



Ministry of Housing,  
Communities &  
Local Government

# Local Authority Planning Capacity and Skills Survey 2023

Survey Report: Findings from Local Authorities and National Park Authorities in England

January 2025

# Foreword

This report presents the findings from a survey of Local Authorities, which aims to understand available resource, recruitment, retention and skills across planning departments. Conducted in 2023, it is the first in a series of surveys intended to track yearly changes in planning capacity and capability. The survey was undertaken by Verian Group, formerly known as Kantar Public.

The survey report has been used internally by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) since early 2024, primarily to inform and shape the Planning Capacity and Capability Programme. Targeted interventions have been developed to tackle the issues raised through this research, and thanks to those who took part, the data provides a comprehensive picture of the challenges to be resolved across the sector. It has also been used to shape policy design in other areas of planning reform and will be used to engage with a wide range of stakeholders externally following its publication.

This survey will be refreshed annually to assess progress against these baseline results, allowing MHCLG to track changes and improvements to resource, recruitment, retention and skills across local planning departments. Alongside research conducted by key industry bodies, this survey contributes to a robust evidence base that shows where planners and Local Authorities most need support now and in the future. A new pulse survey is due to be launched in January 2025, which will provide updated figures on key metrics.

I would like to thank those across local authority planning departments who participated in the survey. Without their input, the research would not have been possible.

Special thanks are also due to all those in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government who helped guide, inform and support this research: Alice Dunn, Bright Muyoti, Gordon McKay, Sean Peacock, Jo Pearce, Figen Deviren, Lan-Ho Man and Stephen Meredith.

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# Contents

<b>1. Executive summary</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2. Introduction</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>3. Staff profile</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>4. Recruitment</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>5. Retention</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>6. Skills, challenges and shortages</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>7. Operating models</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>8. How do challenges vary across England?</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>9. Discussion and conclusions</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>10. Appendix A – Accessible data tables</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>11. Appendix B – Differences by local authority and region</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>12. Appendix C – Light touch evidence</b>	<b>98</b>
<b>13. Appendix D – Technical annex</b>	<b>113</b>
<b>14. Appendix E – Fieldwork documents</b>	<b>119</b>

# 1. Executive summary

## 1.1 Summary of key findings

### Recruitment and retention

- In the last 12 months, nine out of 10 planning departments reported some difficulty with recruitment (91%) and seven in 10 (72%) reported some difficulty with retaining staff.
- Senior and mid-level development management roles experienced the highest levels of vacancies and were the most difficult to recruit for.
- Around three in four planning departments reported significant barriers to resourcing, such as competing for talent (78%), difficulty attracting appropriately qualified candidates (77%), and a lack of qualified candidates (77%).

### Skills gaps

- Almost all (97%) planning departments reported some planning skills gaps. Planning departments' short-term strategies to address capacity and skills-gap issues relied heavily on outsourcing. Departments were most likely to address problems with skills gaps by using agency staff (60%), with half (51%) saying they procured external consultants. Of those with unfilled vacancies, half (52%) reported using agency staff and contractors.
- For those reporting any gaps, the most commonly reported gaps (selected from a list) were in ecology and biodiversity (72%) and masterplanning and design codes (63%), with over half reporting gaps in urban design and architecture (54%).

### Team size

- Planning departments were more likely to report that the number of staff had decreased (38%) than increased (17%). Two in three (66%) expected that the current number of posts would remain the same in the next financial year, with 20% expecting an increase.

### Readiness for Biodiversity Net Gain

- Overall, 72% of planning departments indicated that they currently had skills gaps with regards to ecology and biodiversity. Of those planning departments with any skills gaps, 75% said that skills gaps had impacted on their readiness for Biodiversity Net Gain.

### Differences by type of region and local authority

- For most types of local authorities and councils, the problems and challenges were broadly the same, but each also reported some specific areas of challenge.
- In the East of England, those with recruitment difficulties were more likely than average to say not enough people were interested in planning jobs, whereas in the North West, those with recruitment difficulties were more likely to say recruitment difficulties were due to low numbers of applicants generally.

- In Unitary Authorities, design codes were more likely than the average for other types of authorities to be seen as a challenge from the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act.

## 1.2 Background

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) commissioned Verian (formerly Kantar Public) and the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University to establish an evidence base on local authority capacity and skills. This report focuses on the findings of an online survey of all local authority and National Park planning departments across England, to which 118 planning departments responded. The database of Chief Planning Officers provided by MHCLG was used as the sample frame to facilitate 100% census coverage. MHCLG provided Verian with a sample frame consisting of the 327 local authorities (including National Parks) in England. The survey topics included recruitment; retention; skills, challenges and shortages; and operating models.

### 1.3 What does current capacity and capability look like?

Planning departments reported widespread problems with recruitment, retention and skills gaps. These issues were reported to have a negative impact on service delivery and departments' capacity to prepare for future planning process changes set out in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act.

Of the planning departments that responded to the survey, nine out of 10 reported some difficulty with recruitment (91%), and seven in 10 (72%) reported some difficulty with retaining staff, in the last 12 months. Almost all (97%) reported some planning skills gaps and almost nine in 10 (87%) reported gaps in broader skills.

As a result of these difficulties and skills gaps, planning departments reported that they experienced increased workload (84%), difficulty in meeting workload demands (79%), and reduced staff morale (68%). They also reported difficulties in introducing new working practices or technical systems (40%).

The survey results show that over a third of planning departments reported a decrease in the workforce (38%) in the year prior to the survey, while skills gaps within the workforce had increased. Even if, as expected by most planning departments, staff numbers do start to stabilise, planning departments will continue to struggle if there is no clear strategy to retain experienced staff, fill vacancies and address growing skills gaps.

Planning departments were more than twice as likely to report that their workforce was decreasing (38%) as increasing (17%) in the past year. Furthermore, around one in six planning departments (17%) reported that the number of staff leaving had intensified over the past year. Planning departments attributed decreases in the overall size of the workforce to staff not being replaced, through a combination of vacancies not being filled, restructuring and budget cuts. However, two thirds expected staff numbers to stabilise in the next financial year (66%), while just 2% of planning departments expected them to decrease further.

Overall, 97% of planning departments reported a skills gap. Of these, 53% said the size of the gap had increased in the past 12 months.

#### **1.4 Where are the gaps in capacity and capability?**

Survey data showed that senior and mid-level development management roles experienced the highest levels of vacancies and were the most difficult to recruit for.

Development management vacancies were most commonly reported, with 57% of all planning departments having at least one vacancy at senior level, and 49% having at least one vacancy at entry or mid-level.

Planning departments were most likely to report difficulty recruiting for and retaining development management roles in the past year, particularly at a senior level, with 51% finding these vacancies difficult to fill. Development management was also the second highest priority for planning skills for the next 12 months, cited by 40% of respondents. Senior-level policy vacancies were reported to be the next most difficult to fill (34%).

Development management was cited as one of the biggest calls on resources, with some planning departments saying it diverted senior policy staff resources from other tasks more suited to their level. This included preparing for changes to planning policy set out in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act. Planning departments reported that this redeployment also led to less efficient delivery of other tasks.

The need for staff with skills related to ecology and biodiversity was a particular priority for planning departments. This was specifically in relation to readiness for the Biodiversity Net Gain requirements in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act. Overall, 72% of planning departments indicated that they currently had skills gaps with regards to ecology and biodiversity. This was also the top skill planning departments were looking to prioritise over the next 12 months, cited by 64% of departments.

Of those planning departments with any skills gaps, 75% said that these had impacted on their readiness for Biodiversity Net Gain. In addition, 84% of departments indicated that Biodiversity Net Gain was by far the most challenging to implement of the different changes set out in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act.

When thinking about changes required by the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act, Local Plans and design codes were felt to pose capability challenges.

After Biodiversity Net Gain, changes to Local Plans were selected as the next greatest challenge (57%) arising from the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act.

Local Plans were often mentioned as a major call on resources. 41% of planning departments reported that skills gaps had an impact on preparing or adapting the Local Plan, through a lack of investment in areas such as design codes.

Masterplanning and design codes were seen as a major planning skills gap (62%) and were identified as a top three priority for planning skills in the coming year by 29% of planning departments. Design codes were also seen as a key challenge of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act (53%), along with the [Community Infrastructure Levy](#) (CIL) (42%). Planning departments also identified other areas of planning specialisms that posed capacity and skills challenges.

Besides the key challenges already described in regard to staffing and skills, one in four planning departments reported vacancies in the following specialisms: heritage and conservation, monitoring, and the CIL. Around half of planning departments reported skills gaps in urban design and architecture, as well as CIL, [Section 106](#) and viability assessments. It is worth noting that gaps in planning specialisms varied to some extent across the country, both by region and type of planning department. For example, planning departments in the East of England were more likely than the average to say there were gaps in the broader skills of project management and access to lawyers, whereas planning departments in the South were more likely than the average to report a gap in project commissioning. More detail on differences across regions and local authority types is given in Section 9.

Planning departments also reported that digital skills were a major skills gap, both in terms of digital planning and broader digital skills, including skills for the use of technology, software and data. Few planning departments thought that their staff were competent in sourcing (15%) or using (28%) planning-specific digital skills. Digital planning was seen as a skills gap for 47% of those with any skills gaps, but was only a priority for the next 12 months for 22% of planning departments.

Digital skills were also reported to be the largest gap in broader non-planning skills (for 51% of planning departments) and were the top-ranked priority for such skills (54%). This is likely to be related to the relatively high levels of use of external resources for IT skills.

### **1.5 What is causing problems with capacity and capability?**

Recruitment and retention problems and skills gaps are underpinned by two key issues. There is competition from other local authorities and from the private sector for a small pool of skilled applicants. Meanwhile, large numbers are retiring out of the labour market.

Around three in four planning departments reported significant barriers to resourcing due to the following: competing for talent (78%), attracting appropriately qualified candidates (77%) and a lack of qualified candidates (77%). These were all reported to be more of a barrier than funding issues (66%).

While both the public and the private sectors present competition, two thirds (66%) of planning departments reported that staff had left to work for a different local authority, compared with almost half (47%) reporting staff going to the private sector. The reason most commonly given for staff leaving was to obtain better pay and conditions (58%).

Over a third of planning departments said staff had retired (35%), suggesting an ageing workforce may also be a challenge.

### **1.6 How are challenges being addressed in the short and longer term?**

Planning departments' short-term strategies to address capacity and skills-gap issues relied heavily on outsourcing, with flexible working used to aid recruitment and retention.

In the short term, they reported being most likely to address problems with skills gaps by using agency staff (60%), with half (51%) saying they procured external

consultants. Of those with unfilled vacancies, half (52%) reported using agency staff and contractors.

Most planning departments (84%) reported relying on some external resources. These were particularly used to supplement broader skills, such as legal advice, IT and finance. They were also used for help with planning specialisms, particularly ecology and biodiversity.

Flexible working was most likely to be reported as having been used successfully to aid retention (49% of those facing retention difficulties), as well as as an incentive to fill vacancies (29%).

A longer-term strategy of developing in-house expertise through training was reported as being used successfully, but this is likely to be limited by training budgets.

For unfilled vacancies, the actions most widely reported as having been used successfully were the longer-term tactics of developing planners in-house, through graduate and apprenticeship schemes (67%), and recruiting and training less qualified staff (66%). Both were reported ahead of using agency staff (52%).

Low training budgets present a barrier to the longer-term solution of developing staff in-house, with 22% of planning departments reporting having no training budget at all. Other barriers identified by planning departments were a lack of capacity to deliver or attend training, and a lack of time to provide or attend training.

### **1.7 Differences by region and local authority type**

There were particular issues of capacity and capability that were found to be more prominent in certain regions, although this data should be treated with caution given the small number of planning departments that responded within each region. For example, there were some differences across regions regarding reported recruitment difficulties. In the East of England, planning departments reporting recruitment difficulties were more likely than average to say not enough people were interested in this type of job, and that planning is not an attractive career path, whereas in the North West those facing recruitment difficulties were more likely to say recruitment difficulties were due to low numbers of applicants generally.

For most types of local authorities and councils, the problems and challenges reported were broadly the same, but each also had some specific areas of challenge. For example, with the exception of outsourcing for legal advice, planning departments in District Councils were generally less likely than average to report outsourcing for a range of support, including ecology and biodiversity, environmental and public health, highways, and transport.

In Unitary Authorities, design codes were more likely than the average for other types of authorities to be seen as a challenge from the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act.



## 2. Introduction

### 2.1 Background

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) commissioned Verian (formerly Kantar Public) and the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University to establish an evidence base on planning departments' capacity and skills, with the specific aims of understanding more about planning department capacity and capability at the local authority level and building an evidence base which can be built on in subsequent years.

The research included an online survey and an evidence review (the latter carried out by CRESR). All 327 local authority and National Park planning departments in England were invited to take part in the survey, with 118 completing the survey – a response rate of 36%. This report sets out the findings of the survey. The findings of the evidence review are included in Section 12, Appendix C. The data from the survey will be used as a baseline to measure the planning sector's future performance.

#### 2.1.1 Objectives

The study's primary objective was to understand the capacity and capability challenges in planning departments, and in services in local authorities and National Parks more widely that are critical to planning (e.g. legal, finance etc). The focus was on existing planning department capacity and capability, and on future skills needs and challenges, and opportunities to address them. In terms of existing capacity and capability, key areas of investigation included:

- planning departments' current and relative capacity
- vacancies and recruitment
- planning departments' relationship with the local authority or National Park more widely

In terms of identifying and meeting future skills needs, areas of investigation included:

- planning departments' current and anticipated future skills requirements, notably to support the implementation of planning reforms
- the main perceived barriers to having the right capabilities and capacity in place
- what planning departments are currently doing to build capacity and capability, the effectiveness of these measures, and whether best-practice models can be developed for wider roll-out

Dependent on the uptake of the survey, and where it was possible to conduct data analysis, secondary objectives of the study were to:

- draw out the differences in planning departments' capacity and capability across types, tiers and sizes of local authorities (including National Parks)
- evaluate different operating models and structures for different types of local authorities (including National Parks)

The ability to address these two additional areas was limited by the number of interviews and by the response rate.

## **2.2 Survey method**

The survey method is set out below, including sampling, questionnaire design and testing, survey conduct and analysis, and reporting.

The database of Chief Planning Officers provided by MHCLG was used as the sample frame to facilitate 100% census coverage. MHCLG provided Verian with a sample frame consisting of the 327 local authorities in England. (For the purpose of this report, we refer to National Parks as falling within the category of local authorities.) 317 Local authorities and 10 National Parks were included in the sample frame. The sample frame included the local authority's name, individual contact names, and email addresses. A named contact's email address was available for 271 local authorities. A generic contact email address was available for 56 local authorities.

Verian appended the sample file to include agreed typologies, which included population density and rural/urban classification where available.

A questionnaire design workshop was held on 12 May 2023, attended by key stakeholders. The key aims of the workshop were to:

- gain a deeper contextual understanding of the key research objectives
- understand stakeholder priorities for the questionnaire, including research themes and probes
- identify any issues or concerns in the questionnaire design
- discuss logistical considerations of the questionnaire (e.g. timing)

MHCLG gathered provisional questions and research themes from stakeholders across the Department and shared them with Verian. Verian and MHCLG then worked together to develop and refine questions. The questions were also informed by the evidence review conducted by CRESR. Questions were then tested cognitively.

The final questionnaire length was estimated at 35 minutes. Only one respondent from each planning department could complete the survey. The survey was administered online, with respondents invited to participate via email. This allowed respondents to complete the survey at their convenience and also allowed them to collate the information required beforehand. The email included guidance on how to complete the survey and the kind of information respondents would need to answer the questions, for example information on the number of staff in their planning department.

Verian sent six reminder letters over a period of eight weeks to maximise response rates. The reminder letters were tailored based on whether a planning department had begun to complete the survey or had not started it. For example, if a planning department had completed several questions but not submitted a full response to the survey, the letter thanked the planning department for their responses so far and encouraged them to complete the remaining questions. The reminder letters also included a "final call to action" letter notifying planning departments that the survey was closing the following day.

MHCLG engaged in reminder activities throughout the fieldwork, including sending direct emails to planning department contacts to encourage engagement, and publishing reminders in the Chief Planner’s newsletter.

### 2.2.1 Response rates

In total, 327 planning departments within local authorities were invited to take part, with 118 completing the survey – a response rate of 36%. This is largely in line with response rates achieved in comparable workforce studies (for example, the [Local Government Workforce Survey](#)). Because of the relatively small population size (i.e. number of local authorities in England), and the relatively low response rate, findings cannot be generalised beyond the sample. This is discussed further in Section 2.5.

Key requirements for analysis were region and local authority type. Response rates by region are shown in Table 2.1. While the response rate was higher in the North East, this is a smaller region, so the absolute number of respondents here was lower. In the analysis, regions are grouped into the North, the Midlands, and the South and East (including London and the East of England), to provide a larger number of respondents.

**Table 2.1: Response rates by region**

Region	Number invited	Number completed	Response rate
East Midlands	40	16	40%
East of England	51	22	43%
London	33	12	36%
North East	13	8	62%
North West	37	8	22%
South East	70	25	36%
South West	32	10	31%
West Midlands	33	11	33%
Yorkshire and the Humber	18	6	33%

Response rates by local authority type are shown in Table 2.2. Given their relative similarity, a combined group of Unitary Authorities and Metropolitan Districts is also considered, in order to provide a larger base for analysis.

**Table 2.2: Response rates by type of local authority**

Local authority type	Number invited	Number completed	Response rate
District Council	164	58	35%
County Council	22	9	41%
London Borough	33	12	36%
Metropolitan District	36	9	25%

Unitary Authority	62	25	40%
National Park Authority	10	5	50%

When looking at differences between different types of local authorities and differences by region, it is also worth noting that, among those responding, while District Councils and Unitary Authorities are spread across all or most regions (besides London), County Councils are largely located in the South and East, and Metropolitan Districts in the North and Midlands (Table 2.3).

**Table 2.3: Number of respondents: local authority type by region**

	London Borough	County Council	District Council	Unitary Authority	Metropolitan District	National Park
<b>South and East</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>1</b>
London	12					
South East		3	15	6	-	1
South West		1	5	4	-	-
East of England		3	17	2	-	-
<b>Midlands</b>		<b>2</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>-</b>
East Midlands		-	12	4	-	-
West Midlands		2	6	1	2	-
<b>North</b>		<b>-</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>4</b>
Yorkshire and the Humber		-	-	3	1	2
North East		-	-	4	3	1
North West		-	3	1	3	1
<i>Total responding</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>59</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>5</i>

As shown earlier, there were variations in the response rate between regions, as well as between types of local authorities. To ensure that the final reported data set was representative by region and type of authority, the achieved sample was weighted by both variables. (For details about the weighting, see Appendix D).

While corrective weighting was used to address uneven levels of response as far as is possible, given the relatively small number of respondents, and variations in response rates by local authority type and region, the findings in this report should not be viewed as indicative of the national picture. Weighting is a correction technique which involves making statistical adjustments to survey data after they have been collected in order to improve the accuracy of the survey estimates. Caution should be exercised when generalising findings from comparisons done for

the same type of local authority but across different regions. This is because the weighting process that was completed was undertaken for regions and types of local authorities separately.

### **2.3 Reporting conventions**

Sub-group analysis was performed to explore differences among groups within the sample: for example, across age. The following points should be considered when reading this report:

- percentages for single-response questions do not always add up to exactly 100%, due to the effect of rounding
- the sum of two or more percentages do not always equal the sum of the integers themselves, due to the effect of rounding
- unless otherwise stated, differences between percentages for different subgroups reported are statistically significant to the 95% confidence level, which means that we can be 95% confident that the differences observed are genuine differences and have not just occurred by chance
- 0% is indicated in tables in this report using “-”, and figures above 0% but below 0.5% are indicated using “\*\*”
- base sizes for each result reported are shown with the charts and any base sizes smaller than 100 should be interpreted with caution and the findings viewed as indicative

### **2.4 Significant differences**

Significant differences are identified where relevant throughout the report, as described above.

As set out above, the achieved sample size (n=118, which means the total sample size for the survey) and the response rate (36%) limits the scope for identifying statistically significant differences between subgroups such as regions or local authority types. Where there are suggestive patterns of difference that are not significant at the 95% level, these are described in the report as certain subgroups tending to be more or less likely to do something.

In addition, significance testing has been conducted for local authority types and regions, as compared with all respondents.

For particularly small groups, rather than using percentages, the report uses numbers of respondents instead (e.g. 11 of the 12 London Boroughs, etc). This approach is primarily used to point out where virtually all (or almost no) respondents in a certain type of local authority or region gave an answer, compared with the average level for all local authorities.

While these indicative differences are included in the report, it is important to note that they may not reflect findings for the whole region or type of local authority, given the relatively low and variable response rates. Caution should be exercised when attempting to generalise these findings beyond the research sample.

Data showing differences between all planning departments, and those in the different regions and local authority types, is given in Appendix B, in Section 11. This is restricted to those questions showing any significant differences. Fuller results are including in the data tabulations available in Appendix A, Section 10.

## 2.5 Report structure

The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 3 reports on the number of staff working across planning departments in England, and changes to these numbers
- Chapter 4 provides the survey findings on recruitment, including current vacancy levels, challenges to recruitment, and actions being taken to build capacity
- Chapter 5 covers experiences relating to retention, including challenges and barriers, and the impacts of difficulties in retaining staff
- Chapter 6 sets out the survey findings on skills, challenges and shortages, including current and future gaps, skills training offered, and funding issues
- Chapter 7 reports on planning departments' operating models, including skills-sharing activities
- Chapter 8 reflects on the findings across the full range of topics, in order to form overall conclusions and consider next steps
- Chapter 9 covers differences between planning departments in different regions across England and within different types of local authorities
- Appendix A (Section 10) provides data tables that offer an accessible view of data charted within the report; links are provided below each chart to the relevant data table in this appendix
- Appendix B (Section 11) contains a breakdown of survey respondents by region and local authority where there are any notable differences as compared to the whole population
- Appendix C (Section 12) contains the findings from the light-touch evidence review conducted prior to the survey
- Appendix D (Section 13) is a technical appendix giving further details of the methods used in the survey and analysis
- Appendix E (Section 14) contains survey documents, the questionnaire, and other fieldwork documents

## 3. Staff profile

### 3.1 Chapter summary

This chapter addresses several topics related to capacity and capability. It looks at the number and nature of staff working across planning departments within local authorities in England. This includes the size and make-up of the workforce, use of external resources, and changes in size experienced in the past 12 months and anticipated in the next financial year.

On average, planning departments reported having 41 staff, with numbers ranging from the smallest departments with just three staff to the largest with 161, with four outliers reporting more than 100 staff.

Based on departments that were able to estimate both the number of staff and the number of qualified staff (n=75), 43% of all staff in those planning departments had a relevant qualification, such as from the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI). Staff were almost all permanent, with 76% working full-time. In total, just over half of staff were employed either in development management roles (37%) or administrative roles (16%).

A large majority of planning departments (84%) regularly drew upon policy or specialist skills, areas or services from elsewhere within the local authority to help meet service demand, particularly for legal services, and also for IT and financial skills. Such resources were also used by a substantial minority of departments for ecology and biodiversity skills, including biodiversity net gain.

Planning departments were more likely to report that the number of staff had decreased (38%) than that it had increased (17%), over the past 12 months. The main reasons for the decrease were staff leaving and not being replaced, unfilled vacancies, budget constraints or restructuring.

For the coming financial year, some shift in the direction of change was anticipated, as 20% expected an increase in numbers, while just 2% expected a decrease. The expected increase was largely based either on an expectation that increased fees would lead to increased funding, or on the number of skills gaps and vacancies that would simply have to be filled.

### 3.2 Size and nature of workforce

When asked for the number of members of staff (excluding agency staff), planning departments in England reported an average of 41 staff, ranging from a minimum of three to a maximum of 161 (**Error! Reference source not found.**, Annex Table 9). Almost all planning departments had fewer than 100 staff, with four outlier planning departments reporting more than 100 staff.

It is worth noting that different planning departments in different types of local authorities varied in size. These differences were among the responding planning departments and caution should be used when attempting to generalise these findings beyond the research sample.

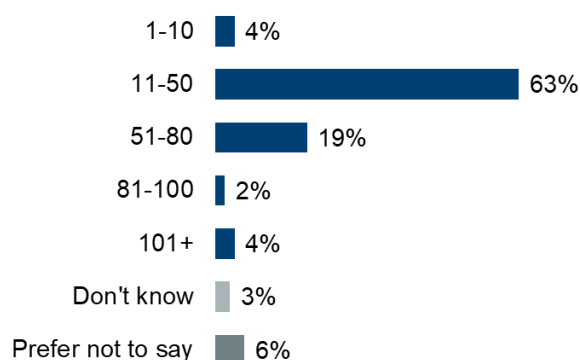
Planning departments in National Parks were consistently the smallest in terms of numbers of staff (average 23), with one responding department reporting just four staff, and with 30 staff at most. Planning departments in County Councils were a little larger but still relatively small (average 29, minimum 15, maximum 58).

Planning departments in District Councils (average 35) and Unitary Authorities (average 44) were closer to the average size for all departments, but size was very variable for both. Those in District Councils varied from eight up to a maximum of 126 staff, although all but two had a maximum of 73 staff. Those in Unitary Authorities ranged from three to 91 for most respondents, although the largest outlier reported 161 staff.

Planning departments in London Boroughs (average 58) and Metropolitan Districts (mean 64) were among the largest in size. The largest department in a London Borough reported 94 staff. While most planning departments in Metropolitan Districts had up to 75 staff, one outlier reported 146. None were very small (minimum 31 and 26, respectively).

### Figure 3.1: Size of planning department workforce

Number of staff employed in planning department

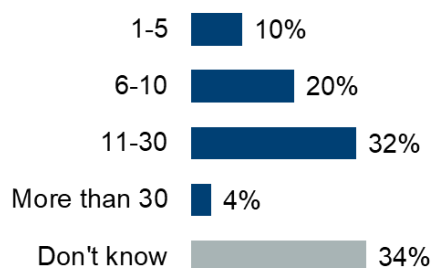


Source: Q37. Thinking about your current workforce (June 2023), how many members of staff (including full-time, part-time and fixed-term appointment staff) are currently employed within your planning department?

Base: All planning departments (118).

### Figure 3.2: Contract status of staff

Number of qualified staff in planning department



Source: Q38. And how many of your planning department staff are employed on the following basis?

Base: All staff (3,647).

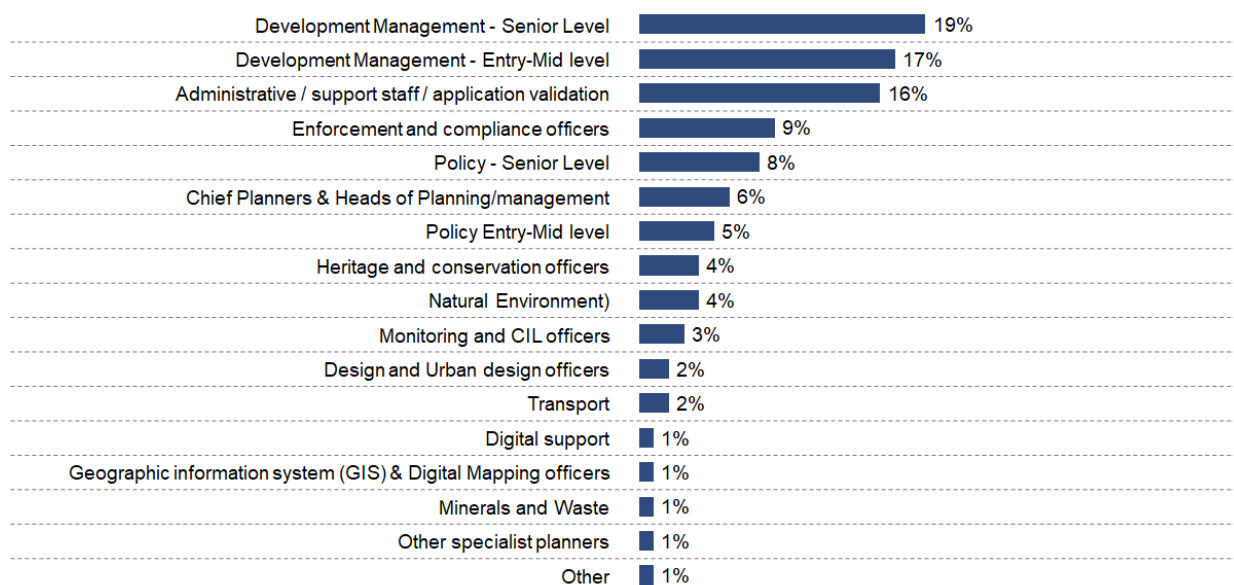
Around three quarters (76%) of all staff in all planning departments were employed on a full-time permanent contract, with most others being part-time permanent employees (17%). On average, planning departments that were able to give numbers of permanent staff reported having 29 full-time staff and seven part-time staff.



Over a third of staff (36%) were employed in development management roles (Figure 3.3, Annex Table 10). Of all staff in planning departments, 19% were senior-level development managers, with 17% entry or mid-level development managers. This was followed by 16% in administrative roles. Just under one in 10 were enforcement or compliance officers (9%) or in senior policy roles (8%).

Just 1% of staff worked in each of digital support, geographic information system (GIS), and minerals and waste, while 2% worked in each of transport, and design and urban design.

**Figure 3.3: Job roles in planning departments (% of staff)**



Source: Q39. Approximately how many of your current workforce staff as at June 2023 are employed within the following job roles?

Base: All staff (4,420).

A large majority of planning departments (84%) said that they regularly drew upon policy or specialist skills, areas or services external to the department, from elsewhere within the local authority, to help meet service demand.

Those who drew on other parts of the local authority were by far most likely to be reliant on such resources for legal services (76% – Figure 3.4, Annex Table 11). Around three in 10 of those using external resources drew on specialist skills for each of IT (30%) and financial expertise (27%). One planning department described how a restructure impacted specialist IT roles in their planning department:

“Our one internal post which covered management of [the] back office system was taken away as part of a corporate restructure so [there is] no longer anyone dedicated to supporting planning in maintaining and improving IT systems.”

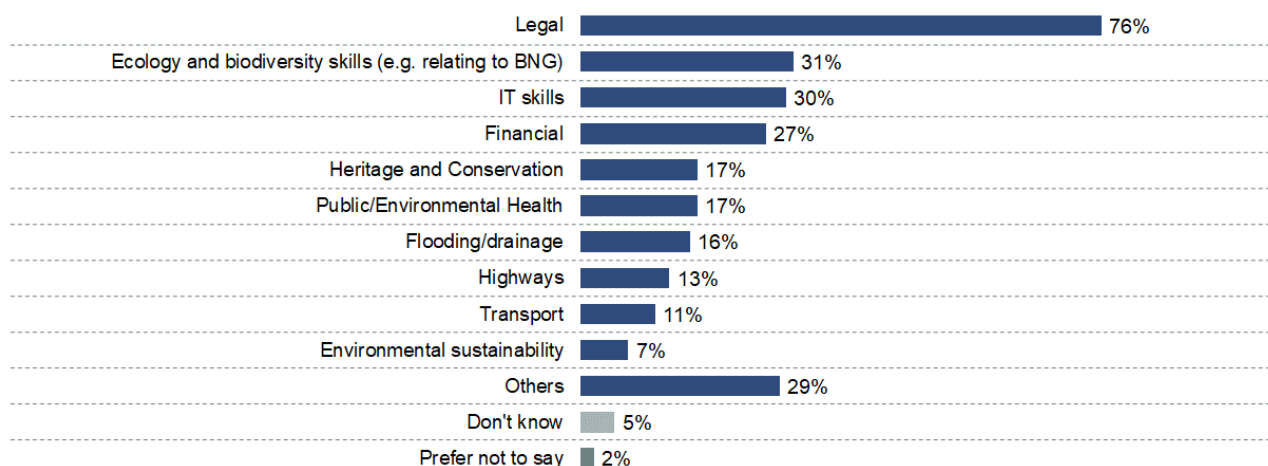
- London Borough

Around three in 10 planning departments (31%) used external resources for ecology and biodiversity skills, which emerged as a key planning skills gap throughout the study. All nine County Councils said they drew on external skills, and they were more likely than average to do so for ecology and biodiversity, and for public and environmental health. Of the 12 London Boroughs that completed the survey, 11 called on such external resources, and all of them did so for legal support.

Among those District Councils and Metropolitan Districts using external skills, this was largely only for legal services, with these authorities less likely than average to use a range of other external skills. National Parks were more likely than average to use external skills for heritage and conservation (see Appendix Table 11.2).

While few departments reported using external resources for environmental sustainability (7% of those that used external resources), this was reported exclusively by planning departments in London and the South of England.

**Figure 3.4: Policy or specialist roles departments were most reliant on (% of planning departments that drew on external skills)**



Source: Q41. Please can you provide more details on the types of policy or specialist roles your department is most reliant on to help deliver services.

Base: Planning departments that regularly drew on any policy or specialist skills (100).

A further 29% of departments mentioned a range of other services for which they drew on external skills, including services related to landscapes, contaminated land, GIS and rights of way. There were also mentions of services to help with media and communications, each of which was only mentioned by a small number of respondents.

Planning departments were asked how many members of their staff had a relevant related qualification, such as from RTP1. Not all could give an exact number, but in those planning departments that were able to give both the total number of staff and the number with qualifications (n=75), respondents reported that on average 43% of staff had a relevant qualification.

Those departments that were unable to give a figure instead gave an estimate of the proportion of staff with qualifications. These estimates were combined with the proportions reported by those able to give an exact number. In total, 18% reported that under a quarter were qualified, 41% said a quarter to a half were qualified, and 36% said that over half of their staff were qualified.

### 3.3 Changes in workforce

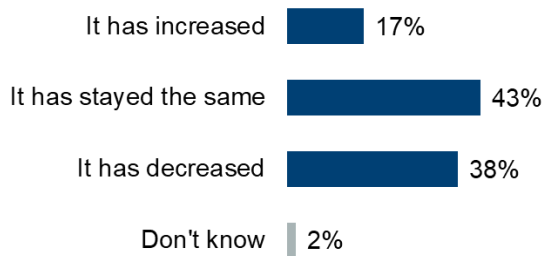
Over the past 12 months, (excluding temporary and agency staff), planning departments were more likely to report that the number of staff had decreased (38%) than that it had increased (17%, Figure 3.5, Annex Table 12). For the next financial year (2024/2025), some shift in the direction of change was anticipated. Two in three departments (66%) expected that the current number of posts would remain the

same in the next financial year, with 20% expecting an increase. Just 2% expected a decrease.

None of the nine County Councils were expecting any change in the number of posts in the next financial year. Planning departments in the East Midlands were more likely than the average overall to expect an increase (a little under half of the 16 respondents).

**Figure 3.5: Changes in job numbers in past 12 months**

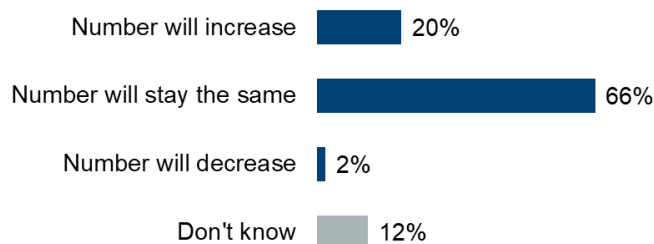
Change in number of employees in last 12 months



Q45. In the last 12 months, how has the total number of employees (full-time, part-time but not temporary contract or agency) in your planning department changed?

**Figure 3.6: Changes in job numbers in next 12 months**

Change in number of posts expected in next financial year



Q47 In light of intended increases to planning fees and thinking about the next financial year (2024/25), which of the following would best describe the total number of posts (filled and unfilled) within your planning department? Base: All respondents (118).

For those departments that said the number of employees had increased in the last 12 months (n=20), the most commonly cited reason for this was the agreement to create new posts, usually linked to increased workloads (11 mentioning one or both of these reasons). Two respondents said it was because of restructuring, and three said that they had filled existing vacancies. For example, one respondent reported:

“We carried out a Planning Team Service Review in 2020/21 and added posts to the establishment to make us more resilient and future-proof. We have also added an ecologist, full-time conservation officer and S106 compliance officer in more recent months. Being fully staffed has enabled us to generate more income in non-statutory functions, which has gone a long way to adding extra posts and the services we offer”.

- District Council

More respondents reported a decrease in staff numbers in the last 12 months (n=45). The reason given most often was staff leaving and not having yet been replaced (n=21), with retirement the reason given most often for staff leaving; staff moving to more attractive posts in the public and private sectors was also cited. Three other explanations were each given by around the same number of respondents: unfilled vacancies (n=9), restructuring or internal re-organisation (n=9) and budget cuts or constraints (n=7). The following examples illustrate the range of responses:

“We have vacancies that we've been carrying for over 12 months which we have tried to fill but not been able to successfully recruit to, but we have also lost some staff to retirement and ill-health.”

- County Council

“Better opportunities in the contractor market, morale, ever-increasing workloads, skills.”

- District Council

“Staff have left and we have not been able to recruit and so 50% of the establishment are agency staff.”

- District Council

“Budget cuts – vacant posts deleted to help meet £530k saving programme.”

- Unitary Authority

Those departments that said they anticipated an increase or decrease in the number of posts in the next financial year were also asked for their reasons. Only three said they expected a decrease, and this was usually for financial reasons.

More expected an increase (n=23). The most frequently cited reason for this was that there would be increased funding available (n=11), with much of this relating to an expectation that revenue from increased planning fees would be ring-fenced. A similar number said that they had a lot of skills gaps and vacancies that would simply have to be filled (n=9). Three were planning to restructure, with this expected to create job vacancies. The following examples illustrate the range of reasons given:

“It is hoped that increased fees will be at least partially ring-fenced / prioritised locally to increase capacity – to ensure that performance targets are met. Depending on available finance this will focus on development management, albeit there are critical shortages in policy (including specialist areas such as ecology) and enforcement.”

- Unitary Authority

“Need to invest in sustainable ways to reduce backlog and the best way to do this is to invest in the team across policy development and DM [development management] delivery, with an increase in both planner resources and specialist skills required for the Borough.”

- District Council

“Because of increasing workloads and need to progress the local plan.”

- London Borough

## 4. Recruitment

### 4.1 Chapter summary

This chapter discusses findings relating to current vacancies, the challenges of recruiting to fill these positions, and what planning departments in English local authorities are doing to build capacity. This builds further on the information presented in Chapter 3 on capacity and capability in relation to current staffing.

The vast majority of planning departments reported having had difficulty recruiting for at least some roles in the last 12 months (91%). Over a third of all reported vacancies (35%) were in development management. Around half of planning departments reported such vacancies, at both senior level (57% of planning departments) and junior level (49%). Most of these planning departments reported having multiple vacancies in these roles. Senior development management vacancies were also said to be the most difficult to fill.

There was also a relatively high number of administrative vacancies (11% of all vacancies, across 43% of planning departments), but these were reported to be relatively less difficult to fill.

The most commonly cited reason for difficulties in recruitment was a lack of applicants, particularly those with the right skills (87%). An uncompetitive salary offer was also a problem (68%).

The main impacts on planning departments with recruitment difficulties were increased workload for existing staff (84%) and issues with staff morale (68%), with 69% having to use agency staff to address staff shortages caused by recruitment problems. Even with this extensive use of outsourcing, over half of all planning departments reported difficulty completing their core tasks and meeting objectives, because of difficulties with recruitment.

The most successful way in which those facing recruitment difficulties had filled vacancies was to recruit graduates or apprentices (67%) or less qualified staff (66%) in order to develop their own planners in-house. However, 52% said they had relied on agency staff or contractors to fill the gaps.

### 4.2 Vacancies

Development management vacancies were the most commonly reported, with 57% of all planning departments having at least one vacancy at senior level, and 49% having at least one at entry or mid-level (Figure 4.1, Annex Table 13). The number of vacancies within each department in each of these role groups was relatively higher than for other roles: around one in five planning departments reported three or more vacancies at each of senior level (22%) and entry or mid-level (20%).

Planning departments in London Boroughs were more likely than the average across all local authority types to report having vacancies in each of these roles (10 of the 12 responding).

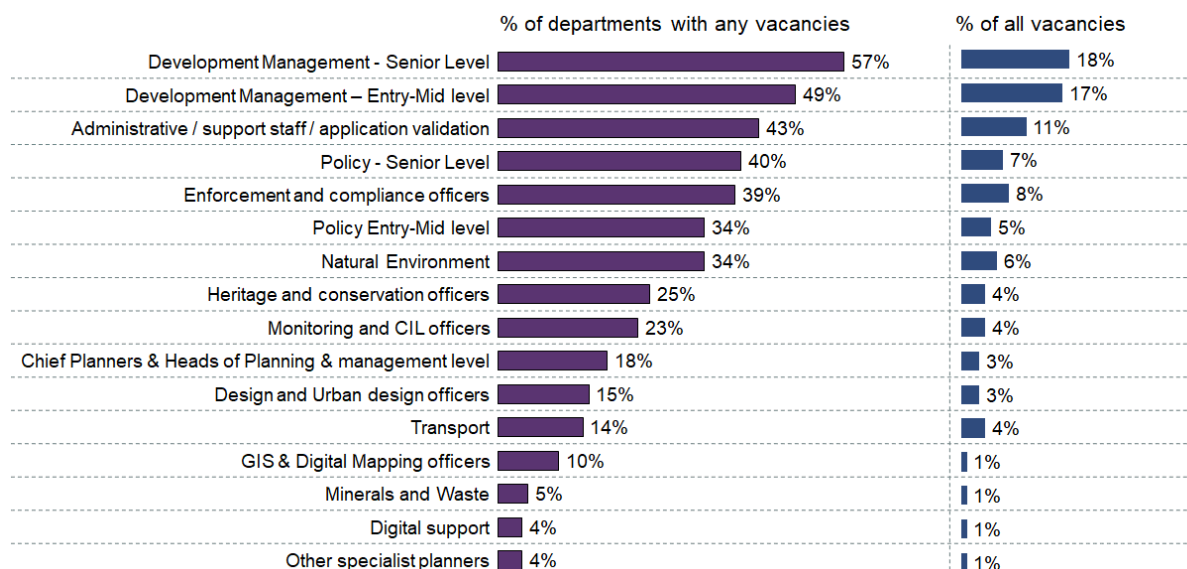
Taking both levels together, 35% of all reported vacancies were in development management (18% senior, 17% entry or mid-level), which is similar to the proportions of current staff in these roles (19% and 17%, as seen in Figure 3.3).

Over four in 10 planning departments (43%) reported having administrative vacancies. These accounted for 11% of all vacancies. This is slightly below the

proportion of current administrative jobs (16%), suggesting relatively fewer unfilled vacancies of this type. It is, however, worth noting that 24% of planning departments reported more than one administrative vacancy.

For most other role groups, the proportion of both staff and vacancies was low (see Figure 3. for details of current staff).

**Figure 4.1: Vacancies by role group**



Q1. Approximately how many vacancies do you currently have across the role groups defined below?

Base: All planning departments (118); all vacancies (1,024).

While a substantial minority of planning departments reported vacancies in policy (40% senior, 34% mid or entry-level) and enforcement (39%), relatively more of them had just one vacancy for each of these roles, compared with development management roles.

The proportion of vacancies in entry or mid-level policy (5% overall) was higher in rural areas (9%) than urban areas (4%), with this pattern reversed for senior-level policy vacancies (5% for rural, 8% for urban).

The natural environment was the planning specialism with the highest level of vacancies, with vacancies in 34% of planning departments, although these only made up 6% of all reported vacancies.

For most role groups other than development management and administration, the number of vacancies was low: at least two in three planning departments with any vacancies in each of these roles reported that they had just one vacancy (see Annex Table 13 for fuller details of numbers of vacancies).

However, the balance was slightly different for transport, where the number of vacancies was relatively higher: 14% had vacancies, with half of these (7% of planning departments) having more than one. The proportion of planning departments with vacancies in transport was higher than average in County Councils, where over half had vacancies. Similarly, while only 5% of planning departments had vacancies in mineral and waste, this was higher in almost half of County Councils. Indeed, almost all mineral and waste vacancies were reported by planning departments in County Councils.

While enforcement and compliance vacancies made up 8% of all reported vacancies, the proportion was higher in less [densely populated areas](#) (12%), compared with areas with a higher population. Related to this, planning departments in London Boroughs were more likely than average to report having vacancies in enforcement (eight of the 12 responding) and in design and urban design (half of those responding).

Planning departments that said they had difficulty recruiting for specific role groups reported vacancies in those same role groups including chief planners; natural environment officers; design and urban design officers; heritage and conservation officers; monitoring and CIL officers; and transport officers. This suggests that planning departments that are trying to fill less common roles may encounter more difficulties.

Planning departments that had not yet completed their Local Plan were more likely than those that had to report vacancies in senior policy roles (53%, compared with 30%) and in heritage and conservation (35%, compared with 16%).

Planning departments were further asked how many graduate planners had joined them: 59% said they had taken on at least one graduate. Departments were most likely to report taking on just one graduate (29%), with 16% taking on two and 14% three or more.

### **4.3 Recruitment difficulties**

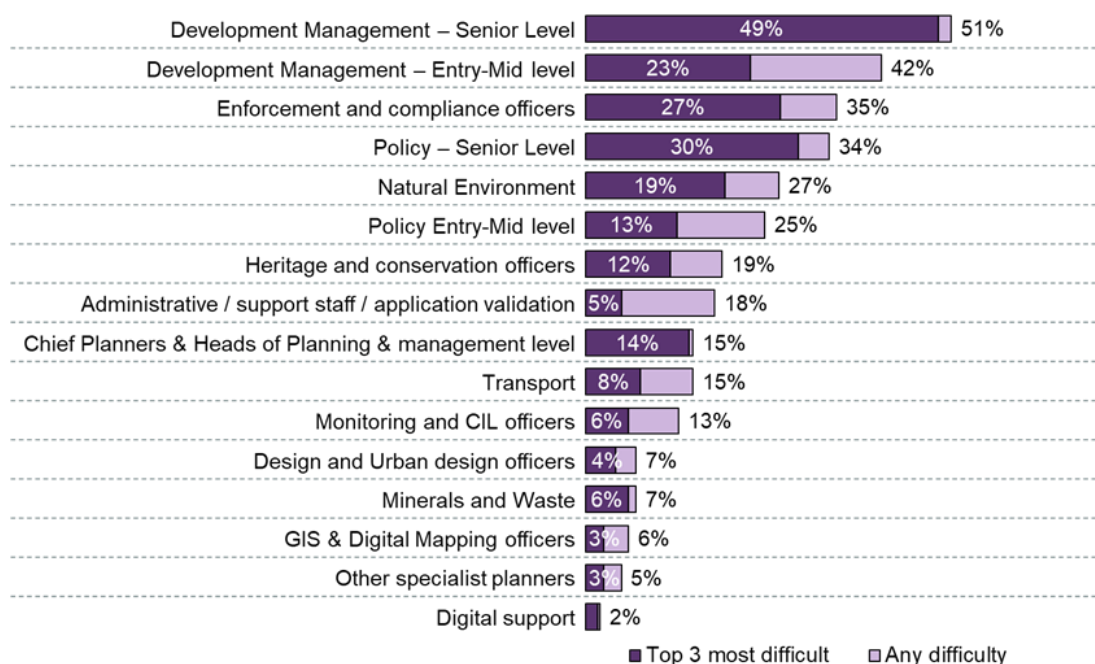
The vast majority of planning departments reported having had difficulty recruiting for at least some roles in the last 12 months (91%). All National Parks and County Councils reported some difficulty, with Unitary Authorities and Metropolitan Districts tending to be less likely to report any difficulties (81% combined). All planning departments in the East of England, West Midlands, and Yorkshire and the Humber reported some difficulties.

Along with being the role where the largest proportion of planning departments had vacancies (57% – Figure 4.1), senior-level development management was clearly the most difficult role to recruit for, with 51% of planning departments reporting some difficulty in the past 12 months. Almost all of these (49% of planning departments) said it was one of the three most difficult roles to recruit for (Figure 4.2, Annex Table 14) and 31% said it was the single most difficult role to recruit for.

In contrast, while 42% of planning departments had difficulty recruiting to entry or mid-level development management roles, it was only one of the three most difficult roles to recruit for in 23% of planning departments. Planning departments in rural areas were, however, more likely to report some difficulty recruiting at this level (62%), compared with those in urban areas (34%). There was no such difference for senior-level roles.

Similar levels of difficulty were reported for recruiting enforcement and compliance officers (35% of departments found the role difficult to recruit for and 27% placed it in the top three most difficult roles to recruit for) and senior-level policy roles (34% difficult, 30% in the top three most difficult roles).

#### **Figure 4.2: Difficulty in recruitment by role group in last 12 months**



Q3. In the last 12 months, which, if any, of the following role group(s) have you had difficulties in recruiting for?  
 Q4. And which of the following role group(s) have been the most difficult to recruit for? (Re-based over all planning departments).  
 Base: All planning departments (118).

As seen for vacancies, the natural environment was the specific planning specialism for which recruitment difficulties were most commonly reported.

This question in the survey provided further evidence that administrative roles were reported to be easier to fill than other roles, with 18% of departments reporting some difficulty recruiting for such roles, but just 5% putting them in the top three most difficult roles for recruitment. In contrast, almost all of those reporting any difficulty recruiting a chief planner (15%) said that it was one of the three most difficult roles to recruit for (14%).

Planning departments in an area with higher population density were more likely than those in less densely populated areas to report having had difficulty recruiting for transport roles (25%, compared with 3%) and monitoring and CIL officers (23%, compared with 5%). In particular, six of the 12 London Boroughs reported problems recruiting monitoring and CIL officers.

Unitary Authorities were less likely than average for all local authority types to report difficulties with recruiting for entry and mid-level development management, and for enforcement and compliance roles (see Appendix Table 11.3).

A majority of planning departments in the East of England reported having difficulty recruiting for development management roles and natural environment roles, being higher than the average for both of these.

Those departments that reported any difficulties recruiting in the past 12 months were asked to select the reasons for this, from a list (Figure 4.3, Annex Table 15). A lack of applicants, and particularly qualified applicants, was clearly the top issue causing problems recruiting: 87% of those with difficulties said there were not enough applicants with the right skills and 74% said there were not enough

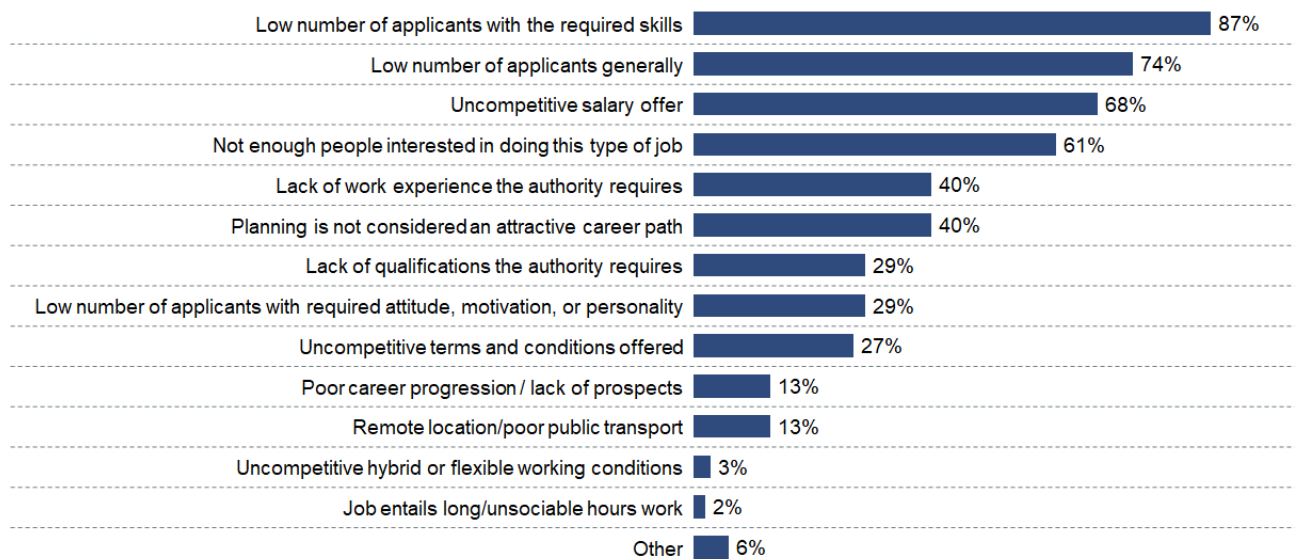


applicants in general. More specifically, there was reported to be a lack of candidates with suitable work experience (40%) and qualifications (29%).

Secondary issues concerned a lack of incentivisation to apply, including an uncompetitive salary offer (68%) and uncompetitive terms and conditions (27%).

These reasons were followed by a lack of interest in planning as a career, including not enough people being interested in this type of job (61%), and planning not being considered an attractive career path (40%).

**Figure 4.3: Reasons why it is hard to fill vacancies (% of planning departments with difficulties)**



Source: Q5. When thinking about recruitment in general, which, if any, of the following reasons explain why it has been hard to fill these vacancies?

Base: Planning departments that have experienced difficulties with recruitment (109).

While remote location or poor public transport was a barrier to recruitment for 13% of planning departments, this was a reason given by most of the National Parks and was also reported more often than average in planning departments in the East of England. This reason was almost exclusively cited by planning departments in rural areas: 44% of rural planning departments cited this reason.

Uncompetitive hybrid or flexible working conditions was not a widespread problem (3%). While this was reported exclusively by departments in rural areas, it was still only an issue for 12% of departments in rural areas.

All County Councils with recruitment difficulties reported problems with low numbers of applicants with the required skills, as did all departments in the South West. All Metropolitan Districts with any difficulty reported problems with low numbers of applicants generally, as did all planning departments with difficulties in the North East and North West.

All five National Parks said an uncompetitive salary offer was a problem. Planning departments in the East of England were more likely than average to say not enough people were interested in this type of job, and that planning is not an attractive career path. Poor career progression was more of a problem in London, relative to other regions (see Appendix Table 11.4 for differences by region).

#### 4.4 Consequences of having hard-to-fill vacancies

Those planning departments that reported any difficulties recruiting in the past 12 months were further asked to select issues that they had experienced as a result, from a list (Figure 4.4, Annex Table 16). Almost all (98%) reported at least one negative consequence of hard-to-fill vacancies, with most reporting a range of impacts.

Impact on workloads was clearly the top consequence, with 84% of those with difficulties reporting an increased workload for other staff, and 79% reporting difficulties in meeting workload demands. One consequence of this for many planning departments was greater use of outsourcing, particularly having to use agency staff (69%), and also outsourcing work to consultancies (46%), in order to fill the gaps.

Presumably related to such workload issues, a majority of those with difficulties recruiting reported issues with lower staff morale and satisfaction (68%) and difficulties retaining existing staff (51%). There were also difficulties in training or upskilling staff for a substantial minority (41%).

Over half of planning departments reported some impact on their ability to deliver, with 53% reporting backlogs to planning applications. In particular, there were reported to be problems doing their job to a sufficient standard: 58% reported difficulties meeting customer services objectives and 42% reported difficulties meeting quality standards.

**Figure 4.4: Consequences of hard-to-fill vacancies (% of planning departments with difficulties)**



Source: Q6. Thinking about all the current vacancies that have been hard to fill for you over the last 12 months, which (if any) of the following issues have you experienced as a result of hard-to-fill vacancies?

Base: Planning departments that have experienced difficulties with recruitment (109).

Increased workload and difficulties in meeting workload demands were each cited by all planning departments in Yorkshire and the Humber that reported having any difficulties. All planning departments in the South West that reported difficulties selected increased workload, with a relatively high proportion also saying they had to outsource to consultants.

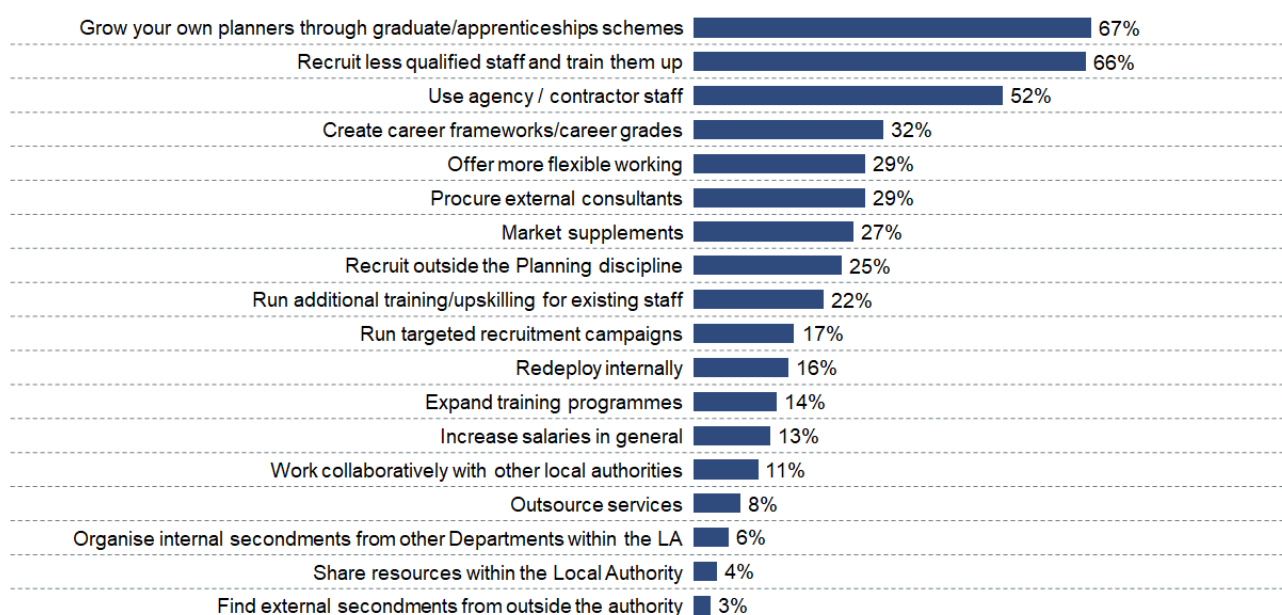
Most of the 12 planning departments in London Boroughs reported using agency staff. Very few Metropolitan Districts reported having to outsource work to consultancies. All five National Parks reported problems with workload and staff morale, and difficulties in meeting customer service objectives.

Those respondents who felt their planning department did not have adequate experience, skills and knowledge were more likely to report a range of issues compared with those who felt they had enough, with these issues including difficulties upskilling and retaining staff, meeting quality standards, and delivering their workload.

#### 4.5 Actions taken to address hard-to-fill vacancies

Finally, in relation to recruitment, those departments that reported any difficulties recruiting in the past 12 months (91% of planning departments) were then asked to say which actions they had previously taken that achieved the greatest success in filling vacancies (**Error! Reference source not found.**, Annex Table 17). Almost all (96%) selected at least one action from the list presented to them.

**Figure 4.5: Most successful actions taken to fill vacancies (% of planning departments with difficulties)**



Source: Q7. Thinking about those hard-to-fill vacancies, which, if any, of the following actions have you taken which have been the most successful?

Base: Planning departments that have experienced difficulties with recruitment (109).

By far the most commonly reported actions involved recruiting staff for internal development: 67% of those with hard-to-fill vacancies said they had success in “growing their own” planners through graduate or apprenticeship schemes, while 66% said they had recruited less qualified staff and trained them up. For 25% of those with hard-to-fill vacancies, this included recruiting outside of the planning discipline entirely.

All County Councils, and most Metropolitan Districts, with any difficulties reported developing their own planners in-house through graduate recruitment or apprenticeships. However, a majority also reported using external resources to fill

vacancies, with 52% who reported using external resources saying they had used agency or contractor staff, and 29% procuring external consultants. This means there is likely to be a combination of both internal and external approaches to filling problematic vacancies within planning departments.

Ways to develop and incentivise both new and existing staff were reported as having been used successfully by a substantial minority, including career frameworks and career grades (32%), more flexible working (29%), and further training for existing staff (22%). Most National Parks with difficulties recruiting reported using career frameworks.

Different approaches to recruitment were reported by some planning departments, particularly financial incentives, such as market supplements (27%) and increased salaries (13%), as well as targeted recruitment campaigns (17%). The greatest use of market supplements was reported by District Councils with recruitment difficulties (40%).

Few planning departments selected resource sharing or secondments as successful ways to fill vacancies, although secondments within the local authority were selected more often (6%) than external secondments (3%).

## 5. Retention

### 5.1 Chapter summary

This chapter discusses findings relating to issues of retention, including which roles were more challenging to retain, reasons for staff leaving, the impact of retention difficulties, and what planning departments were doing to improve retention. Barriers to having the right capabilities and capacity, covering both recruitment and retention, are also discussed.

Almost three in four planning departments (72%) reported difficulties with retaining staff over the past 12 months, with almost all of these saying this had had a significant impact on their department's ability to fulfil services or business needs. 61% of all departments felt that the number of staff currently leaving was around the same as the level leaving a year ago, with 17% feeling that more staff were leaving, and 21% that fewer were currently leaving.

Retention problems were ranked in a similar order by role group to the ranking seen for recruitment problems, but with senior development management roles standing out even more clearly from all other roles, being reported as a retention problem by 60% of planning departments.

Planning departments were more likely to report staff having left to go to a different local authority (66%) than going to the private sector (47%), with better pay and conditions considered a key motivation for leaving generally (58%), along with retirement (35%). While half of planning departments reported more flexible working as having been helpful in retaining staff, 15% said they had not successfully used any action to help retain staff.

Overall, in terms of both recruitment and retention, the key significant barriers to meeting resourcing or capacity needs were recruitment-related: competing with both public and private sector organisations for talent (78%), attracting qualified and skilled candidates (77%), and a lack of appropriately qualified candidates (77%). Lack of funding for staff was a further major problem for 66% of planning departments.

### 5.2 Difficulties in retaining staff

Almost three in four planning departments (72%) reported difficulties with retaining staff over the past 12 months, including all 12 London Boroughs. Problems with retention among all planning departments (Figure 5.1, Annex Table 18) were ranked in a fairly similar order by role group to that seen for problems with recruitment (see Figure 4.2). However, development management roles stood out even more clearly from all other roles as a problem in terms of retention.

Senior development management roles were by far most likely to be reported as a current problem for retention (43% of all planning departments), followed by entry and mid-level development management roles (35%). Of the 12 London Boroughs, 11 reported problems with retaining senior development managers. None of the planning departments in the North East reported such a problem.

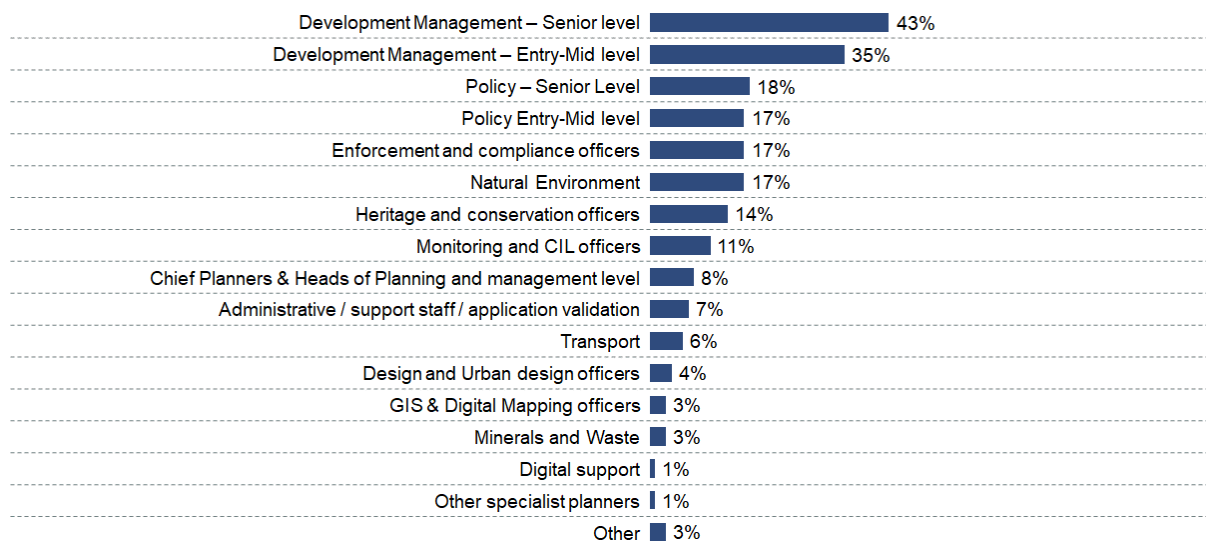
The next four most commonly cited roles in regard to retention problems were each selected by a similar proportion: senior policy (18%), entry and mid-level policy (17%), enforcement and compliance (17%) and the natural environment (17%). As

for vacancies and problems with recruitment, the natural environment was the top planning specialism in terms of retention difficulties.

Administrative roles were slightly lower down the list for retention problems (7%), compared with recruitment problems.

While retaining monitoring and CIL officers was a problem for relatively few planning departments (11%), this was reported more as a problem than average in London Boroughs. Transport was also a problem for a small minority (6%), but this was higher than average for County Councils (transport being a recurring theme for County Councils).

**Figure 5.1: Role groups with current retention problems (re-based over all planning departments)**



Q9. In which, if any, of the following role groups are you currently experiencing difficulties in retaining staff? (Re-based over all planning departments).

Base: All planning departments (118).

### 5.3 Reasons for staff leaving

As was discussed in relation to the staff profile (see Section 3.3 planning departments were more likely to report that the number of staff employed had decreased over the past 12 months (38%) than that it had increased (17%). Just 2% were expecting a decrease in the next financial year (ending 2025).

Providing further context, 61% of all planning departments said that the number of staff currently leaving was around the same as it had been a year ago, with 17% feeling that more staff were currently leaving, and 21% that fewer staff were currently leaving. District Councils were more likely than average to say that fewer staff were leaving than before (30%), while Unitary Authorities were less likely than average to say that more staff were leaving (just one respondent), with National Parks largely reporting no change.

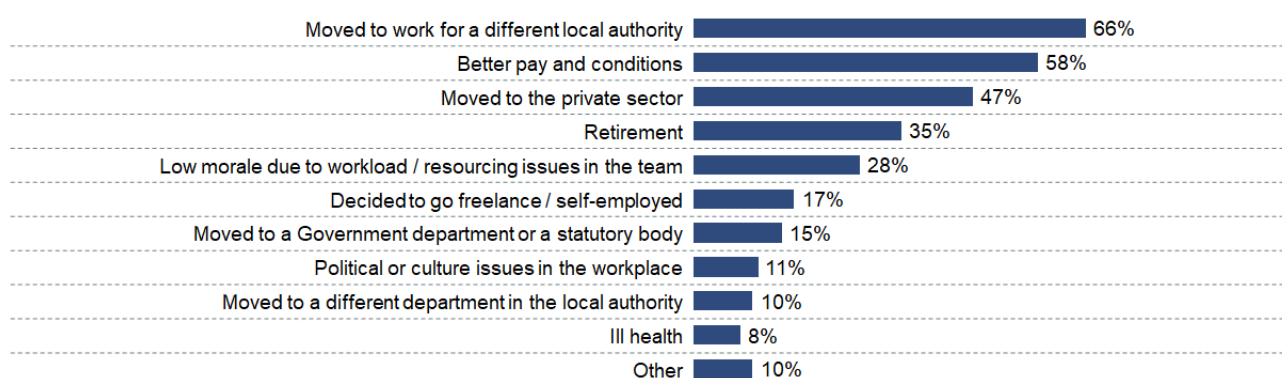
When asked to select the reasons why staff had left (from a list), planning departments were most likely to report that staff had moved to a different local authority (66%), with fewer saying they had moved to the private sector (47%) (Figure 5.2, Annex Table 19). A minority reported moves to government departments (15%) or elsewhere in the local authority (10%).

The key motivation reported for leaving was to obtain better pay and conditions (58%), but over a quarter of planning departments reported that low morale due to workload and resourcing issues was a motivation for leaving (28%). Seeking better pay and conditions was reported more than average by departments in London (11 out of 12) and the East Midlands (12 out of 16).

Changes in working status were also selected as a motivation for leaving, particularly retirement (35%) but also becoming freelance (17%). This echoes the finding that retirement was a key reason given for staff having left (see Section 3.3 ), meaning an ageing workforce could create ongoing problems.

Planning departments that reported some difficulty with retention in the past 12 months were relatively more likely to select better pay and conditions (70%), moving to the private sector (55%) and low morale (34%) as reasons for staff having left.

**Figure 5.2: Reasons for staff leaving planning department**



Q13. Which, if any, of the following are reasons why staff have left your planning department?

Base: All departments (118)

#### 5.4 Impact of retention difficulties

Of those planning departments reporting difficulties with staff retention, the vast majority said that difficulties with retention had a significant impact on their department's ability to fulfil services or business needs (94%), including 34% that said these difficulties had a very significant impact. None said they had no significant impact at all.

None of the planning departments in the North East said the impact was very significant.

#### 5.5 Actions taken to retain staff

When asked to select, from a list, actions taken in the last 12 months to retain staff, most planning departments reported taking at least one action that had been successful in retaining staff (85%). However, 15% said that none of these actions had been used successfully (see

Figure 5.3, Annex Table 20). All departments in Metropolitan Districts and National Parks reported taking some successful action.

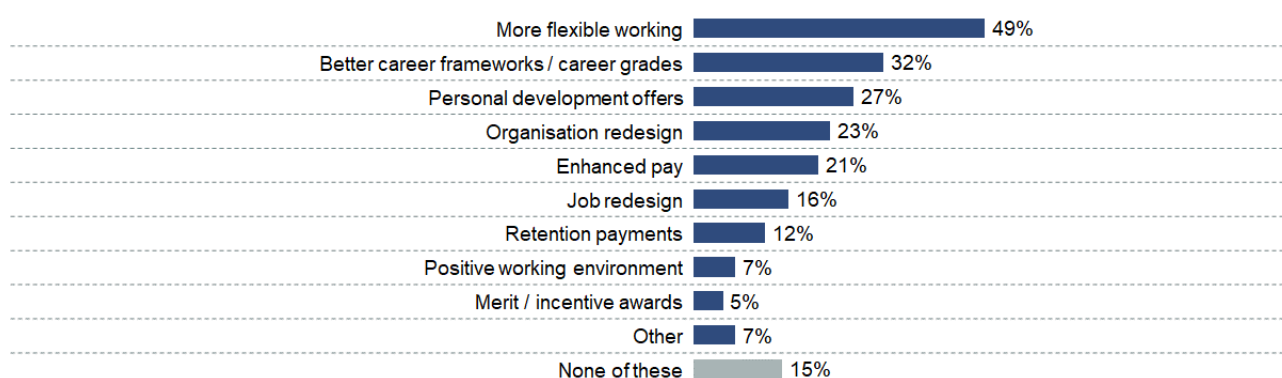
Flexible working stood out as the most commonly reported successful action taken to retain staff, although this was still only reported by 49% of planning departments. This action was reported less often than average by departments in the North East, but was reported by all five National Parks.

Career development improvements were the next most likely action to be selected, including better career frameworks and career grades (32%) and personal development offers (27%). Financial incentives were reported less often, with enhanced pay reported by 21% and retention payments by 12%. Career frameworks were reported more often than average by planning departments in the East of England.

Organisation re-design (23%) was reported about as often as some career-specific actions. Job re-design was reported by 16% of planning departments, with this figure being higher for Metropolitan Districts.

Those departments that said they did not have problems with retention were more likely than average to report having used a positive working environment with some success (22%, compared with 7% of all planning departments).

**Figure 5.3: Most successful actions taken to retain staff**



Q11. Thinking about the last 12 months, which, if any, of the following actions have you taken which have been most successful in retaining your staff?

Base: All planning departments (118).

## 5.6 Barriers to meeting resourcing needs

In a question covering both recruitment and retention, all planning departments were asked to what extent each of a list of difficulties were barriers to them in terms of meeting resourcing or capacity needs (Figure 5.4, Annex Table 21).

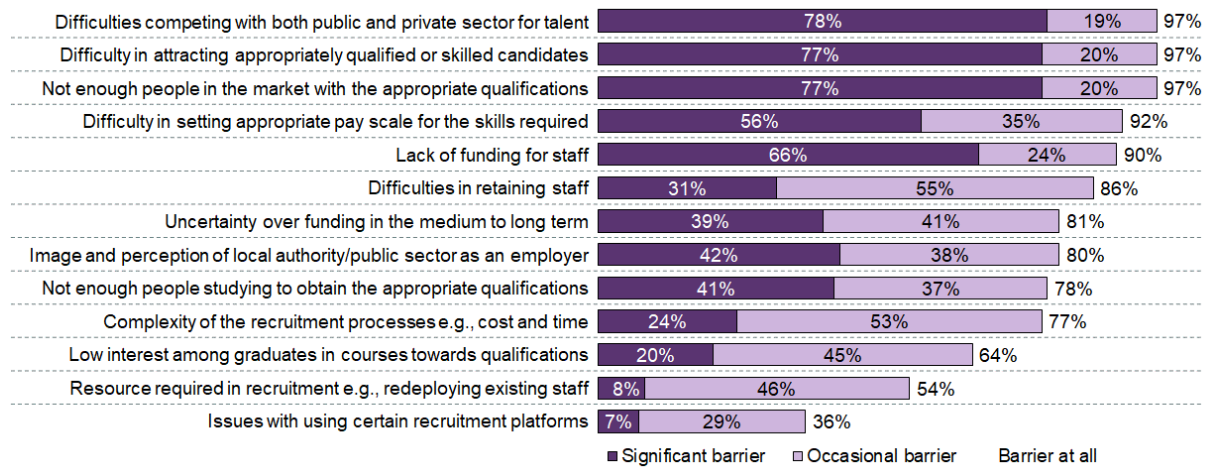
Three recruitment-related barriers to resourcing stood out, with each being at least an occasional barrier for 97% of planning departments and each reported to be a significant barrier for over three in four departments: competing with both public and private sector organisations for talent (78%), attracting qualified and skilled candidates (77%), and a lack of appropriately qualified candidates (77%). Competing for talent and a lack of qualified candidates was seen as a significant barrier by all five National Parks but was reported by fewer planning departments in Unitary Authorities than average.

At least nine in 10 planning departments reported as barriers to meeting resourcing needs difficulty in setting the appropriate pay scale (92%) and lack of funding (90%) for staff, but lack of funding was more likely to be seen as a significant barrier (66%) than pay scales (56%). Broader uncertainty over funding in the medium to long term was relatively less likely to be seen as a significant barrier (39%). Lack of funding for staff was seen as a significant barrier by most planning departments in the North West.



The process of recruitment was seen to be less of a barrier, with the complexity of recruiting being a significant barrier for 24% of planning departments. Very few departments saw the resources required to recruit (8%) or recruitment platforms (7%) as a significant barrier.

**Figure 5.4: Barriers to meeting resourcing needs**



Q14. Thinking about resourcing overall, which, if any, of the following do you think are barriers to meeting your resourcing or capacity needs?

Base: All planning departments (118).

## 6. Skills, challenges and shortages

### 6.1 Chapter summary

This chapter covers the broader topic of skills, knowledge and experience within planning departments, including overall perceptions of current skills levels. The chapter discusses the nature and size of skills gaps, priorities for skills needs, what planning departments are doing to address skills gaps, and the challenges of upskilling. Training budgets are also considered.

Almost all planning departments reported at least some planning skills gaps (97%), with 21% saying there were a lot of gaps. The size of the skills gap was felt to have increased in the past 12 months by 53% of those reporting a gap.

The planning skills gaps that were most commonly reported were in ecology and biodiversity (72%), masterplanning and design codes (63%), and urban design and architecture (54%). Ecology and biodiversity was also the top priority for skills for the next 12 months (64% put this in their top three priorities). Biodiversity Net Gain was also seen as the most challenging reform to implement from the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act, with 84% of planning departments putting this in their top three most challenging changes, with a lack of readiness for Biodiversity Net Gain also being the most commonly reported impact of skills gaps.

While development management and planning policy were not ranked particularly highly as current planning skills gaps, they were ranked second and third as priorities for the next 12 months. This reflects these roles being top challenges for recruitment and retention.

Most of those with planning skills gaps also reported gaps in broader skills beyond planning (89%), with digital skills being the biggest gap (51%), followed by assessing environmental impact (44%): both areas for which planning departments had reported regularly drawing on external resources. Digital skills were also the top priority for the next 12 months (54% of planning departments put this in their top three priorities for broader skills beyond planning).

There were also clear gaps in planning-specific digital skills, with almost half of planning departments saying they had a gap in general. Few (17%) thought that their staff would be able to identify or source (15%) new digital planning tools, and just 28% thought that their staff were competent in its use.

Development management and dealing with planning applications and enforcement was the biggest draw on departmental resources, with this seen as diverting senior resources from other tasks. A reduction in the speed of determining planning applications was also reported as one of the top impacts of skills gaps (72%). Dealing with changes to legislation and the Local Plan were some of the competing demands for resources. The Local Plan was also the second most challenging reform to implement, from the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act.

According to planning departments, skills gaps were most likely to have been addressed by using agency staff (60% of those with a gap) and external consultants (51%), but developing planners internally was also reported as a strategy, through upskilling graduates or apprentices (55%), less qualified recruits (53%) and existing staff (49%).

The main barriers to upskilling identified by planning departments were a lack of capacity to deliver or attend training (72%), followed by a lack of time (67%) and a lack of training budget (60%). For most departments (84%), the training budget was less than £30,000, which included 22% of departments that had no budget at all, and most planning departments expected that budgets would stay the same or decrease next financial year.

## **6.2 Skills gaps**

There was some evidence of an overall perception of skills gaps in planning departments. More disagreed (47%) than agreed (33%) that “there is adequate experience, skills and knowledge within the planning department to deliver the services and work required”. Those reporting difficulties in retention were more likely to disagree (53%) than those without retention issues (29%), but there was no difference by whether or not they had problems with recruitment.

When thinking about planning skills, almost all planning departments reported at least some skills gaps (97%), albeit with most of these reporting just some gaps (77%) and one in five reporting a lot of skills gaps (21%).

None of the five National Parks said they had a lot of skills gaps, while all County Councils, London Boroughs and Metropolitan Districts reported at least some skills gaps. All planning departments in the East and South West of England, and in Yorkshire and the Humber, also reported some skills gap, but with those in the East Midlands and in Yorkshire and the Humber less likely than average to report a lot of skills gaps (see Appendix Table 11.6).

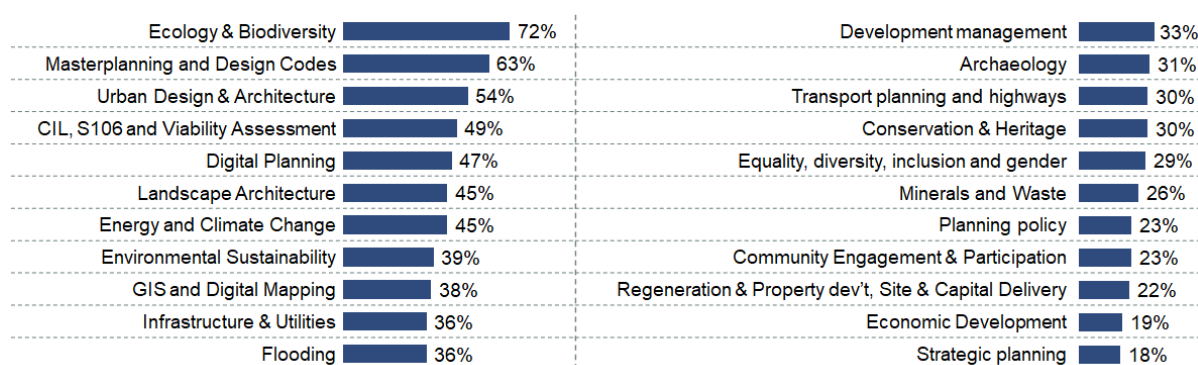
Around half of those with a skills gap said the size of the skills gap had increased in the past 12 months, (53%), with 43% saying it had stayed the same. One in 10 (10%) said it had increased significantly. Just 5% reported a decrease.

No planning departments in the East Midlands, North West, London, and the South West reported a decrease in the skills gap, but the number reporting a decrease was at most one or two planning departments in all other regions and there was no regional difference in those reporting an increase.

These gaps were related to a wide range of planning skills (

Figure 6.1, Annex Table 22). For those reporting any gaps, the most commonly reported gaps (selected from a list) were in ecology and biodiversity (72%) and masterplanning and design codes (63%), with over half of planning departments reporting gaps in urban design and architecture (54%). All other skills were reported by fewer than half of departments, with 47% reporting a gap in digital planning and 45% reporting each of energy and climate change, and landscape architecture.

**Figure 6.1: Gaps in planning skills (% among planning departments with skills gaps)**



Q16. Which, if any, of the following planning skills does your planning department currently have gaps in?

Base: All planning departments with skills gaps (114).

Among those with any skills gaps, London Boroughs were more likely than average to report problems with ecology and biodiversity (all 12 planning departments), digital planning, environmental sustainability, and GIS. Metropolitan District planning departments were more likely than average to have a gap in infrastructure and utilities.

By region, in addition to the differences described above for London, planning departments in the East Midlands and in Yorkshire and the Humber were more likely to report gaps for urban design and architecture. Planning departments in the North West were more likely to have gaps in digital planning, flooding, and infrastructure and utilities, with this latter area more commonly reported to be a gap in the West Midlands (see Appendix Table 11.7).

### Gaps in broader skills beyond planning

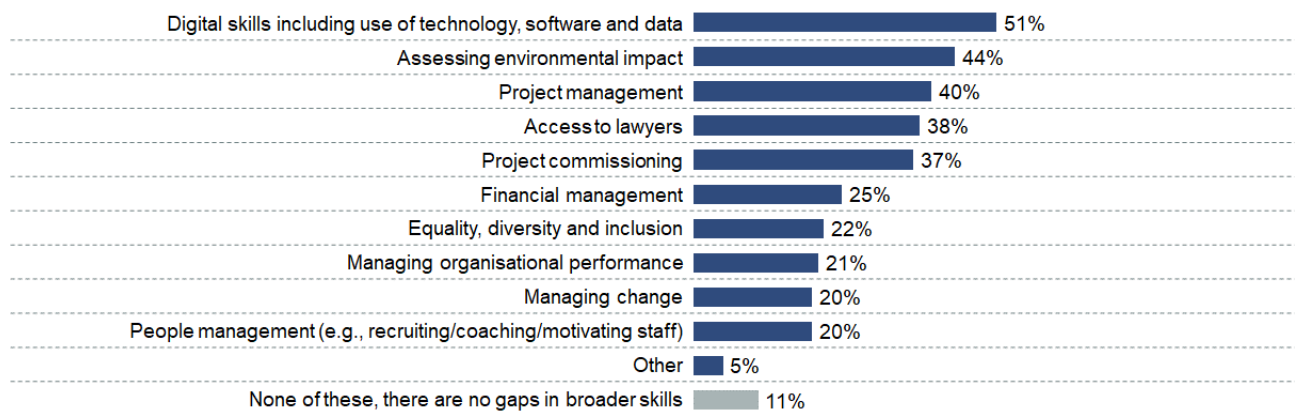
When presented with a list of broader skills beyond planning, 89% of planning departments with planning skills gaps also reported having some gaps in these broader skills (Figure 6.2, Annex Table 23). As a proportion of all respondents, this means that 87% of all planning departments reported some gaps in broader skills beyond planning.

Such gaps were reported by all Metropolitan Districts and National Parks, but by fewer Unitary Authorities than average.

Digital skills were the greatest gap in broader skills beyond planning (51% of those with any skills gaps), followed by assessing environmental impact (44%). Other than legal skills, these were the two areas in which planning departments were most likely to report regularly drawing on skills elsewhere in the local authority (see Figure 3.4). Related to this, the natural environment was also reported as the top specific planning specialism for difficulties in each of recruitment (see Figure 4.2) and retention (see Figure 5.1).

A substantial minority of planning departments reported skills gaps in project management (40%), access to lawyers (38%) and project commissioning (37%). Many planning departments reported drawing regularly on legal skills elsewhere in the local authority, and this may be why more did not report access to lawyers as a skills gap.

**Figure 6.2: Gaps in broader skills beyond planning (% among planning departments with skills gaps)**



Q17. Thinking of broader skills beyond planning, which, if any, of the following does your planning department currently have gaps in?

Base: All planning departments with skills gaps (114).

London Boroughs were more likely than average to report gaps in digital skills and assessing environmental impact, with planning departments in the East of England with skills gaps more likely to say there were gaps in project management and access to lawyers, and those in the South West more likely to report a gap in project commissioning (see Appendix Table 11.8).

### 6.3 Planning-specific digital skills

As already discussed, digital skills were most often reported as a gap in terms of broader skills beyond planning (see Figure 6.2) and almost half of planning departments (47%) reported a skills gap in digital planning (see

Figure 6.1).

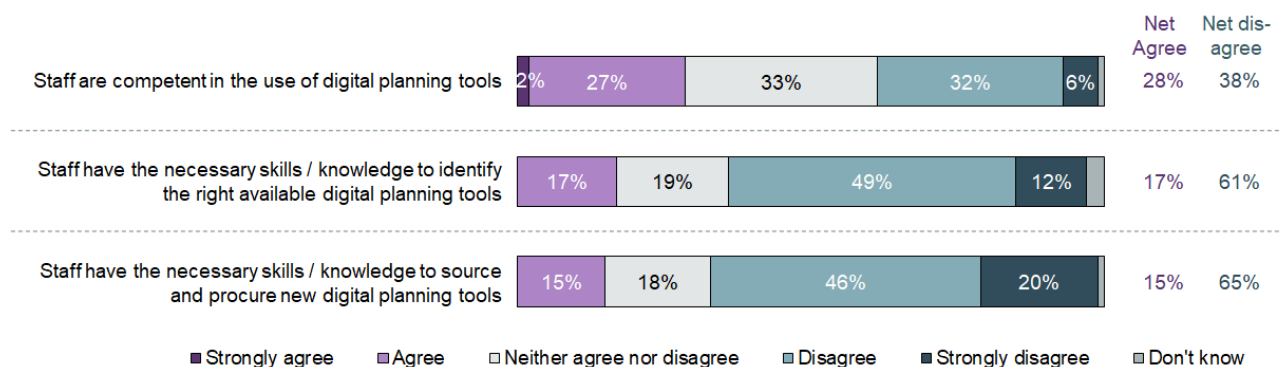
In order to further assess the level of skills relating to planning-specific digital tools, the survey reminded respondents of new and emerging tools, such as PropTech, and digital community engagement. Respondents were then asked for their opinion on the level of skills of their staff in using such digital tools, beyond their use of day-to-day operating systems.

There was clearly a perceived skills gap in sourcing and using new digital planning tools (Figure 6.3, Annex Table 24). Disagreement was particularly high that staff had the necessary skills and knowledge to identify the right available digital planning tools (61%) and to source and procure new digital planning tools (65%). Just 15% of planning departments agreed that staff had the skills to procure new digital planning tools at present.

The perceived competency of staff in using these tools was higher than perceptions of staff's ability to identify and source them. Nevertheless, more planning departments disagreed (38%) than agreed (28%) that staff were competent in the use of digital planning tools, with just 2% agreeing strongly.

All five National Parks disagreed that staff had the necessary skills and knowledge to identify the right available digital planning tools. Those in the North West were also more likely than average to disagree with this statement.

**Figure 6.3: Digital planning skills**



Q26. There are a number of new and emerging digital planning tools (including PropTech and digital community engagement). Beyond your day-to-day operating systems, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the below statements about your staff's skills in using digital tools required for planning?

Base: All planning departments (118).

#### 6.4 Priorities for future skills needs

All planning departments were asked to rank their top three priorities for planning skills (from a list) in the next 12 months. Ecology and biodiversity was clearly the top-ranked planning skills priority, with 64% placing it in their top three priorities and 33% saying it was their number one priority (Figure 6.4, Annex Table 25). This reflects its position as the top current planning skills gap (see

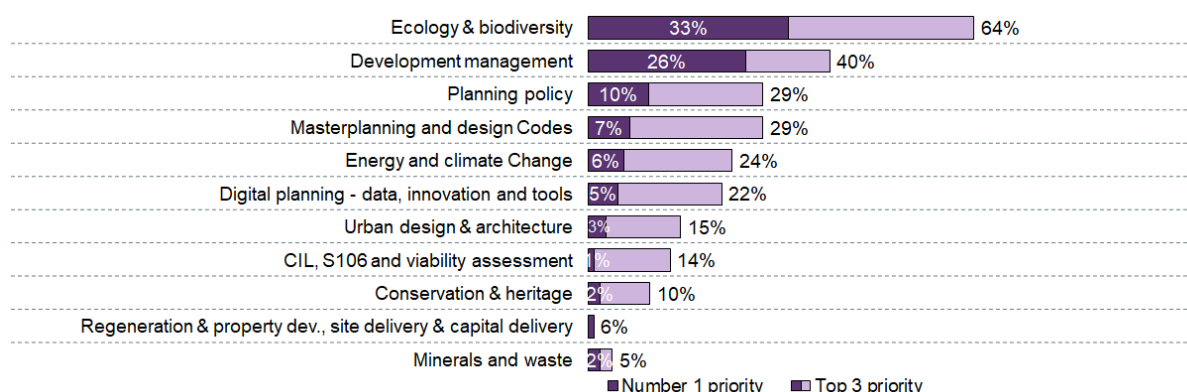
Figure 6.1).

Development management was the second highest priority, ranked as a top three priority for 40% of departments and the number one priority for 26%. While this was not ranked highly as a skills gap (see



Figure 6.1), this prioritisation reflects the finding that it was the top difficulty in terms of both recruitment (see Figure 4.2) and retention (see Figure 5.1).

**Figure 6.4: Top priorities for planning skills in next 12 months**



Q23. Looking ahead to the next 12 months, which planning skills are you looking to prioritise for your planning department?

Base: All departments (118).

**Planning policy** and **masterplanning and design codes** were each selected as top three priorities by 29% of planning departments. However, few selected either of these as their number one priority. Planning policy was ranked much more highly as a priority than it was as a skills gap. As for development management, this is likely to reflect greater difficulties in recruitment and retention for these roles compared with most other roles.

Planning policy was relatively more likely to be the number one priority for planning departments in areas with a higher population density (17%).

Planning departments in Metropolitan Districts were more likely than average to report masterplanning and design codes as a top three priority, while this was not reported at all by those in London and in National Parks. Urban design and architecture was more likely than average to be a top three priority in Unitary Authorities.

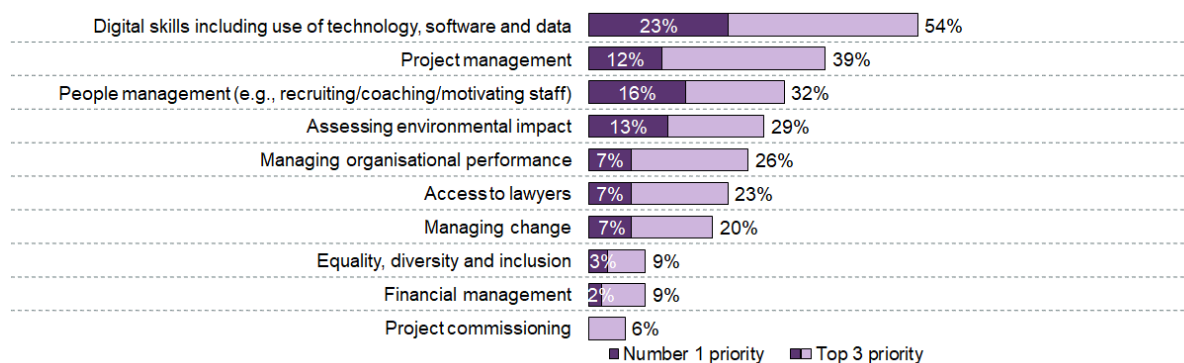
In addition, planning departments in the North West were more likely than average to prioritise ecology and biodiversity.

### Priorities in broader skills beyond planning

When asked for priorities in broader skills beyond planning, digital skills stood out as a top three priority for 54% of planning departments and as the single greatest priority for 23% (Figure 6.5, Annex Table 26). This reflects its position as the greatest current gap in broader skills (see Figure 6.2).

Project management was the second highest priority, with 39% of planning departments placing it in their top three priorities, but with just 12% placing it as their number one priority.

**Figure 6.5: Priorities for broader skills beyond planning**



Q24. Looking ahead, which of the following broader skills are you looking to prioritise for your planning department?

Base: All planning departments (118).

People management was the third highest priority for broad skills beyond planning, being in the top three priorities for 32% of planning departments, but it was ranked at the bottom of the list of current broad skills gaps. It was more likely than average to be a top priority in National Parks. This prioritisation may be related to the need to address problems with recruitment challenges having a strong negative impact on staff morale (see Figure 4.4).

Assessing environmental impact was identified as the second largest skills gap, just behind digital skills, and was the fourth ranked priority for the future, with 29% of planning departments putting it in their top three priorities. While this was a much lower level of priority compared to digital skills, it was close to the prioritisation given to people management. Assessing environmental impact was more likely than average to be a top three priority for planning departments in County Councils.

## 6.5 Demands on resources

In a more general question, planning departments were asked to describe, in their own words, what kind of demand or workload drew or used up the most resources within their planning department. This provides further insights into what skills are likely to be most important, in terms of resourcing.

Around half of those giving an answer cited processing planning applications as one of the greatest demands. For a minority (less than 20 planning departments) this was the only issue that was mentioned. While some departments cited invalid applications, and while a few mentioned major or politically sensitive applications, more mentioned minor and householder applications. For example:

“Currently minor planning applications forming the vast majority of the backlog dealt with by senior planning officers.”

- Metropolitan District

In line with earlier findings regarding retention and recruitment problems for development management, particularly at a senior level, around a third of respondents mentioned this as a major demand on resources, often alongside planning applications and other aspects of this, such as enforcements. The following brief example is fairly typical:

“Day to day DM [development management] workloads and enforcement.”

- National Park

Planning applications and development management were cited as a disproportionate demand on resources, diverting insufficient resources, particularly at a senior level, from other needs:

“Development management, takes up time for other improvement projects where the senior staff such as the development manager [is] spending more time in discussion of applications.”

- District Council

Specific comments about processing planning applications were related to other issues, such as communicating with the public, including complaints. For example:

“In particular customer expectations around contact and queries – moving customers to be more self-serving and digital is challenging. The second highest area of demand is the % of applications received which are invalid.”

- District Council

“Currently complaints arising from backlog in applications and a lack of understanding from the public that the planning service application fees do not cover the cost of running the service.”

- District Council

Other related issues were also cited, including dealing with consultations and appeals.

The demands of dealing with development management and planning applications formed part of more generally reported problems around a lack of resources and a range of skills gaps, such as in the following examples:

“Handling major applications. This authority simply doesn't have the staff resource to handle the complexity and volume of major planning applications it has to determine. There are insufficient in-house support skills available, a very small planning policy team, out of date SPDs [supplementary planning documents] and lack of senior level DM [development management] officers.”

- District Council

“The main issue is that whilst we are operating with no vacancies, due to staff reductions we don't have a sufficiently sized team to deal with applications as quickly as we would want to ... or the resilience to maintain the current levels of performance when there are planned and/or unplanned absences or if there is an increase (either in number or complexity) of cases.”

- Unitary Authority

The need to develop or review the Local Plan was also mentioned by a substantial minority of planning departments, often as the third or fourth item after issues such as development management and planning applications, such as in the following example:

“Planning applications (including listed building matters), political pressures and ideas, Local Plan review (short timeframes).”

- London Borough

Keeping up to date with changes in planning legislation was mentioned as a demand on resources by a number of respondents. The specific examples of changes cited most often were Biodiversity Net Gain and nutrient neutrality. The example below

shows how this concern can sit alongside a wide range of other demands for some respondents:

“Appeals and inquiries, major applications, consultations on local plans, adapting to new requirements e.g., nutrient neutrality, BNG.”  
 - Unitary Authority

In addition, a few respondents mentioned issues with websites, IT and systems, with a few others reporting issues around legal challenges and obtaining legal advice.

## 6.6 Challenges arising from the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act

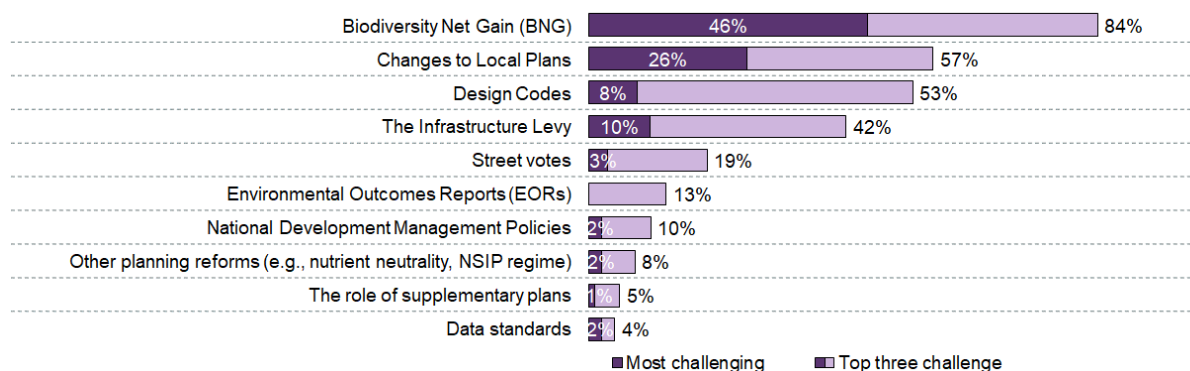
Changes to planning included in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act have clear implications for the prioritisation of skills and resourcing in planning departments. At the time of the survey this was not yet an Act of Parliament, and so was referred to in the questionnaire as the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill. Questions were asked about the content of the Bill at that stage.

When asked which planning changes would be most challenging to implement given the current skills available, Biodiversity Net Gain was clearly considered the greatest challenge to the planning process (Almost half (46%) of planning departments said that Biodiversity Net Gain would be the single most challenging change to implement, with 84% placing it in their top three greatest challenges. This is in keeping with the finding that ecology and biodiversity were the top priority for planning skills (see Figure 6.4). It is also likely to be linked to difficulties reported in recruitment and retention for natural environment roles. Biodiversity Net Gain was reported to be a challenge by all planning departments in the East Midlands.

Figure 6.6, Annex Table 27).

Almost half (46%) of planning departments said that Biodiversity Net Gain would be the single most challenging change to implement, with 84% placing it in their top three greatest challenges. This is in keeping with the finding that ecology and biodiversity were the top priority for planning skills (see Figure 6.4). It is also likely to be linked to difficulties reported in recruitment and retention for natural environment roles. Biodiversity Net Gain was reported to be a challenge by all planning departments in the East Midlands.

**Figure 6.6: Most challenging Levelling Up and Regeneration Act planning changes**



Q25. Thinking about the changes to planning set out in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, which of the changes do you think will be the most challenging to implement given the current skills available in your local authority?

Base: All planning departments (118).

Changes to Local Plans were a clear secondary challenge, with 57% of planning departments placing this in the top three challenges and 26% selecting this as the most challenging change to implement. This was less likely than average to be the top challenge in London, but more likely to be in the top three for planning departments in County Councils and Metropolitan Districts (see Appendix Table 11.11).

It is worth noting, as context, that Local Plans were ranked behind the ability to complete core tasks, such as planning applications and enforcement action, in terms of the impact of current skills gaps.

While over half (53%) of planning departments saw design codes as a top three challenge, few saw this as the most challenging change to implement (8%). This was more likely than average to be a top three challenge in Unitary Authorities and was a top three challenge for most planning departments in Yorkshire and the Humber.

The CIL was the top challenge for 10% of departments, but was less likely to be in the top three (42%) than design codes.

While preparing supplementary planning documents were reported as a middle ranking area of impact for current skills gaps, very few thought the changes to these would be a top three challenge (5%).

## **6.7 Impact of skills gaps**

Those planning departments with any skills gaps (planning or broader skills) were asked to describe, in their own words, which had the most negative impact on their department and why. Few went into detail about why the gaps were impactful, perhaps taking it as read that a lack of sufficient capacity with regard to particular skills would cause problems with delivery. The minority who did give details focused on an increased need to outsource, and problems with tasks taking longer to deliver than they should, such as in the following examples:

“Bottlenecking in the Legal Department, which is more about lack of capacity than skills gaps per se. It is very difficult to explain to people that their application is taking time, due to the associated legal agreements being held up in Legal (or Legal aren't able to turn them around as quickly as everyone would like).”

- Unitary Authority

“We have to buy in a lot of services from outside due to the department not being big enough to support specific officers for things such as conservation, ecology, so they are probably two key areas where we have skills gaps in-house currently.”

- District Council

The vast majority of respondents focused on the specific skills gaps that caused them problems. Biodiversity and ecology were cited most frequently, often with reference to Biodiversity Net Gain requirements. This was mentioned in relation to the requirements of changes to the planning process, as in the following example:

“Ecology and Biodiversity Net Gain – As the largest change to the planning process this skill area needs to be pervasive amongst all planners but is currently outsourced.”

- Unitary Authority

Change was also mentioned more generally as an issue:

“Change management – constant change at a national level is too resource intensive and prevents the ability to effectively plan for the long term.”

- District Council

Legal expertise was mentioned as a skills gap more frequently than many other skills (as seen in the earlier example), and particularly the requirements of S106 agreements. There was also a relatively high number of mentions of design codes. The following example covers both of these skills, among others that were mentioned, including the demands of the Local Plan:

“Reliance on technical consultees who are equally struggling for resource is impacting the statutory service. This includes ecology, LLFA [Lead Local Flood Authority], highways and S106 legal officers. We have no capacity to invest in design codes which is a concern as this is necessary to support new local plan.”

- District Council

Reflecting findings related to other questions, development management was also mentioned fairly frequently as a skills gap that had the most negative impact, sometimes alongside planning policy, and particularly in relation to a lack of experienced staff.

“Development Management and Planning Policy. Skills gap places additional pressure on more experienced members of the team and leads to delays in decision-making, and delays to Local Plan preparation leading to customer dissatisfaction.”

- Metropolitan District

Also reflecting findings relating to other questions, digital planning skills were cited as a skills gap which had a negative impact. The example below covers this, as well as other areas of skills mentioned by respondents: urban design and landscape architecture. This illustrates the way respondents often mentioned a wide range of issues in their response:

“Urban Design ... we have had a growth agenda for some years. The quality of new housing developments in urban extensions has been variable ... Landscape Architecture ... We see the spaces between buildings as of equal importance to the buildings themselves. Digital Skills – we have not recruited for a replacement planning IT specialist and have somewhat stagnated over the last few years rather than investing through the Government's digitization agenda and performance management information.”

- Unitary Authority

Problems with expertise in a range of other specialisms were mentioned, including the environment, climate change, flooding and drainage, highways and transport. More general broader non-planning skills were also mentioned, including project and people management and IT.

### **Prompted impact of skills gaps**

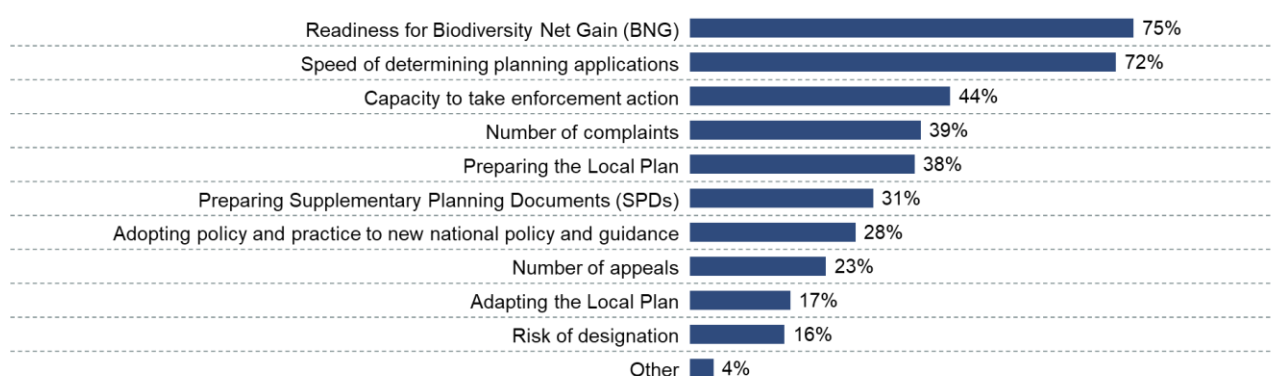
Respondents were then asked to select from a list the ways in which skills gaps (both planning or broader skills) had impacted on their planning department. Two issues stood out (Figure 6.7, Annex Table 28). When prompted, three in four reported an impact on their readiness for biodiversity net gain (75%). This reflects earlier findings that this was perceived to be the most challenging reform to

implement from the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act (see Figure 6.6), as well as major planning skills gaps in ecology and biodiversity (see Figure 6.1).

Almost as many planning departments reported that skills gaps had an impact on the speed of determining planning applications (72%). This reflects many of the responses to the unprompted question already discussed, and the gaps reported in development management skills.

All planning departments with a skills gap in the North East reported some impact on the speed of determining planning applications. This was also higher than average for planning departments in the South West, with those in the South West also more likely than average to report an impact on readiness for biodiversity.

**Figure 6.7: Impact of skills gaps (% of planning departments with skills gaps)**



Q19. Overall, how has your local authority planning department been impacted by the skills gap(s) you mentioned?

Base: All planning departments with skills gaps (114).

Secondary impacts of skills gaps included the capacity to take enforcement action (44%), the number of complaints (39%) and preparing the Local Plan (38%). Adapting the Local Plan was also an impact for 17% of departments. In total, 41% mentioned the Local Plan as an impact of the skills gaps, either in terms of preparation or adaptation.

It is worth noting that almost half of planning departments reported not yet having completed their Local Plan (46%), so this is likely to be an ongoing problem. There was no statistically significant difference in reported impact on preparing or adopting the Local Plan between those that had and those that had not already completed it.

While fewer planning departments (28%) said there was an impact on adopting policy and practice to new national policy and guidance, this was higher than average among County Councils.

Those in more densely populated areas were more likely than those in less densely populated areas to report an impact on preparing the Local Plan (51%, compared with 28%) and preparing supplementary planning documents (SPDs) (44%, compared with 20%).

## 6.8 Actions taken to address skills gaps

When asked to select from a list of actions that had been taken, almost all planning departments reported having taken some action to help address skills gaps (99%).

Using agency staff was the action most likely to be selected (60%), followed by growing skilled staff internally through graduate and apprentice schemes (55%) and 53% recruiting less qualified staff to train them up (Planning departments with skills gaps in County Councils were more likely than average to report upskilling existing staff, while those in London were more likely to report running targeted recruitment campaigns. Those in Metropolitan Districts were relatively more likely to report growing staff internally, both through recruitment of graduates or apprentices and recruiting less qualified staff. None of the National Parks reported using agency staff, but most said they ran additional training for existing staff (see Appendix Table 11.9).

In addition, planning departments in the East of England were more likely than average to report implementing career frameworks and using market supplements.

Figure 6.8, Annex Table 29). These were the same top three actions as were reported for addressing problems with recruitment (see Figure 4.5), but with the use of agency staff more highly ranked when addressing skills gaps.

Other actions that were more likely to be reported as ways to address skills gaps than as ways to address recruitment difficulties included the use of external consultants (51%) and upskilling existing staff (49%).

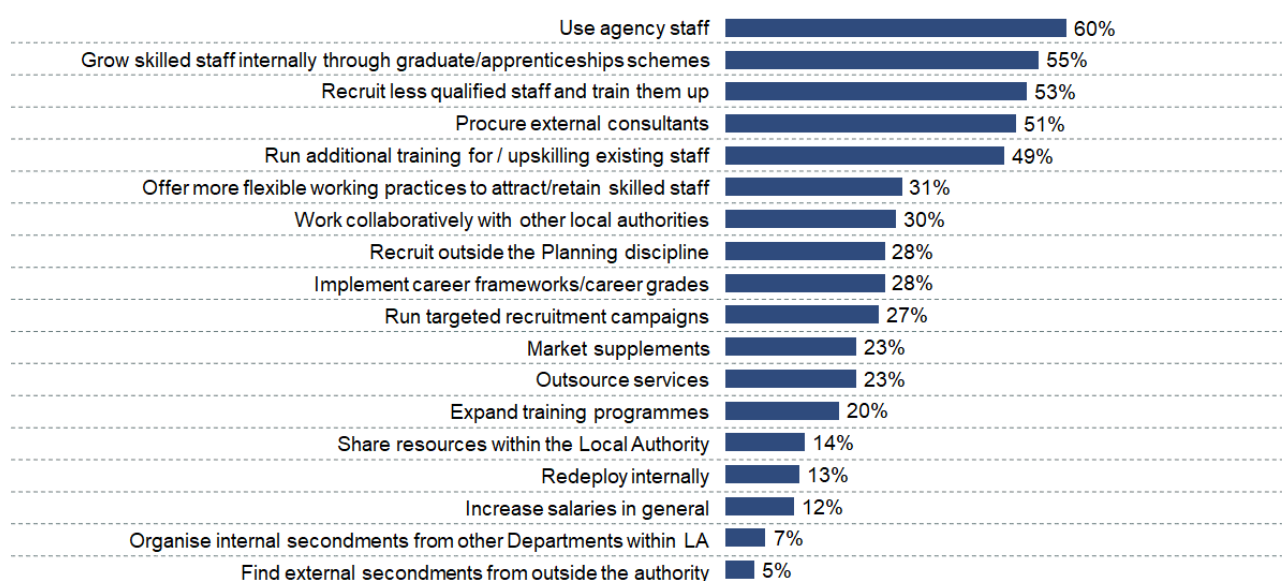
Three in 10 planning departments reported working collaboratively with other local authorities to address skills gaps. Offering more flexible working was equally likely to be offered as a way to address skills gap (31%). As for recruitment, secondments were only reported by a very small minority of planning departments.

Planning departments with skills gaps in County Councils were more likely than average to report upskilling existing staff, while those in London were more likely to report running targeted recruitment campaigns. Those in Metropolitan Districts were relatively more likely to report growing staff internally, both through recruitment of graduates or apprentices and recruiting less qualified staff. None of the National Parks reported using agency staff, but most said they ran additional training for existing staff (see Appendix Table 11.9).

In addition, planning departments in the East of England were more likely than average to report implementing career frameworks and using market supplements.

**Figure 6.8: Actions taken to address skills gaps (% among planning departments with skills gaps)**





Q20. What actions, if any, have your organisation undertaken to help address these gaps in skills?  
 Base: All departments with skills gaps (114).

## 6.9 Barriers to upskilling

When asked to select barriers to upskilling staff from a list, the main barriers identified by planning departments were a lack of capacity to deliver or attend training (72%), followed by a lack of time (67%) and the lack of a training budget, including constraints on paying staff to attend training (60%).

A lack of capacity was more likely to be chosen by those with retention difficulties (80%) than those without (50%). The lack of a budget was more likely to be reported by those in more densely populated areas (74%, compared with 48% in less densely populated areas).

A lack of external training courses was less of a barrier, although this was selected by 38%, constituting a substantial minority. Around a quarter of planning departments were concerned that, after upskilling, staff would choose to move on (26%).

Planning departments in National Parks tended to be largely concerned about capacity and time issues. Unitary Authorities were less concerned about a lack of external courses. Planning departments in London were less likely than average to fear that upskilled staff would move on. The lack of a training budget was reported as less of a concern in planning departments in Yorkshire and the Humber.

## 6.10 Training and budgets

A large majority of planning departments reported that their training budget was less than £30,000 (84%). One in five said they had no training budget (22%) and 62% said they had a budget of up to £30,000. Just 6% reported having a larger training budget.

Those in more densely populated areas were more likely to report having no budget (37%) than those in less densely populated areas (7%). The majority of Metropolitan Districts reported having no budget, with this proportion was also higher than average in planning departments in the North West.

Planning departments were most likely to think their training budget would not change in the next financial year (63%), with 28% thinking it would decrease and just 3% anticipating an increase. Those in Metropolitan Districts were less likely than average to expect a decrease.

Almost all planning departments (96%) reported that members of their planning committee had received mandatory training in the last two to three years. Of the handful saying they had not (n=4), most were in Unitary Authorities and Metropolitan Districts.

## 7. Operating models

### 7.1 Chapter summary

This chapter reports on the operating models of planning departments, excluding County Councils (n=109, once County Councils are removed), and the extent to which staff, services and skills were shared with other local authorities.

A large majority of planning departments (86%) reported having a standardised local authority departmental structure, while most of the remainder (9%) said they were a planning department that was embedded across combined services.

Around four in 10 planning departments (excluding County Councils) said they shared services with other local authorities through a contract or formal agreement (39%), with 27% of all planning departments using the agreement to share staff, most frequently for ecology and biodiversity. Of those who were able to give numbers, on average planning departments shared around four staff, and did so with three to four other local authorities.

### 7.2 Operating models of planning departments within local authorities

A large majority of planning departments reported having a standardised local authority departmental structure (86%), such as one headed by a chief planner or head of planning, and with all planning services being within the same directorate. All five National Parks reported having this model.

Most of the remainder said they were a planning department embedded across combined services (9%), and where planning services sat in multiple directorates and management was shared across disciplines (e.g. planning policy and development management services operating in separate corporate directorates). This was only reported in District Councils, Unitary Authorities and Metropolitan Districts.

Just 3% of planning departments reported having a 'flat' organisational structure, with cross-role working and responsibility, where officers and management operated in multiple disciplines. This was only reported in District Councils and Metropolitan Districts.

The remaining 2% were in the process of restructuring.

### 7.3 Sharing staff and services with other local authorities

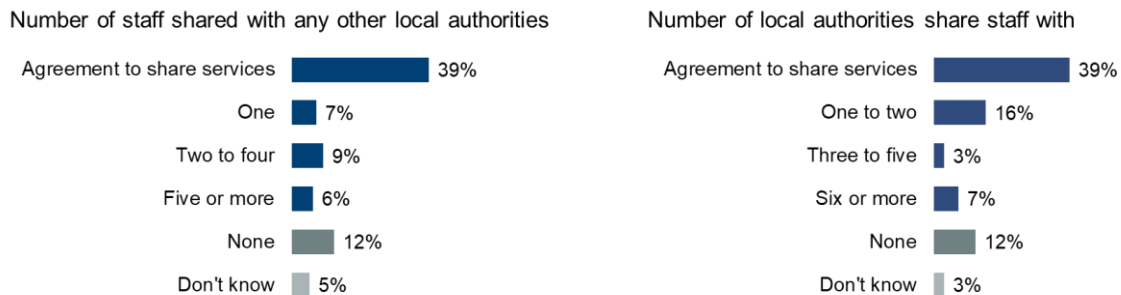
Around four in 10 planning departments (excluding County Councils) said they shared services with other local authorities through a contract or formal agreement (39%).

Nine of the 10 planning departments that were embedded across combined services said they shared services, compared with just a third of those with a standardised local authority structure (34%). None of the London Boroughs, and none of those in Yorkshire and the Humber, reported having an agreement to share services.

Of those with an agreement, 29% said they did not share any staff with local authorities, meaning 71% were using their agreement to share staff. This equates to 27% of all planning departments sharing staff with other local authorities. Of those that were able to give numbers, departments reported sharing an average of around four staff, with an average of three to four other local authorities.

Taken as a proportion of all planning departments (Figure 7.1, Annex Table 30), 7% of planning departments shared just one member of staff, 9% shared two to four and 6% shared five or more. Planning departments were most likely to share staff with just one or two other local authorities (16%), although 7% shared staff more widely, with six or more other local authorities.

**Figure 7.1: Staff sharing with other local authorities**



Q33. Does your local authority planning department share any services with other local authorities through a contract or formal agreement?

Q34. Overall, approximately how many staff do you share with other local authorities?

Q35. How many other local authorities do you share staff with?

Base: All planning departments, excluding County Councils (109).

The 30 planning departments reporting sharing any staff with other local authorities were asked to select (from a list) the planning skills that they shared. The skills that were most commonly reported to be shared were ecology and biodiversity (n=12), archaeology (n=9), conservation and heritage (n=8) and planning policy (n=7). Strategic planning, energy and climate change, and minerals and waste skills were each shared by four planning departments, with skills in development management and flooding each shared by three. A range of other skills were each shared by just one or two planning departments.

## 8. How do challenges vary across England?

This final chapter explores differences by region and type of local authority and council. As explained in Section 2, sample sizes and variable response rates limit the degree to which these findings can be generalised beyond the research sample and caution should be used, but the data in this section can be used as a possible indication of the different needs across the country.

- With the exception of outsourcing for legal advice, District Councils were generally less likely than average to outsource for a range of support, including ecology and biodiversity, environmental and public health, highways, and transport.
- Fewer Unitary Authorities reported recruitment difficulties for entry and mid-level development managers and enforcement and compliance officers than the average.
- Planning departments in Yorkshire and the Humber all reported recruitment difficulties and said that this led to increasing workload and difficulties in meeting demands. They were more likely than the average to report offering flexible working to address these difficulties.
- No particular challenges or gaps stood out from the average for planning departments in the South East.

### 8.1 Differences by region

There were particular issues of capacity and capability that were found to be more prominent in certain regions, although this data should be treated with caution given the small numbers of planning departments responding within each region.

While it proved more fruitful to explore differences by the nature of the authority within which the planning department sits (see Section 8.2 ), there were some specific challenges for particular regions, which are described here. Percentages are not given because of small base sizes, but supporting data is included in Appendix B.

#### East of England and Midlands

There were a few ways in which planning departments in the East of England were different compared to the average for all planning departments:

- A majority had difficulty recruiting for development management and natural environment roles. Those with recruitment difficulties were more likely than average to say not enough people were interested in this type of job, and that planning is not an attractive career path.
- All reported skills gaps, and they were more likely than average to say there were gaps in the broader skills of project management and access to lawyers. They were more likely to report implementing career frameworks and using market supplements to address skills gaps successfully.

Planning departments in the East Midlands were more likely than average to expect an increase in staff numbers in the next financial year. They were more likely to

report that staff had left for better pay and conditions, and to report planning skills gaps for urban design and architecture. All saw biodiversity net gain as a key challenge arising from the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act.

All planning departments in the West Midlands had some difficulty with recruitment, and all said an uncompetitive salary offer contributed to these problems. Infrastructure and utilities was a relatively greater skills gap for these departments.

## **South**

Planning departments in the South West were characterised by a number of differences when compared to the overall picture:

- All those with recruitment difficulties reported the problem of there being low numbers of applicants with the required skills, and an impact on increased workload for staff. They were more likely to report having to outsource because of recruitment difficulties.
- All reported skills gaps, and they were more likely to report a gap in project commissioning. All said skills gaps had impacted their readiness for biodiversity net gain, and most said it affected the speed with which they determined planning applications.

No particular challenges or gaps stood out from the average for planning departments in the South East.

There were also differences in London, as compared to the average, given the difference in the nature of this region as compared to the rest of England. These are described later, in the section on types of local authorities.

## **North**

In the North East, all planning departments with recruitment difficulties reported problems with low numbers of applicants generally. All said their skills gaps had an impact on the speed of determining planning applications.

There were a number of differences from the average, for planning departments in the North West:

- All departments in the North West with recruitment difficulties reported problems with low numbers of applicants generally. A lack of funding for staff was more likely than average to be a barrier to resourcing for these departments.
- Departments in the North West were more likely to have skills gaps for digital planning, flooding, and infrastructure and utilities. More thought their staff had the skills to identify the right digital planning tools. They were more likely to report having no training budget and most did not think their budget would change in the next year.

There was also a number of differences for planning departments in Yorkshire and the Humber

- All reported recruitment difficulties and said that this led to an increased workload and difficulties in meeting demands. They were more likely than average to report offering flexible working to address these difficulties. All said staff turnover was similar to what it had been a year ago.

- All planning departments reported skills gaps. They were more likely to report gaps for urban design and architecture, and to see design codes as a key challenge arising from the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act.

## **8.2 Differences by types of local authorities**

For most types of local authorities and councils, the problems and challenges were broadly the same, but each also reported some specific areas of challenge.

Clearly, differences in location, as discussed above, will be reflected to some extent in differences between the types of planning departments, with National Parks being particularly rural, and Unitary Authorities, Metropolitan Districts and London Boroughs more likely to be urban and more densely populated. Furthermore, responding County Councils were largely in the South and East, Metropolitan Districts in the North and Midlands, while most National Parks were in the North. However, there were other differences that play a role.

Key differences from the average for each of the different types of planning departments are detailed below. Given the small numbers of respondents within most of these categories, these differences should be interpreted as indicative; they may not reflect findings for the type of planning department as a whole. Percentages will not be given, other than for District Councils, for which the base size is sufficiently large. Caution should be exercised when attempting to generalise these findings beyond the research sample.

Note that references to the size of a planning department are based on the number of staff in the planning department reported in the survey, and do not reflect the geographical spread covered by planning departments. Fuller details of key differences by type of authority are included in Appendix B.

### **National Parks (five respondents)**

These were consistently the smallest in size, with a mean of 23 staff members and a range of from four to 30 staff.

Differences from the average for all responding planning departments were as follows:

- All five responding planning departments reported some difficulty in recruitment. All reported an uncompetitive salary offer as contributing to this difficulty, with remote location and poor public transport being an issue for four of the five.
- All five reported that recruitment difficulties led to an increased workload, issues with staff morale and difficulties meeting customer service objectives.
- Four of the five reported successfully creating a career framework to address recruitment problems, while most reported offering more flexible working to address retention problems.
- Most of the departments reported that staff turnover was fairly stable, with the same number of staff leaving now as a year ago.
- All five reported that difficulties competing with other organisations, and in attracting qualified applicants, were barriers to resourcing, along with a lack of suitably qualified applicants.

- All five departments reported some gaps in broader non-planning skills. None reported using agency staff to fill skills gaps, with most running additional training instead. Only one department reported the lack of a training budget as a barrier to upskilling.
- All five said staff knew how to identify suitable digital planning tools. They were more likely than average to prioritise people management as a future broad skill.
- All five said their Local Plan had been adopted.

### **County Councils (nine respondents)**

These planning departments were smaller in size than the average for all respondents, with a mean of 29 members of staff. With a range of 15 to 58, however, none of the planning departments responding were extremely small.

Differences from the average for all responding planning departments in Country Council were as follows:

- All nine anticipated no change in the number of posts in the next year.
- All nine reported some recruitment difficulties, and all reported a low number of skilled applicants as one reason for this. They also all reported having successfully developed their own expertise, using graduate schemes and apprenticeships, to overcome recruitment difficulties.
- All nine reported at least some planning skills gaps for existing staff, but they were also more likely to report having successfully run additional training to fill skills gaps.
- Most departments reported skills gaps for minerals and waste, and minerals and waste was also a priority skills area for the next year.
- They were more likely to report vacancies and retention problems with transport roles.
- Assessing environmental impact was more likely to be a broad non-planning skills priority for the next year.
- All planning departments in County Councils outsourced at least some skills, with this proportion being higher than average for ecology and biodiversity, and for environmental and public health.
- They were more likely to report problems adopting policy and practice to new policy and guidance as a negative impact of their skills gap, and to see changes to Local Plans as a major challenge arising from the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act.

### **District Councils (58 respondents)**

These planning departments had a mean of 35 members of staff, but size was quite variable, ranging from eight to 73 staff for most responding planning departments, but with two much larger planning departments also responding (110 staff and 126 staff).

Planning departments in District Councils made up about half of respondents, and thus were largely in line with the average for all planning departments. There were



just a small number of differences from the average for all responding planning departments:

- staff turnover rates had started to slow more than the average, with 30% saying fewer had left compared with a year ago
- they were relatively more likely to report the successful use of market supplements to help recruitment (39%)
- with the exception of outsourcing for legal advice, they were generally less likely than average to outsource for a range of support, including ecology and biodiversity, environmental and public health, highways, and transport.

### **Unitary Authorities (25 respondents)**

These planning departments had a mean of 44 members of staff, but size was quite variable, with a range of three to 91 staff for most respondents, but with one much larger department responding, reporting 161 staff.

Differences from the average for all responding planning departments were as follows:

- turnover had been more stable than average over the past year, with three in four saying the number of staff leaving felt around the same now, and very few saying more staff have left
- fewer reported recruitment difficulties for entry and mid-level development managers and enforcement and compliance officers
- fewer reported difficulties competing with organisations and difficulty attracting appropriately qualified people as barriers to resourcing, although over half reported each as a significant barrier
- fewer reported any gaps in broader non-planning skills, although this still affected two in three
- urban design and architecture was a higher priority than average for planning skills in the next year
- design codes were more likely to be seen as a challenge arising from the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act.

### **London Boroughs (12 respondents)**

These planning departments were among the largest in size, with a mean of 58 staff members and a range of 31 to 94 staff.

Differences from the average for all responding planning departments were as follows:

- All those outsourcing reporting did so for legal advice.
- Most reported vacancies in development management roles (10 out of 12) and more than average reported vacancies in enforcement (eight out of 10).
- Half reported difficulty recruiting monitoring and CIL officers. All 12 departments reported retention difficulties, and these were higher than average for senior development managers (11 of 12) and monitoring and CIL officers (five out of 12).

- The reason for recruitment difficulties was more likely to be poor career progression and less likely to be not enough people being interested in the job. 11 of the 12 departments reported staff having left for better pay and conditions.
- 11 of the 12 departments reported that they had to use agency staff as a consequence of recruitment difficulties.
- All 12 departments reported some planning skills gaps, with all of them reporting gaps in ecology and biodiversity, and with higher than average gaps in digital planning, environmental sustainability, and GIS. In terms of broader skills, more departments than average reported gaps for digital skills and assessing environmental impact.
- Targeted recruitment was reported more often than average as an action taken successfully to fill skills gaps.
- Local Plans and design codes were less likely to be seen as key challenges arising from the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act.

### **Metropolitan Districts (nine respondents)**

These planning departments were among the largest in size, with a mean of 64 staff, and a range of 26 to 75 for most respondents, but with one much larger department responding, with 146 members of staff.

Differences from the average for all responding planning departments in Metropolitan Districts were as follows:

- All reported some planning skills gaps, with this being higher than average for infrastructure and utilities. Masterplanning and design codes were more of a priority for skills in the next year.
- All those responding with recruitment difficulties attributed this to low numbers of applicants generally, and they were also more likely to blame uncompetitive terms and conditions.
- Around half of planning departments in Metropolitan Authorities reported using job re-design successfully to aid retention. They were less likely than average to report using market supplements to overcome recruitment problems.
- Most reported successfully developing their own planners through graduate and apprenticeships schemes to address recruitment problems. Most also reported growing skilled staff internally through graduate/apprenticeship schemes, and recruiting less qualified staff to train them in order to fill skills gaps.
- However, they were more likely than average to say they had no training budget.
- More saw Local Plans as a key challenge arising from the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act.

## 9. Discussion and conclusions

This final chapter reflects on the findings across the full range of topics, in order to form overall conclusions on current capacity and capability challenges in planning departments, and in services within the wider authority. It provides more details of the evidence underlying the conclusions, as set out in the executive summary, and considers what this evidence suggests in regard to potential next steps.

### 9.1 Summary of key conclusions

- Skills gaps seem to be intensifying across the sector. Of those planning departments with planning skills gaps, over half (53%) said these skills gaps had increased in the past 12 months. Only a third of planning departments indicated there was adequate experience, skills and knowledge within their planning departments to meet and deliver the services and work required.
- For those reporting any gaps, the most reported gaps (selected from a list) were in ecology and biodiversity (72%) and masterplanning and design codes (63%), with over half of planning departments reporting gaps in urban design and architecture (54%).
- In the past year, staff levels had decreased and skills gaps had increased. However, very few planning departments expected to see a continued decrease in staff numbers in the next financial year, suggesting the potential for greater stability for most.
- Sufficient resourcing for development management is an urgent need, and policy roles also need to be filled in order to ensure that these roles can be more clearly delineated. Planning departments felt that this would help to deliver services more efficiently.
- There were some differences across regions regarding recruitment difficulties. In the East of England, planning departments with recruitment difficulties were more likely than average to say not enough people are interested in this type of job, and that planning is not an attractive career path. On the other hand, in the North West, those with recruitment difficulties were more likely to say recruitment difficulties were due to low numbers of applicants generally.
- Unitary authorities and district councils generally reported slower rates of staff turnover than the average in the past year
- The survey findings suggest that a more competitive salary offer, increased funding for planning departments overall, and improved working conditions may help address capacity issues. This may help attract younger qualified staff from a limited pool of applicants, to replace those who are retiring.
- While outsourcing is essential to fill gaps in the short term, longer-term solutions are already being used, which should eventually reduce costs. There is clear evidence that recruiting and training junior and less qualified staff can produce in-house expertise, but sufficient training budgets and resourcing are needed for this to work more broadly.

## 9.2 What did capacity and capability look like in 2023?

There were clearly widespread problems with recruitment, retention and skills gaps in the surveyed planning departments, with all of these having a negative impact on service delivery, and on the capacity to prepare for changes to the planning process set out in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act.

In the 12 months prior to completing the survey, the majority of planning departments (91%) reported some difficulty with recruitment, while 72% reported some difficulty with retaining staff. Such problems with recruitment had a negative impact on staff retention, particularly through increased workloads (84% of those with recruitment problems) and reduced staff morale (68%). Furthermore, the scale of challenges noted with regards to recruitment and retention in the data suggests a substantial detrimental impact on the ability of staff to fulfil services and meet demand. This was resulting in substantial back logs for the surveyed departments.

Almost all planning departments (97%) reported specific planning skills gaps, while 87% reported gaps in broader skills. These skills gaps were likewise reported to be having a negative impact on delivery. This was particularly the case in terms of speed of determining planning applications (cited by 72% of planning departments) and the ability to prepare for a range of changes to the planning process, particularly readiness for Biodiversity Net Gain (75%).

On balance, in the past year, staff levels were decreasing and skills gaps increasing. However, very few planning departments expected to see a continued decrease in staff numbers in the next financial year, suggesting the potential for greater stability for most.

Skills gaps seem to be intensifying across the sector. Of those planning departments with planning skills gaps, over half (53%) said these skills gaps had increased in the past 12 months. Indeed, only a third of planning departments indicated there was adequate experience, skills and knowledge within their planning departments to meet and deliver the services and work required. Furthermore, the ability to tackle such skills gaps was reported to be hampered by the fact that a high proportion of planning departments had no training budget, or where one did exist, it was relatively small.

As well as a shortage of skills, planning departments were also found to be hampered by a shortage of people. Planning departments were more than twice as likely to report staff numbers having decreased (38%) as having increased (17%) in the past year. Such decreases were attributed to staff not being replaced, through a combination of vacancies not being filled, restructuring and budget cuts.

With regards to vacancies, it was reported that many posts remained unfilled, particularly among development manager roles. Difficulties in filling roles were perceived as being primarily driven by a low number of applicants with appropriate skills, uncompetitive salaries, and a lack of interest in planning as a sector. Authorities said they were competing to recruit staff from a smaller labour market pool that has less relevant skills and qualifications. Likewise, seven in 10 planning departments reported having difficulties with regards to retaining staff. The knock-on effect of these difficulties was an increase workloads, challenges with keeping up with demand, backlogs, and low morale amongst staff. In response to these challenges, authorities reported using a range of strategies: notably, “growing their

own existing staff”, “recruiting in less qualified staff, and training up” and an “increasing reliance on external consultants or agencies”. Specifically with regards to retention, key strategies used by authorities to help with retention tended to relate to offering more flexible working, enhanced career frameworks and improved personal development.

Looking forwards, however, hardly any planning departments expected to see a continued decrease in staff numbers in the next financial year (2%), while 20% expected an increase. There was some expectation of increased funding from ring-fenced planning fees.

Experiences over the preceding year had left planning departments in a position where they struggled with delivering day-to-day services and with preparing for changes to the planning system. If staff numbers do begin to stabilise, without a clear strategy to retain experienced staff, fill vacancies, and address growing skills gaps, planning departments will continue to struggle.

### **9.3 What are the gaps in capacity and capability?**

The issue reported to be affecting the most planning departments was having sufficient skilled staff in development management roles, particularly at a senior level. This was said to be diverting more senior resources from other tasks, such as preparing for the changes to planning policy set out in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act.

Difficulty with recruitment in the last 12 months was greatest for development management roles, particularly at a senior level (51%), but also at entry to mid-level (42%). Difficulty with retaining staff over the past 12 months was dominated by development management roles at both senior level (43%) and entry to mid-level (35%). Together, development management roles at any level made up 35% of all reported vacancies. For some planning departments, this was a sizeable problem, with 22% of planning departments reporting three or more vacancies for senior development management roles.

Development management was reported as a skills gap by one in three planning departments. It was the second highest priority for planning skills for the next 12 months, despite only being ranked as the eighth highest skills gap, presumably reflecting the high number of vacancies.

The degree of impact of these staffing difficulties and skills gaps is partly explained by development management being cited by many as one of the biggest calls on resources within planning departments, with some planning departments saying it diverted senior staff resources from other tasks more suited to their level, such as preparing for the changes to planning policy set out in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act. Feedback from the sector suggested that using staff outside of their areas of expertise also led to less efficient delivery.

The second greatest staffing and skills gap for planning departments concerned senior policy roles, and enforcement and compliance officers. Policy skills gaps were also likely to affect preparedness for changes to planning policy.

After development management, two roles were most likely to be reported as difficult to fill: enforcement and compliance officers (35%) and senior-level policy roles (34%). Planning policy was reported as a skills gap by 23% of planning departments

and was the third highest planning skills priority for the next 12 months. This is likely to be related to the need to prepare for the changes to planning policy set out in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act.

### **What do these gaps in capacity and capability suggest?**

For planning departments, it seems that sufficient resourcing for development management is an urgent need, and policy roles also need to be filled in order to ensure that these roles can be more clearly delineated. Planning departments reported that this would help to deliver services more efficiently. There is also an urgent need to fill gaps in enforcement and compliance.

In terms of planning specialisms, the greatest gaps were reported for the natural environment, and for ecology and biodiversity, particularly in relation to readiness for the biodiversity net gain requirements set out in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act.

Related to this planning specialism, ecology and biodiversity was the top planning skills gap reported across the sector, affecting 72% of planning departments. A further 64% indicated that these skills were the top priority that needed to be addressed over the next 12 months.

Related to this reported gap, three in four planning departments with any skills gaps said that these gaps had impacted on their readiness for Biodiversity Net Gain. This was seen as by far the most challenging of the changes set out in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act, with 84% selecting it as one of the three greatest challenges.

Other elements of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act, particularly Local Plans and design codes, were also perceived to be clear challenges for planning departments, both now and in the next year.

After biodiversity net gain, Local Plans were selected as the next greatest challenge arising from the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act (57%). Just over half of planning departments reported having completed their plan (55%), meaning many were still working on it, and with one in 10 saying it was stalled. Local Plans were mentioned by a substantial minority as a major call on resources.

Departmental skills gaps were reported as having an impact on preparing and adapting the Local Plan by 41% of planning departments. Skills gaps were reported as having an impact on being able to develop the plan, through a lack of investment in areas such as design codes. Indeed, related to this, masterplanning and design codes were seen as a top planning skills gap (62%) and were the joint third priority for planning skills in the next 12 months. Design codes were also seen as a key challenge arising from the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act (53%), along with the CIL (42%).

Digital skills were also reported to be a major skills gap, both in terms of digital planning and broader digital skills, but with a higher priority given to broader skills. Other broader skills gaps related to project and people management.

Just 28% of planning departments perceived that their staff were competent in the use of such digital planning tools. Digital planning was seen as a skills gap for almost half (47%) of those authorities with any skills gaps, and was a priority for the next 12 months for 22% of planning departments.

More broadly, nine in 10 planning departments (89%) reported some gap in broader, non-planning skills, with the most commonly reported gap being in digital skills (51%). Digital skills were also the top-ranked priority for broad skills in the next 12 months, being a priority for 54% of planning departments. This is likely to be related to the relatively high levels of use of external resources for IT skills.

Project management was the third highest broad skills gap reported (40%) and was also the second highest priority for the next 12 months. While people management was not a major broader skills gap, it was the third highest priority for the next 12 months. This prioritisation may be related to the need to address the impact of recruitment difficulties on staff morale.

There were consistent responses across planning departments regarding priority areas for filling gaps in planning skills. In particular, ecology and biodiversity was a key area in which planning departments identified the need to prepare for the changes set out in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act. However, skills gaps in a wide range of other planning specialisms were also seen as a priority. A tailored solution to fill these that is based on local assessment of needs is recommended. Furthermore, the negative impact of broader skills gaps should not be underestimated. Digital skills are a key gap to plug, but people and project management skills are also needed to ensure efficient service delivery and good staff morale.

#### **9.4 What is causing problems with capacity and capability?**

The difficulty of competing with other local authority roles, and with the private sector, for a small pool of skilled applicants is at the root of many of the recruitment and retention problems and skills gaps.

The pool of talent for recruitment stood out as the key barrier for resourcing, ahead of funding and well ahead of retaining staff. Around three in four planning departments reported significant barriers to resourcing from each of the following: competing with both the public and private sectors for talent (78%), attracting appropriately qualified candidates (77%), and the lack of qualified candidates (77%). Two in three departments (66%) said lack of funding was a significant barrier to resourcing, compared with just three in 10 (31%) reporting staff retention as a significant barrier.

Similarly, when talking specifically about recruitment, a lack of skilled applicants was the main reason for difficulties (87%), considerably ahead of an uncompetitive salary offer (68%).

While both public and private sectors offer competition, more planning departments reported that staff had left to work for a different local authority (66%) than said staff had moved to the private sector (47%). The motivation was most commonly reported to be better pay and conditions (58%).

There was some variation in the nature of reported recruitment problems, depending on population density and rural/urban classification of planning departments. Further research is needed to understand these different challenges.

Planning departments in rural areas were more likely to have difficulty recruiting for entry or mid-level development management roles, compared with those in urban areas, while this was not the case for senior roles. Planning departments in less

densely populated areas were relatively more likely to report enforcement and compliance vacancies. Those in rural areas were also more likely to report remote location and poor public transport as a barrier to recruitment.

The survey findings suggest that a more competitive salary offer, increased funding for planning departments overall, and improved working conditions may help address capacity issues. This may help attract younger qualified staff from a limited pool of applicants to replace those who are retiring, and to offer existing staff a compelling reason to stay, in the face of potentially more attractive offers from the public and private sector.

## **9.5 How are challenges being addressed in the short and longer term?**

Short-term strategies to address capacity and skills-gap issues rely heavily on outsourcing, with flexible working used to aid recruitment and retention.

In the short term, problems with skills gaps were reported to be being addressed by outsourcing and the use of agency staff. The most common action reported by those with any skills gaps was the use of agency staff (60%), with half saying they procured external consultants (51%). Of those with unfilled vacancies, half (52%) reported using agency staff and contractors. In addition, most planning departments (84%) reported relying on some external resources from elsewhere in the local authority. These resources were particularly used to supplement broader skills, such as legal advice, IT and finance. However, external resources were also used for help with planning specialisms, and particularly for ecology and biodiversity.

Flexible working was most likely to be reported as having been used successfully to aid retention, by half (49%) of planning departments with retention difficulties. It was also used as a strategy to fill vacancies, and it was used to address skills gaps by around three in 10 departments.

A longer-term strategy of developing in-house expertise by training was reported as being used successfully. However, this is likely to be limited by training budgets and existing capacity.

For unfilled vacancies, the actions most widely reported as being used successfully were the longer-term tactics of developing departments' own planners in-house through graduate and apprenticeship schemes (67%) and recruiting and training less qualified staff (66%). Both were reported more often than the use of agency staff (52%) to deal with unfilled vacancies.

These were also the main actions that were used successfully to address skills gaps (with around half of planning departments reporting using each successfully), but with agency staff being the top choice in this situation. However, low training budgets (including 22% of planning departments reporting having no training budget) present a barrier to the longer-term solution of developing staff through training. Other barriers identified by planning departments were a lack of capacity to deliver or attend training, and a lack of time to give or attend training.

Given limitations on funding, while outsourcing is essential to fill gaps in the short term, longer-term solutions are already being used, which should eventually reduce costs. There is clear evidence that recruiting and training junior and less qualified staff can produce in-house expertise, but sufficient training budgets and resourcing



are needed for this to work more broadly. Further research is needed to explore this in detail.

## **9.6 What are the overarching challenges and how can they be addressed?**

Even if staff numbers start to stabilise, planning departments need a clear strategy to address key skills and staffing gaps, which are currently a barrier both to delivering day-to-day services and to preparing for changes to the planning system.

The data suggests there is a need across England for additional resourcing in each of development management and policy. Planning departments would welcome more clearly delineated roles, thus optimising the use of existing experience and maximising efficiency. Departments identified a need for more enforcement and compliance officers, particularly in less densely populated areas.

Planning departments reported that specific skills gaps, particularly around ecology and biodiversity, and masterplanning and design codes, need attention in the preparation for the changes in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act. There are wide ranging skills gaps in other planning specialisms, but these vary across the country, with tailored solutions called for, based on assessments of local needs.

Digital is by far the greatest skills gap (both for planning and broader skills). However, the importance of building project and people management skills should not be underestimated, in order to increase efficiency and staff morale, both of which are suffering under the current gaps in resourcing.

Filling these gaps will involve a range of short term and longer-term recruitment and retention strategies. This should build on current best practice identified in the survey, and address the core difficulty of competing for talent.

Recruitment and retention strategies are key in the longer term, with challenges differing depending on factors such as role, life stage, stage of career, location etc. At present, the option of recruiting experienced senior staff from elsewhere seems likely to have limited scope. The data suggests an ageing workforce, with retirement levels removing vital skills from the workforce. Further research is required to explore the impact of this.

A tailored strategy is needed to recruit enforcement and compliance officers. The data suggests that there is more difficulty recruiting for these in less densely populated areas, so different incentives may need to be offered outside of urban locations. Additional research in this area could inform this strategy.

For the very long term, sufficient resourcing is needed to recruit junior staff and to train them in-house to fill the gaps left by retirement and moves to the private sector.

While recruiting staff with appropriate qualifications would be most immediately productive, the small pool of skilled applicants even at this level means that this can only be one part of the strategy. Since pay is unlikely to be competitive with the private sector, incentives other than a high salary need to be offered, in terms of working conditions. Flexible working is one such incentive that has already been used successfully.

Given the small pool of skilled recruits, many planning departments are successfully recruiting less qualified staff, graduates, and apprentices, to train in-house.

Increased adoption of this approach by planning departments should help to fill specific skills gaps.

Filling some specific skills gaps could involve recruiting staff with broader expertise, such as in ecology and biodiversity, but with no background in planning. Some planning departments are doing this or have plans to do this in the future. The surveyed planning departments felt that people in such roles could perhaps be shared between planning departments or across the local authority to make best use of their specific skills.

Other key planning skills, such as masterplanning and design codes, would need expertise from those with a planning background initially, although in-house expertise could then be developed among more junior staff through training. The surveyed planning departments felt that shared resources would be useful here, to aid in their training.

Digital skills could be more easily addressed through training more junior staff, both in terms of planning software, and more broadly. The data from the surveyed planning departments suggests that recruitment of a small number of IT specialists, or use of IT resources elsewhere in the local authority, could be used to inform or provide such training. Alternatively, external training is likely to be an option.

There is no shortage of external training courses for other, broader skills, such as project or people management, but sufficient funding and time resourcing would be essential to leverage this.

The main barrier to all of these longer-term solutions is the need for a sufficient training budget and sufficient resourcing, and these are not currently in place for most planning departments. Planning departments need to be provided with a sufficient training budget, sufficient in-house resources to dedicate to training provision, sufficient time allocated to staff to take part in training, and a budget for the use of external training resources. Efficiencies could be found through setting up a national training resource database to help planning departments access resources both for internal and external training.

The data suggests that better resourcing and expertise to implement recruitment and retention strategies may also help to overcome some of the current barriers, such as identifying potential applicants and putting together attractive offers.

# 10. Appendix A – Accessible data tables

## Tables supporting Chapter 1

### Annex Table 1: Problems with capability and capacity

Difficulties and gaps (% of departments)	%
Difficulty with recruitment	91%
Difficulty with retention	72%
Gaps in planning skills	97%
Gaps in broader skills	87%

Q3. In the last 12 months, which, if any, of the following role group(s) have you had difficulties in recruiting for?

Q8. Over the past 12 months, has your planning department experienced any difficulties in retaining staff?

Q15. Thinking about planning skills you have in the planning department, which of the following statements best describe your team?

Q17. Thinking of broader skills beyond planning, which, if any, of the following does your planning department currently have gaps in?

Base: All respondents (118).

### Annex Table 2: Change over time in staffing and skills

Change (% of all departments)	Increase(d)	Same	Decrease(d)
Number of staff leaving compared to a year ago	17%	61%	21%
Change in size of skills gap in last 12 months	53%	43%	5%
Change in total staff in last 12 months	17%	43%	38%
Expected change in total staff in next 12 months	20%	66%	2%

Q12. Compared to a year ago, which of the below best describes your experience of the numbers of staff leaving your planning department?

Q21. Overall, how has the size of skills gap(s) across your planning department changed in the past 12 months?

Base: All with skills gap (114).

Q45. In the last 12 months, how has the total number of employees (full-time, part-time but not temporary contract or agency) in your planning department changed?

Q47. In light of intended increases to planning fees and thinking about the next financial year (2024/25), which of the following would best describe the total number of posts (filled and unfilled) within your planning department?

Base: All respondents (118).

**Annex Table 3: Top six roles with difficulties in recruitment and retention**

Top staffing difficulties (% of all departments)	Recruitment	Retention
Development management – senior level	51%	43%
Development management – entry and mid-level	42%	35%
Enforcement and compliance officers	35%	17%
Policy – senior level	34%	18%
Natural environment	27%	17%
Policy – entry and mid-level	25%	17%

Q3. In the last 12 months, which, if any, of the following role group(s) have you had difficulties in recruiting for?

Q8 Over the past 12 months, has your planning department experienced any difficulties in retaining staff?  
department?

Base: All departments (118).

**Annex Table 4: Top skills gaps and priorities for next 12 months**

Top skills gaps and priorities (% of all departments)	Skills gaps	Priorities in next 12 months
Ecology and biodiversity	72%	64%
Masterplanning and design codes	62%	29%
Urban design and architecture	54%	15%
CIL, S106 and viability assessment	49%	14%
Digital planning – data, innovation and tools	47%	22%
Energy and climate change	45%	24%
Development management	33%	40%
Conservation and heritage	30%	10%
Planning policy	23%	29%

Q16. Which, if any, of the following planning skills does your planning department currently have gaps in?

Base: All with skills gap (114).

Q23. Looking ahead to the next 12 months, which planning skills are you looking to prioritise for your planning department?

Base: All departments (118).

SHOWING top nine based on those selected by: either 40% or more as a skills gap, or 10% or more as a priority.

## Annex Table 5: Main impacts of skills gaps

Main impact (% of departments)	%
Readiness for Biodiversity Net Gain	75%
Speed of determining planning applications	72%
Capacity to take enforcement action	44%
Number of complaints	39%
Preparing the Local Plan	38%

Q19. Overall, how has your local authority planning department been impacted by the skills gap(s) you mentioned?

Base: All departments with skills gaps (114).

## Annex Table 6: Main challenges from Levelling Up and Regeneration Act

Main impact (% of departments)	%
Biodiversity Net Gain	84%
Changes to Local Plans	57%
Design codes	53%
CIL	42%

Q25. Thinking about the changes to planning set out in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, which of the changes do you think will be the most challenging to implement given the current skills available in your local authority?

Base: All departments (118).

## Annex Table 7: Top significant barriers to meeting resourcing needs

Significant barrier (% of departments)	%
Difficulties competing with other organisations, both public and private sector, for talent	78%
Difficulty in attracting appropriately qualified or skilled candidates	77%
Not enough people in the market with the appropriate qualifications	77%
Lack of funding for staff	66%
Difficulty in setting appropriate pay scale for the skills required	56%

Q14. Thinking about resourcing overall, which, if any, of the following do you think are barriers in meeting your resourcing or capacity needs?

Base: All departments (118).

## Annex Table 8: Most successful ways to fill vacancies and address skills gaps

Ways of successfully addressing: (% of all departments)	Filling vacancies	Addressing skills gaps
Grow skilled staff internally through graduate/apprenticeships schemes	67%	55%
Recruit less qualified staff and train them up	66%	53%
Use agency / contractor staff	52%	60%
Procure external consultants	29%	51%
Career frameworks/career grades	32%	28%
Offer more flexible working	29%	31%

Source: Q7. Thinking about those hard-to-fill vacancies, which, if any, of the following actions have you taken which have been the most successful?

Base: Departments that have experienced difficulties with recruitment (109).

Q20. What actions, if any, have your organisation undertaken to help address these gaps in skills?

Base: All departments with skills gaps (114).

### Tables supporting Chapter 3

#### Annex Table 9: Size of planning department workforce (data from Error! Reference source not found.)

Type of department	Minimum	Mean	Max excl. Outliers	Max incl. outliers
All	3	41	94	161
National Park Authority	4	23	30	30
County Council	15	29	58	58
District Council	8	35	73	126
Unitary Authority	3	44	91	161
London Borough	31	58	94	94
Metropolitan District	23	64	75	146

Source: Q37. Thinking about your current workforce (June 2023), how many members of staff (including full-time, part-time and fixed-term appointment staff) are currently employed within your planning department?

Base: All respondents (118), National Park (5), County (9), District (59), Unitary (24), London (12), Metropolitan (9).

#### Annex Table 10: Job roles in planning departments (% of staff) (data from Figure 3.3)

Job role (% of employees)	%
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Development management – senior level (team leaders, principal planners, senior planners)	19%
Development management – entry and mid-level (planner, planning officer, junior planning officer, graduate planning officer)	17%
Administrative / support staff / application validation	16%
Enforcement and compliance officers	9%
Policy – senior level (team leaders, principal planners, senior planners)	8%
Chief planners and heads of planning and management level – heads of policy/Local Plans and heads of development management	6%
Policy – entry and mid-level (planner, planning officer, junior planning officer, graduate planning officer)	5%
Heritage and conservation officers	4%
Natural environment (ecologists, environmental design, landscape and environmental impact assessment (EIA), tree officer)	4%
Monitoring and CIL officers	3%
Design and urban design officers	2%
Transport	2%
Digital support	1%
GIS and digital mapping officers	1%
Minerals and waste	1%
Other specialist planners	1%
Other	1%

Source: Q39. Approximately how many of your current workforce staff as at June 2023 are employed within the following job roles?

Base: All staff (4,420).

**Annex Table 11: Policy or specialist roles department is most reliant on (% of departments who draw on external skills) (data from Figure 3.4)**

Policy role most reliant on (% of those drawing on skills)	%
Legal	76%
Ecology and biodiversity skills (e.g. relating to Biodiversity Net Gain)	31%
IT skills	30%
Financial	27%
Heritage and conservation	17%
Public/environmental health	17%
Flooding/drainage	16%
Highways	13%
Transport	11%
Environmental sustainability	7%
Other	29%
Don't know	5%
Prefer not to say	2%

Source: Q41. Please can you provide more details on the types of policy or specialist roles your department is most reliant on to help deliver services.

Base: Departments that regularly draw upon any policy or specialist skills (100).

**Annex Table 12: Changes in job numbers in past 12 months and next financial year (data from Error! Reference source not found.)**

Direction of change (% of all departments)	Last 12 months	Next financial year
Increase	17%	20%
Stay the same	43%	66%
Decrease	38%	2%
Don't know	2%	12%

Q45. In the last 12 months, how has the total number of employees (full-time, part-time but not temporary contract or agency) in your planning department changed?

Q47. In light of intended increases to planning fees and thinking about the next financial year (2024/25), which of the following would best describe the total number of posts (filled and unfilled) within your planning department?

Base: All respondents (118).



## Tables supporting Chapter 4

**Annex Table 13: Numbers of vacancies by role group (data from Figure 4.1)**

Number of vacancies for each role (% of all departments)	1	2	3+	Any	% of all vacancies
Development management – Senior level	19%	17%	22%	57%	18%
Development management – Entry and mid-level	12%	17%	20%	49%	17%
Administrative / support staff / application validation	19%	11%	13%	43%	11%
Policy – senior level	24%	8%	8%	40%	7%
Enforcement and compliance officers	25%	6%	7%	39%	8%
Policy – entry and mid-level	28%	4%	2%	34%	5%
Natural environment	22%	6%	6%	34%	6%
Heritage and conservation officers	20%	4%	1%	25%	4%
Monitoring and CIL officers	15%	6%	2%	23%	4%
Chief planners and heads of planning and management level	12%	3%	3%	18%	3%
Design and urban design officers	11%	2%	2%	15%	3%
Transport	7%	4%	3%	14%	4%
GIS and digital mapping officers	9%	2%	-	10%	1%
Minerals and waste	2%	-	3%	5%	1%
Digital support	3%	1%	-	4%	1%
Other specialist planners	3%	2%	-	4%	1%

Q1. Approximately how many vacancies do you currently have across the role groups defined below?

Base: All departments (118); all vacancies (1,024).

**Annex Table 14: Difficulty in recruitment by role group in last 12 months (data from Figure 4.2)**

<b>Role with recruitment difficulty (% of all departments)</b>	<b>Top three difficulty</b>	<b>Any difficulty</b>	<b>Most difficult</b>
Development management – senior level	49%	51%	31%
Development management – entry and mid-level	23%	42%	5%
Enforcement and compliance officers	27%	35%	14%
Policy – senior level	30%	34%	10%
Natural environment	19%	27%	8%
Policy entry and mid-level	13%	25%	2%
Heritage and conservation officers	12%	19%	3%
Administrative / support staff / application validation	5%	18%	-
Chief planners and heads of planning and management level	14%	15%	6%
Transport	8%	15%	3%
Monitoring and CIL officers	6%	13%	3%
Design and urban design officers	4%	7%	1%
Minerals and waste	6%	7%	3%
GIS and digital mapping officers	3%	6%	-
Other specialist planners	3%	5%	-
Digital support	2%	2%	-

Q3. In the last 12 months, which, if any, of the following role group(s) have you had difficulties in recruiting for?  
 Q4. And which of the following role group(s) have been the most difficult to recruit for? (Re-based over all departments).

Base: All departments (118).

**Annex Table 15: Reasons for hard-to-fill vacancies (% of departments with difficulties) (data from Figure 4.3)**

Reasons vacancies are hard to fill (% of departments with difficulties)	%
Low number of applicants with the required skills	87%
Low number of applicants generally	74%
Uncompetitive salary offer	68%
Not enough people interested in doing this type of job	61%
Lack of work experience the authority requires	40%
Planning is not considered an attractive career path	40%
Lack of qualifications the authority requires	29%
Low number of applicants with the required attitude, motivation or personality	29%
Uncompetitive terms and conditions offered	27%
Poor career progression / lack of prospects	13%
Remote location/poor public transport	13%
Uncompetitive hybrid or flexible working conditions	3%
Job entails long/unsociable hours work	2%
Other	6%

Source: Q5. When thinking about recruitment in general, which, if any, of the following reasons explain why it has been hard to fill these vacancies?

Base: Departments that have experienced difficulties with recruitment (109).

**Annex Table 16: Consequences of hard-to-fill vacancies (% of departments with difficulties) (data from Figure 4.4)**

Consequences (% of departments with difficulties)	%
Increasing workload for other staff	84%
Difficulties in meeting workload demands	79%
Have to use agency staff	69%
Issues with lower staff morale / satisfaction	68%
Difficulties in meeting customer services objectives	58%
Backlogs in progressing planning applications	53%
Difficulties in retaining existing staff	51%
Having to outsource work to consultancies	46%
Difficulties in meeting quality standards	42%
Difficulties with upskilling or training existing staff	41%
Difficulties in introducing new working practices or technical systems	40%
Unable to progress Local Plan	20%
Other	3%
None of these	2%

Source: Q6. Thinking about all of the current vacancies that have been hard to fill for you over the last 12 months, which (if any) of the following issues have you experienced as a result of hard-to-fill vacancies?

Base: Departments that have experienced difficulties with recruitment (109).

**Annex Table 17: Most successful actions taken to fill vacancies (% of departments with difficulties) (data from Error! Reference source not found.)**

Successful actions taken (% of departments with difficulties)	%
Grow your own planners through graduate/apprenticeships schemes	67%
Recruit less qualified staff and train them up	66%
Use agency / contractor staff	52%
Create career frameworks/career grades	32%
Offer more flexible working	29%
Procure external consultants	29%
Market supplements	27%
Recruit outside the planning discipline	25%
Run additional training/upskilling for existing staff	22%
Run targeted recruitment campaigns	17%
Re-deploy internally	16%
Expand training programmes	14%
Increase salaries in general	13%
Work collaboratively with other local authorities	11%
Outsource services	8%
Organise internal secondments from other departments within the local authority	6%
Share resources within the local authority	4%
Find external secondments from outside the authority	3%
Other	6%
None of these	4%

Source: Q7. Thinking about those hard-to-fill vacancies, which, if any, of the following actions have you taken which have been the most successful?

Base: Departments that have experienced difficulties with recruitment (109).

## Tables supporting Chapter 5

**Annex Table 18: Role groups with current retention problems (% of departments with problems retaining staff) (data from Figure 5.1)**

Role group (% of department with retention problems)	%
Development management – senior level (team leaders, principal planners, senior planners)	43%
Development management – entry and mid-level (planner, planning officer, junior planning officer, graduate planning officer)	35%
Policy – senior level (team leaders, principal planners, senior planners)	18%
Policy entry and mid-level (planner, planning officer, junior planning officer, graduate planning officer)	17%
Enforcement and compliance officers	17%
Natural environment (ecologists, environmental design, landscape and EIA, tree officer)	17%
Heritage and conservation officers	14%
Monitoring and CIL officers	11%
Chief planners and heads of planning and management level – heads of policy/Local Plans and heads of development management	8%
Administrative / support staff / application validation	7%
Transport	6%
Design and urban design officers	4%
GIS and digital mapping officers	3%
Minerals and waste	3%
Digital support	1%
Other specialist planners	1%
Other	3%
Not had difficulties recruiting for any of these	1%

Q9. Which, if any, of the following role groups are you currently experiencing difficulties in retaining staff for?  
Base: All departments (118).

**Annex Table 19: Reasons for staff leaving department (data from Figure 5.2)**

Reasons for staff leaving (% of all departments)	%
Moved to work for a different local authority	66%
Better pay and conditions	58%
Moved to the private sector	47%
Retirement	35%
Low morale due to workload / resourcing issues in the team	28%
Decided to go freelance / self-employed	17%
Moved to a government department or a statutory body	15%
Political or culture issues in the workplace	11%
Moved to a different department in the local authority	10%
Ill health	8%
Other	10%
None of these	1%

Q13. Which, if any, of the following are reasons for why staff have left your planning department?

Base: All departments (118).

**Annex Table 20: Most successful actions taken to retain staff (data from Figure 5.3)**

Successful retention actions taken (% of all departments)	%
More flexible working	49%
Better career frameworks / career grades	32%
Personal development offers	27%
Organisation re-design	23%
Enhanced pay	21%
Job re-design	16%
Retention payments	12%
Positive working environment	7%
Merit / incentive awards	5%
Other	7%
None of these	15%

Q11. Thinking about the last 12 months, which, if any, of the following actions have you taken which have been most successful in retaining your staff?

Base: All departments (118).



**Annex Table 21: Barriers to meeting resourcing needs (data from Figure 5.4)**

Barriers (% of all departments)	Significant	Occasional	Any barrier at all
Difficulties competing with both public and private sector for talent	78%	19%	97%
Difficulty in attracting appropriately qualified or skilled candidates	77%	20%	97%
Not enough people in the market with the appropriate qualifications	77%	20%	97%
Difficulty in setting appropriate pay scale for the skills required	56%	35%	92%
Lack of funding for staff	66%	24%	90%
Difficulties in retaining staff	31%	55%	86%
Uncertainty over funding in the medium to long term	39%	41%	81%
Image and perception of local authority/public sector as an employer	42%	38%	80%
Not enough people studying to obtain the appropriate qualifications	41%	37%	78%
Complexity of the recruitment processes, e.g. cost and time	24%	53%	77%
Low interest among graduates in courses leading to qualifications	20%	45%	64%
Resources required for recruitment, e.g. re-deploying existing staff	8%	46%	54%
Issues with using certain recruitment platforms (e.g. LinkedIn) or recruitment agencies	7%	29%	36%

Q14. Thinking about resourcing overall, which, if any, of the following do you think are barriers to meeting your resourcing or capacity needs?

Base: All departments (118)

**Tables supporting Chapter 6**

**Annex Table 22: Gaps in planning skills (data from**

**Figure 6.1)**

<b>Gaps in planning skills (% of departments with skills gaps)</b>	<b>%</b>
Ecology and biodiversity	72%
Masterplanning and design codes	62%
Urban design and architecture	54%
CIL, S106 and viability assessment	49%
Digital planning – data, innovation and tools	47%
Energy and climate change	45%
Landscape architecture	45%
Environmental sustainability, including EIA and strategic environmental assessment (SEA)	39%
GIS and digital mapping	38%
Flooding	36%
Infrastructure and utilities	36%
Development management	33%
Archaeology	31%
Conservation and heritage	30%
Transport planning and highways	30%
Equality, diversity, inclusion and gender mainstreaming in planning	29%
Minerals and waste	26%
Community engagement and participation	23%
Planning policy	23%
Regeneration and property development, site delivery and capital delivery	22%
Economic development	19%
Strategic planning	18%
Other	5%

Q16. Which, if any, of the following planning skills does your planning department currently have gaps in?

Base: All departments with skills gaps (114).

**Annex Table 23: Gaps in broader skills beyond planning (% among departments with skills gaps) (data from Figure 6.2)**

Gaps in skills (% of departments with skills gaps)	%
Digital skills, including use of technology, software and data	51%
Assessing environmental impact	44%
Project management	40%
Access to lawyers	38%
Project commissioning	37%
Financial management	25%
Equality, diversity and inclusion	22%
Managing organisational performance	21%
Managing change	20%
People management (e.g. recruiting/coaching/motivating staff)	20%
Other	5%
None of these, there are no gaps in broader skills	11%

Q17. Thinking of broader skills beyond planning, which, if any, of the following does your planning department currently have gaps in?

Base: All departments with skills gaps (114).

**Annex Table 24: Digital planning skills (data from Figure 6.3)**

Agreement that (% all departments)	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
Staff are competent in the use of digital planning tools	2%	27%	33%	32%	6%	1%
Staff have the necessary skills / knowledge to identify the right available digital planning tools	-	17%	19%	49%	12%	3%
Staff have the necessary skills / knowledge to source and procure new digital planning tools	-	15%	18%	46%	20%	1%

Q26. There are a number of new and emerging digital planning tools (including PropTech and digital community engagement). Beyond your day-to-day operating systems, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the below statements about your staff's skills in using digital tools required for planning?

Base: All departments (118).

**Annex Table 25: Top 10 priorities for planning skills in next 12 months (data from Figure 6.4)**

Priorities for planning skills (% all departments)	1st	2nd	3rd	Top 3
Ecology and biodiversity	33%	22%	9%	64%
Development management	26%	8%	6%	40%
Planning policy	10%	11%	9%	29%
Masterplanning and design codes	7%	7%	15%	29%
Energy and climate change	6%	12%	6%	24%
Digital planning – data, innovation and tools	5%	7%	10%	22%
Urban design and architecture	3%	4%	9%	15%
CIL, S106 and viability assessment	1%	5%	8%	14%
Conservation and heritage	2%	5%	3%	10%
Minerals and waste	2%	2%	2%	5%

Q23. Looking ahead to the next 12 months, which planning skills are you looking to prioritise for your planning department?

Base: All departments (118).

**Annex Table 26: Priorities for broader skills beyond planning (data from Figure 6.5)**

Priorities for skills (% all departments)	1st	2nd	3rd	Top 3
Digital skills, including use of technology, software and data	23%	16%	15%	54%
Project management	12%	13%	14%	39%
People management (e.g. recruiting/coaching/motivating staff)	16%	9%	7%	32%
Assessing environmental impact	13%	9%	7%	29%
Managing organisational performance	7%	9%	10%	26%
Access to lawyers	7%	8%	8%	23%
Managing change	7%	7%	7%	20%
Equality, diversity and inclusion	3%	3%	4%	9%
Financial management	2%	6%	1%	9%
Project commissioning	-	3%	3%	6%

Q24. Looking ahead, which of the following broader skills are you looking to prioritise for your planning department?

Base: All departments (118).

Annex Table 27: Most challenging Levelling Up and Regeneration Act planning changes (data from Almost half (46%) of planning departments said that Biodiversity Net Gain would be the single most challenging change to implement, with 84% placing it in their top three greatest challenges. This is in keeping with the finding that ecology and biodiversity were the top priority for planning skills (see Figure 6.4). It is also likely to be linked to difficulties reported in recruitment and retention for natural environment roles. Biodiversity Net Gain was reported to be a challenge by all planning departments in the East Midlands.

**Figure 6.6)**

Change (% all departments)	Most	2nd most	3rd most	Top 3
Biodiversity Net Gain	46%	28%	10%	84%
Changes to Local Plans	26%	16%	14%	57%
Design codes	8%	26%	19%	53%
CIL	10%	14%	18%	42%
Street votes	3%	6%	11%	19%
Environmental outcomes reports (EORs)	-	5%	8%	13%
National Development Management Policies	2%	2%	6%	10%
Other planning reforms and changes (e.g. nutrient neutrality, NSIP regime)	2%	1%	5%	8%
The role of supplementary plans	1%	1%	3%	5%
Data standards	2%	2%	1%	4%

Q25. Thinking about the changes to planning set out in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, which of the changes do you think will be the most challenging to implement given the current skills available in your local authority?

Base: All departments (118).

**Annex Table 28: Impact of skills gaps (% among departments with skills gaps) (data from Figure 6.7)**

Impact of skills gaps (% of departments with skills gaps)	%
Readiness for Biodiversity Net Gain	75%
Speed of determining planning applications	72%
Capacity to take enforcement action	45%
Number of complaints	39%
Preparing the Local Plan	38%
Preparing Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs)	31%
Adopting policy and practice to new national policy and guidance	28%
Number of appeals	23%

Adapting the Local Plan	17%
Risk of designation	16%
Other	4%
No impact	1%

Q19. Overall, how has your local authority planning department been impacted by the skills gap(s) you mentioned?

Base: All departments with skills gaps (114).

Annex Table 29: Actions taken to address skills gaps (% among departments with skills gaps) (data from Planning departments with skills gaps in County Councils were more likely than average to report upskilling existing staff, while those in London were more likely to report running targeted recruitment campaigns. Those in Metropolitan Districts were relatively more likely to report growing staff internally, both through recruitment of graduates or apprentices and recruiting less qualified staff. None of the National Parks reported using agency staff, but most said they ran additional training for existing staff (see Appendix Table 11.9).

In addition, planning departments in the East of England were more likely than average to report implementing career frameworks and using market supplements.

### Figure 6.8)

Actions taken to address gaps (% of departments with skills gaps)	%
Use agency staff	60%
Grow skilled staff internally through graduate/apprenticeships schemes	55%
Recruit less qualified staff and train them up	53%
Procure external consultants	51%
Run additional training for / upskilling existing staff	49%
Offer more flexible working practices to attract/retain skilled staff	31%
Work collaboratively with other local authorities	30%
Implement career frameworks/career grades	28%
Recruit outside the planning discipline	28%
Run targeted recruitment campaigns	27%
Market supplements	23%
Outsource services	23%
Expand training programmes	20%
Share resources within the local authority	14%
Re-deploy internally	13%

Increase salaries in general	12%
Organise internal secondments from other departments within the local authority	7%
Find external secondments from outside the authority	5%
Other	4%
None of these	1%

Q20. What actions, if any, have your organisation undertaken to help address these gaps in skills?

Base: All departments with skills gaps (114).



## Tables supporting Chapter 7

**Annex Table 30: Sharing staff with other local authorities (data from Figure 7.1)**

<b>Number of staff (% of departments, exc. County Councils)</b>	<b>%</b>
Have a formal agreement to share ANY services	39%
One	7%
Two to four	9%
Five or more	6%
None	12%
Don't know	5%
<b>Number of local authorities (% of departments, exc. County Councils)</b>	<b>%</b>
Have a formal agreement to share services	39%
One to two	16%
Three to five	3%
Six or more	7%
None	12%
Don't know	3%

Q33. Does your local authority planning department share any services with other local authorities through a contract or formal agreement?

Q34. Overall, approximately how many staff do you share with other local authorities?

Q35. How many other local authorities do you share staff with?

Base: All departments, excluding County Councils (109).

## 11. Appendix B – Differences by local authority and region

This appendix includes supporting data tables for those questions where there were identifiable differences by local authority type and/or region. It does not include tables for all questions reported. Tables are only included where there are statistically significant differences from the total for more than one local authority type or region.

**Underlining** is used in the tables to indicate where a figure for a particular local authority type or region is significantly different from the total for all planning departments at the 95% level.

The following abbreviations are used within the tables for reasons of space. The numbers of respondents are shown here for each local authority type and region in brackets.

### Local authority types:

- CC – County Councils (n=9)
- DC – District Council (n=58)
- UA – Unitary Authority (n=25)
- LB – London Borough (n=12)
- MD – Metropolitan District (n=9)
- NP – National Park Authority (n=5)

### Regions:

- EM – East Midlands (n=16)
- EE – East of England (n=22)
- LB – London (n=12)
- NE – North East (n=8)
- NW – North West (n=8)
- SE – South East (n=25)
- SW – South West (n=10)
- WM – West Midlands (n=11)
- YH – Yorkshire and the Humber (n=6)

### Tables to support Chapter 3

**Table 11.1: Number of employees, by local authority type**

	ALL	CC	DC	UA	LB	MD	NP
Minimum	3	15	8	3	31	26	4
Mean	41	<u>29</u>	35	44	<u>58</u>	64	23

Maximum, exc. outliers	94	58	73	91	94	75	30
Maximum, inc. outliers	161	58	126	161	94	146	30
<i>Base: All departments</i>	<i>118</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>58</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>5</i>

Q37. Thinking about your current workforce (June 2023), how many members of staff (including full-time, part-time and fixed-term appointment staff) are currently employed within your planning department?

**Table 11.2: Policy or specialist roles department is most reliant on by local authority type (% of departments who draw on external skills)**

	ALL	CC	DC	UA	LB	MD	NP
Legal	76%	79%	68%	81%	<b>100%</b>	84%	56%
Ecology and biodiversity skills	31%	<b>67%</b>	<b>19%</b>	46%	36%	<b>8%</b>	73%
IT skills	30%	56%	25%	23%	36%	47%	<b>0%</b>
Financial	27%	48%	17%	31%	27%	54%	<b>0%</b>
Heritage and conservation	17%	44%	12%	26%	<b>0%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>73%</b>
Public/environmental health	17%	<b>56%</b>	<b>6%</b>	25%	27%	8%	29%
Flooding/drainage	16%	42%	9%	24%	18%	8%	29%
Highways	13%	23%	<b>6%</b>	25%	27%	<b>0%</b>	29%
Transport	11%	34%	<b>0%</b>	24%	27%	<b>0%</b>	<b>0%</b>
Environmental sustainability	7%	<b>0%</b>	6%	10%	18%	<b>0%</b>	<b>0%</b>
<i>Base: Those who draw on external skills</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>47</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>4</i>

Source: Q41. Please can you provide more details on the types of policy or specialist roles your department is most reliant on to help deliver services.

## Tables to support Chapter 4

**Table 11.3: Difficulty in recruitment by role group in last 12 months**

	ALL	CC	DC	UA	LB	MD	NP
NET: Any difficulties	91%	<b><u>100%</u></b>	95%	80%	92%	84%	<b><u>100%</u></b>
Senior development management	51%	34%	55%	43%	75%	40%	40%
Entry and mid-level development management	42%	42%	45%	<b><u>26%</u></b>	50%	45%	60%
Enforcement and compliance officers	35%	23%	42%	<b><u>15%</u></b>	42%	34%	49%
Policy – senior level	34%	21%	34%	35%	50%	22%	28%
Natural environment	27%	33%	27%	30%	33%	17%	<b><u>0%</u></b>
Policy entry and mid-level	25%	35%	30%	16%	33%	<b><u>6%</u></b>	21%
Heritage and conservation officers	19%	9%	<b><u>11%</u></b>	32%	33%	28%	20%
Administrative staff	18%	<b><u>0%</u></b>	18%	17%	17%	32%	10%
Chief planners and heads	15%	12%	18%	20%	8%	<b><u>0%</u></b>	<b><u>0%</u></b>
Transport	15%	44%	<b><u>5%</u></b>	13%	33%	33%	<b><u>0%</u></b>
Monitoring and CIL officers	13%	<b><u>0%</u></b>	9%	<b><u>3%</u></b>	<b><u>50%</u></b>	27%	<b><u>0%</u></b>
Design and urban design officers	7%	<b><u>0%</u></b>	8%	8%	17%	<b><u>0%</u></b>	<b><u>0%</u></b>
Minerals and waste	7%	<b><u>58%</u></b>	<b><u>0%</u></b>	5%	<b><u>0%</u></b>	6%	40%
GIS and digital mapping officers	6%	<b><u>0%</u></b>	<b><u>1%</u></b>	4%	17%	16%	28%
Other specialist planners	5%	12%	4%	4%	17%	<b><u>0%</u></b>	<b><u>0%</u></b>
Digital support	2%	0%	3%	0%	8%	0%	0%

<i>Base: All departments</i>	118	9	58	25	12	9	5
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Q3. In the last 12 months, which, if any, of the following role group(s) have you had difficulties in recruiting for?

**Table 11.4: Reasons for hard-to-fill vacancies by region (among those with vacancies)**

	ALL	EM	EE	LB	NE	NW	SE	SW	WM	YH
Low number of applicants with the required skills	87%	80%	95%	92%	82%	91%	85%	<b>100%</b>	74%	83%
Low number of applicants generally	74%	73%	82%	50%	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	59%	75%	91%	59%
Uncompetitive salary offer	68%	80%	49%	67%	39%	73%	61%	88%	<b>100%</b>	41%
Not enough people interested in doing this type of job	61%	52%	<b>83%</b>	<b>33%</b>	49%	59%	57%	75%	62%	63%
Lack of work experience the authority requires	40%	47%	37%	42%	64%	54%	28%	37%	36%	37%
Planning not considered an attractive career path	40%	32%	<b>64%</b>	33%	43%	32%	29%	38%	48%	29%
Lack of qualifications the authority requires	29%	40%	19%	17%	24%	45%	19%	49%	46%	12%
Low number of applicants with the required attitude, motivation or personality	29%	<b>0%</b>	28%	33%	43%	32%	50%	50%	<b>9%</b>	12%
Uncompetitive terms and conditions offered	27%	26%	19%	42%	36%	37%	20%	39%	9%	37%
Poor career progression / lack of prospects	13%	7%	9%	<b>42%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>0%</b>	15%	13%	9%	17%
Remote location/poor public transport	13%	<b>0%</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>0%</b>	9%	9%	13%	12%	8%	12%

<i>Base: All with vacancies</i>	109	15	22	12	7	7	21	8	11	6
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Q5. When thinking about recruitment in general, which, if any, of the following reasons explain why it has been hard to fill these vacancies?

**Table 11.5: Top eight consequences of hard-to-fill vacancies by local authority type (among those with vacancies)**

	ALL	CC	DC	UA	LB	MD	NP
Increasing workload for other staff	84%	79%	81%	86%	92%	86%	<b><u>100%</u></b>
Difficulties in meeting workload demands	79%	68%	80%	90%	83%	61%	70%
Have to use agency staff	69%	52%	72%	62%	<b><u>92%</u></b>	61%	48%
Issues with lower staff morale / satisfaction	68%	72%	62%	76%	83%	60%	<b><u>100%</u></b>
Difficulties in meeting customer services objectives	58%	54%	58%	46%	67%	53%	<b><u>100%</u></b>
Backlogs in progressing planning applications	53%	<b><u>0%</u></b>	52%	70%	67%	54%	60%
Difficulties in retaining existing staff	51%	48%	50%	55%	75%	40%	21%
Having to outsource work to consultancies	46%	56%	53%	44%	42%	<b><u>7%</u></b>	69%
<i>Base: All with vacancies</i>	109	9	55	20	12	8	5

Q6. Thinking about all of the current vacancies that have been hard to fill for you over the last 12 months, which (if any) of the following issues have you experienced as a result of hard-to-fill vacancies?

## Tables to support Chapter 6

**Table 11.6: Level of skills gaps in department by region**

	ALL	EM	EE	LB	NE	NW	SE	SW	WM	YH
ANY skills gaps	97%	94%	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	89%	100%	97%	<b>100%</b>	91%	100%
A lot of skills gaps	21%	<b>6%</b>	40%	25%	11%	27%	13%	30%	18%	<b>0%</b>
Some skills gaps	77%	87%	60%	75%	78%	73%	85%	70%	74%	<b>100%</b>
<i>Base: All departments</i>	118	16	22	12	8	8	25	10	11	6

Q15. Thinking about planning skills you have in the planning department, which of the following statements best describes your team?

**Table 11.7: Top 11 current planning skills gaps by region (% among those with skills gaps)**

	ALL	EM	EE	LB	NE	NW	SE	SW	WM	YH
Ecology and biodiversity	72%	67%	74%	<b>100%</b>	64%	69%	80%	60%	60%	59%
Masterplanning and design codes	62%	73%	56%	50%	61%	54%	67%	71%	70%	59%
Urban design and architecture	54%	<b>80%</b>	46%	33%	30%	54%	50%	61%	50%	<b>88%</b>
CIL, S106 and viability assessment	49%	53%	42%	42%	49%	57%	47%	52%	72%	29%
Digital planning – data, innovation and tools	47%	27%	32%	<b>83%</b>	67%	<b>77%</b>	50%	<b>20%</b>	46%	29%
Energy and climate change	45%	40%	50%	67%	30%	54%	38%	40%	60%	<b>0%</b>
Landscape architecture	45%	67%	37%	33%	51%	61%	34%	50%	50%	37%
Environmental sustainability	39%	<b>14%</b>	46%	<b>75%</b>	30%	38%	34%	49%	37%	17%
GIS and digital mapping	38%	27%	36%	<b>67%</b>	55%	39%	45%	30%	28%	<b>0%</b>
Flooding	36%	<b>14%</b>	33%	50%	36%	<b>77%</b>	30%	31%	31%	17%
Infrastructure and utilities	36%	20%	28%	42%	55%	<b>69%</b>	21%	40%	<b>68%</b>	<b>0%</b>
<i>Base: All with skills gaps</i>	114	15	22	12	7	8	24	10	10	6

Q16. Which, if any, of the following planning skills does your planning department currently have gaps in?

**Table 11.8: Current broader skills gaps beyond planning by region (% among those with skills gaps)**

	ALL	EM	EE	LB	NE	NW	SE	SW	WM	YH
ANY GAPS	89%	86%	91%	92%	76%	<b>100%</b>	80%	<b>100%</b>	91%	83%
Digital skills	51%	40%	50%	<b>83%</b>	67%	65%	30%	60%	59%	29%
Assessing environmental impact	44%	34%	54%	<b>75%</b>	18%	38%	38%	30%	52%	42%
Project management	40%	27%	<b>64%</b>	33%	55%	46%	<b>21%</b>	50%	54%	<b>12%</b>
Access to lawyers	38%	46%	<b>59%</b>	42%	45%	27%	25%	49%	39%	<b>0%</b>
Project commissioning	37%	32%	42%	17%	18%	51%	38%	<b>71%</b>	31%	<b>0%</b>
Financial management	25%	13%	32%	33%	18%	27%	17%	31%	45%	<b>0%</b>
Equality, diversity and inclusion	22%	12%	28%	25%	36%	27%	25%	20%	10%	12%
Managing organisational performance	21%	13%	23%	17%	<b>0%</b>	12%	34%	31%	23%	<b>0%</b>
Managing change	20%	26%	18%	17%	<b>0%</b>	16%	29%	21%	23%	<b>0%</b>
People management	20%	26%	31%	33%	<b>0%</b>	<b>0%</b>	9%	40%	23%	<b>0%</b>
<i>Base: All with skills gaps</i>	<i>114</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>6</i>

Q17 . Thinking of broader skills beyond planning, which, if any, of the following does your planning department currently have gaps in?

**Table 11.9: Actions taken to address skills gap by local authority type (among those with gaps)**

	ALL	CC	DC	UA	LB	MD	NP
Use agency staff	60%	63%	65%	42%	75%	67%	<b>0%</b>
Grow skilled staff internally through graduate/apprenticeships schemes	55%	56%	45%	55%	58%	<b>94%</b>	65%
Recruit less qualified staff and train	53%	44%	50%	48%	50%	<b>83%</b>	39%
Procure external consultants	51%	65%	41%	64%	67%	55%	35%
Run additional training for existing staff	49%	<b>81%</b>	39%	45%	67%	55%	<b>87%</b>
Offer more flexible working practices	31%	23%	31%	25%	25%	50%	26%
Work collaboratively with other local authorities	30%	12%	24%	40%	17%	49%	61%
Implement career frameworks/grades	28%	53%	22%	20%	33%	44%	26%
Recruit outside the planning discipline	28%	42%	34%	<b>10%</b>	17%	38%	26%
Run targeted recruitment campaigns	27%	33%	19%	21%	<b>58%</b>	50%	<b>0%</b>



Market supplements	23%	9%	27%	25%	25%	17%	<b>0%</b>
<i>Base: All with skills gaps</i>	114	9	56	24	12	9	4

Q20. What actions, if any, have your organisation undertaken to help address these gaps in skills?

**Table 11.10: Top three priority skills for next 12 months by local authority type**

	ALL
Ecology and biodiversity	64%
Development management	40%
Planning policy	29%
Masterplanning and design codes	29%
Energy and climate change	24%
Digital planning – data, innovation and tools	22%
Urban design and architecture	15%
CIL, S106 and viability assessment	14%
Conservation and heritage	10%
Regeneration and property development, site delivery and capital delivery	6%
Minerals and waste	5%
<i>Base: All departments</i>	118

Q23. Looking ahead to the next 12 months, which planning skills are you looking to prioritise for your planning department?

**Table 11.11: Top three challenges from Levelling Up and Regeneration Act by local authority type**

	ALL
Biodiversity net gain	84%
Changes to Local Plans	57%
Design codes	53%
<i>Base: All departments</i>	181

Q25. Thinking about the changes to planning set out in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, which of the changes do you think will be the most challenging to implement given the current skills available in your local authority?

## 12. Appendix C – Light-touch evidence

### 12.1 Background

An efficient and appropriately resourced local planning system is key to the successful delivery of many of the measures set out in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act and associated priority areas. However, the current system is under strain, in terms of both capacity and capability. It also faces additional pressures from the substantial changes that are expected to result from measures to reform the planning system.

MHCLG has commissioned Verian and CRESR at Sheffield Hallam University to establish an evidence base on local authority capacity and skills.

The commissioned study involved a short light-touch evidence review and a survey of planning departments in England. This note provides an output from the evidence review. The light-touch evidence review was undertaken at the beginning of the study, between May and June 2023. It aimed to collate, organise, analyse and present existing evidence in relation to the capacity and skills within local authority planning.

The early stages of the evidence review also informed the development of the survey. In particular, it did the following: identified “knowns” to reduce the survey’s evidence gathering requirements; identified gaps in the evidence base that needed to be collected in the survey; and identified key aspects and outcomes in order to evaluate the impact of interventions to improve local authority capacity and skills to deliver the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act.

The next section summarises the approach underpinning the light-touch evidence review.

### 12.2 Our approach to the evidence review

The light-touch evidence review was undertaken in May and June 2023. It involved three main tasks: establishing a framework for the review, evidence gathering, and analysis and reporting.

#### 12.2.1 Establishing a framework for the review

The first task was to scope and develop a framework to underpin the evidence review. This framework was developed to set the parameters for the review, ensure the evidence review was focused on the study’s aims, identify the breadth of relevant evidence, and collate evidence in a clear and consistent framework for the analysis.

Table 12.1 below presents the framework that was developed. This emerged from a rapid scoping of the available documentation, including the Project Initiation Document (PID) and an output produced by MHCLG from a previous evidence gathering exercise.

#### 12.2.2 Evidence gathering

Once the framework was agreed it was used to guide the evidence search and gathering process. As agreed with MHCLG, the initial evidence gathering focused on the 14 research outputs that the department had considered as part of its earlier

review. Each of these studies was reviewed against the framework, with evidence extracted to a database as appropriate.

The review was then extended to include more recent evidence: outputs published from 2021 to May 2023. Recent studies were identified from three sources: a review by the IDOX document retrieval service, a Google search, and searches of the websites of key stakeholder organisations. These latter included RTPI, the Local Government Authority (LGA), the Greater London Authority, Place Alliance, Planning Futures and Planning Resource. These searches identified a further eight outputs, which were reviewed against the framework, with key evidence extracted.

This list of documents reviewed is provided at the end of this appendix (“Sources”). Specific references to these documents in this review are indicated using [#]. However, the content of the evidence review draws more extensively from all of the documents that were reviewed.

### **12.2.3 Analysis and reporting**

Finally, the evidence extracted from the evidence gathering was analysed, synthesised and written up. This included an overarching overview of local authority capacity and skills (Appendix C, Section 12.3), as well as more specific analysis by planning domain (Appendix C, Section 12.4).

**Table 12.1: Evidence review framework**

<b>Focus areas</b>	<b>Current skills</b>	<b>Current capacity now</b>	<b>Anticipated future skills needs</b>	<b>Anticipated future capacity needs</b>	<b>Spatial granularity</b>	<b>Planning department operating model granularity</b>
<b>Policy areas</b>						
Local Plans						
Neighbourhood plan						
Dev. man						
Crown developments						
Enforcement						
Design						
Heritage						
Infrastructure						
Environmental						
High street						
Urban dev. corps						
Viability						
Enforcement environment/ecology/biodiversity/trees						
Minerals and waste						
Transport						
<b>Skills</b>						
Digital						
GIS						

Viability assessment						
Land use monitoring						
<b>Legislation</b>						
Pavement licensing						
CPO						
Relief from enforcement of planning conditions						
Build-out						

## 12.3 Overview of local authority capacity and skills

### 12.3.1 Introduction

This section provides an overview of the evidence on local authority capacity and skills in relation to planning. It is based on reviews of 22 outputs: the 14 outputs included in MHCLGs original evidence review and eight more recent studies that were identified from searches of the evidence base between 2021 and May 2023. This list of documents reviewed is provided at the end of this appendix (“Sources”).

The section first sets out current capacity and skills in planning. It then considers barriers to increasing capacity and skills, and the anticipated impact of capacity and skills.

### 12.3.2 Current capacity and skills in planning

There is broad support for the direction and scope of planning reforms, and a belief that they could deliver better outcomes. However, there are concerns within the sector about the practicalities of implementation. In particular, reforms need to be coupled with a major investment in local authority capacity and skills. The overarching picture from the evidence base is one of planning departments struggling with reduced budgets and a lack of capacity and skills to respond to frequently changing policy and legislation. Many planning departments are reported to rely heavily upon outsourcing to consultancies and temporary agency staff to support core staff, who focus primarily on delivering statutory duties and services. This is at the expense of, for example, community consultation, design assessments and viability negotiations.

The following sub-sections present the evidence base with respect to:

- expenditure and income
- staffing numbers
- skills and training

### **12.3.2.1 Expenditure and income**

Reduced spending by local authorities on planning emerged consistently within the evidence base. RTPI analysis [21] found that, nationally, local authority net expenditure on planning has fallen by 43%, from £844 million in 2009-10 to £480 million in 2020-21 (in 2021 prices). Although compared to earlier RTPI analysis [10] this suggests net expenditure has remained fairly constant since 2017/18 (£401 million in 2017-18 prices).

Other sources have identified similar patterns. For example, the Planning for the Future report cites local authority planning departments being under great pressure, with spending per person on planning and development down 60% (according to a 2019 Institute for Fiscal Studies study). Consequently, local authorities were spending on average £5 per resident per year on planning policy.

Regional imbalances mean local authorities in the North West, West Midlands and Yorkshire were on average spending around £3 per resident per year.

This reflects regions which saw the largest falls in public spending on planning between 2009/10 and 2020/21. RTPI analysis [21] reveals the North East saw the largest reduction in net expenditure over this period: 62%. Other regions also faced similar declines: Yorkshire and the Humber (49%), London (48%), West Midlands (47%) and North West (46%).

A reduction in the subsidy for development management (which fell by £220 million a year in this period) and in the subsidy for planning policy (which fell by £60 million a year compared to pre-2010 levels) was seen as a cause of this reduced expenditure. Coupled with this, the national planning fee regime reduced the scope for planning departments to generate additional revenue. The Institute for Fiscal Studies forecast that the 2016/17 overall local authority revenue budget would be 25.6% lower than the budget in 2009/10. The recent 20% increase on the planning application fee will support increased revenues but does not resolve staff resourcing challenges. It will help ensure a recovery from disinvestment to pre-2011 levels.

Reductions in income mean there a wide range of activities which are completely unfunded, other than by central council resources – which are equally under pressure [10]. These include:

- neighbourhood plans
- supplementary planning documents
- design codes
- heritage and conservation planning
- enforcement of planning law

- non-fee-earning activities (e.g. tree applications)
- applications for conservation area consent
- community engagement / securing public participation
- digital transformation

The cost of community engagement is often cited as a key reason for not undertaking more than the statutory requirements for consultation, particularly for tightly resourced and service-obligated planning departments [17]. Local authorities are often reliant on third parties to deliver community engagement. However, sector experiences are extremely varied, with only half of the 12 sectors considered reporting 50% or more of respondents viewing community engagement as “effective” [6].

### **12.3.2.2 Staff numbers**

The size of staff planning department teams has reduced. Between 2012 and 2020 the average size of planning teams in London Boroughs fell from 88 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff to 71 FTEs. Nationally, the pattern is generally the same [2], albeit from a much smaller average staff team size, meaning the percentage reductions were greater. A RTPI survey [3] suggested a quarter of planners left the public sector between 2013 and 2020, whereas the private sector experienced an 80% increase in the number of employed planners. As well as a reduction in posts, the consequence of budget reductions has led to unmanageable workloads and overstretched workers, meaning planning departments now struggle to recruit and retain staff. The RTPI survey found that 82% of local authority planners said their employer had had difficulties hiring planners in the last 12 months. 68% saw competitive salaries as a key difficulty for local authorities.

However, reductions were not consistent across all local authorities: around a quarter of local authorities grew their staff team size between 2006 and 2016 [2].

Work by the RTPI [10] suggests three quarters of cuts to expenditure on planning staff have fallen on policy officers, which it says goes against the proposed focus of the Government’s planning reform on plan-making. Furthermore, survey evidence from the Greater London Authority [9] demonstrates that reductions in capacity have been focused on specialisms within planning teams. Between the Greater London Authority’s baseline survey in 2012 and 2020 the largest declines were in the disciplines of regeneration/economic development (nine fewer FTEs on average; a reduction of 55%) and Transport Highways Designers (four fewer FTEs on average; a reduction of 50%). Conversely the number of staff working in planning development teams increased by two FTEs on average between 2014 and 2022. However, this number was lower (22 FTEs on average) in 2016 and 2018, indicating recent investment in local authority planning development capacity after an initial disinvestment.

Consideration of the diversity of those in the sector reveals that the planning workforce is ageing. Between 40% and 50% of staff are aged 50 years or older [16]. This raises concerns about the loss of experience from the sector when this cohort

retires. Although the older cohort are stereotypically male and white, there are signs that the younger workforce may be more diverse [22]:

- 50% of RTPPI members under 40 years of age are female
- 8% of RTPPI members under 40 years of age are from an Asian, Black or minority ethnic background

Staff time did not feature in many of the outputs reviewed. However, one study [18] reported time spent on smaller projects was felt to be disproportionate compared to the scrutiny larger developments were subject to, with 74% reporting that planning officers “rarely” or “never” spent proportionate time on small applications.

### **12.3.2.3 Skills and training**

Taylor and Close [20] summarise a compilation of survey findings spanning 2004–2020 which identified a need for skills development in the following areas: project management, presentation, leadership, communication, negotiation and teamwork, financial management, staff management, and IT. This is consistent with work from Planning Resource [3] which highlighted training events (such as those provided by RTPPI) focus on topics such as housing delivery and development viability, rather than on important soft skills such as planner-specific project management skills.

The lack of a clear pathway into planning was seen as a contributing factor to skills shortages, as well as the low number of new planners entering the sector. As a response to this, there is widespread support for planning apprenticeships and other vocational training paths, to increase routes into the sector [16].

To address a shortage of professional planners, Planning Resource’s 2019 survey of Fees and Resources [7] found that planning departments were training people without planning qualifications to fill gaps. Eighty per cent of respondents said they have already done this, while 60 per cent said they would in the near future. This compromises the depth of knowledge and skills in teams. Also, given reduced capacity for mentoring, junior planners are likely to be working on areas that they are not fully qualified to do.

As well as skills shortages, there are reports that the skills required of local authority planners have been simplified. Reforms in recent decades have worked to reduce the discretion and autonomy of planners. Instead, there has been a narrowing of the scope and role of planners, with statutory duties being prioritised over strategic planning and the quality of decision-making [13].

### **12.3.3 Barriers to increasing capacity and skills**

Three barriers were identified to increasing the capacity and skills of planning within local authorities:

Knowledge about, and the reputation of, planning as a career. The evidence indicates there is relatively little knowledge of planning careers outside of those in the sector. More broadly, planning is reported to suffer from a poor reputation as a career path, which impacts on the ability to recruit new talent. This includes views that the sector has become dominated by “box-ticking” exercises [20].



Competition with the private sector, where pay and benefits are better than in local authorities. In addition, it is suggested that the private sector offers more scope for creative planners and innovative planning activities [3], with planning departments reduced to a focus on meeting statutory duties and targets for processing applications.

Limited training and career development within local authorities. Resource constraints have eroded training budgets, which were once seen as a key benefit of working for a planning department. The over-reliance on external consultants and agency staff is reported to mean fewer opportunities for progression, and unstable team structures for in-house staff. There is also a reported lack of a management development programme in planning [18].

#### **12.3.4 Anticipated impacts of local authority capacity and skills**

This subsection considers the issues anticipated to arise due to reduced levels of capacity and skills within local authorities.

Impact on delivery. There is consensus that the under-resourcing of planning departments is one of the key barriers to delivery through the planning system. For example, planning consultant GL Hearn reported in its 2015 Annual Planning Survey that over half of local authorities thought that under-resourcing of their planning departments would “present a significant challenge to achieving their aims” that year. This situation further impacts on performance measures, such as planning applications decided within the statutory time limit. RTPI analysis [21] reveals that just 49% of planning applications were decided within statutory time limits in 2021 – continuing a downward trend since 2010.

As reported earlier, most local authorities have moved to a reactive modus operandi – with a focus on statutory obligations within the system [2; 3]. However, there is an expectation that as planning applications continue to increase and staff numbers remain in decline, many planning departments might not be able to meet their statutory obligations moving forward.

Impact on delivery of the planning reforms. There is a unanimous view that the existing capacity and skills within authorities will be insufficient to deliver the proposals set out in the planning White Paper [11]. Alongside this, staff turnover affects policy departments’ communication of planning reform changes to officers and members, and hampers the introduction of new systems and processes [2]. Given this, authorities have emphasised the value of sharing best practices, alongside increased funding, staff training and public practice support.

Further impact on staffing. As indicated earlier, there is ongoing concern about the ability of local authorities to attract both the numbers and the quality of planners needed. This is due both to a shortage of planners in general and to competition with the private sector, where pay and benefits tend to be more attractive. Studies [3; 9] have identified the need for planning services to be able to offer a competitive rewards package, as well as the opportunity to use internal secondments and to tap into apprenticeships to grow their departments. Capacity and skills shortages also create wider issues. As staff caseloads have steadily increased there have been

reports of increased rates of stress-related absences from work – with some opting to leave the public sector or even the industry [2].

### 12.3.5 Summary

This section has provided an overview of the evidence on local authority capacity and skills in relation to planning. It has identified concerns about capacity and skills levels within local authority planning teams. Despite broad support for the direction and scope of planning reforms, the review finds that there are concerns within the sector about the practicalities of implementing them without major investment.

The next section provides specific analysis of local authority capacity and skills by planning domain.

## 12.4 Local authority capacity and skills by planning domain

### 12.4.1 Introduction

This section aims to provide a more detailed consideration of local authority capacity and skills by specific planning domains.

It focuses on six planning domains where there is sufficient detail provided in the 20 research outputs that underpinned the evidence review:

- Local Plan-making
- development management
- design
- infrastructure
- environmental and ecological
- digital

### 12.4.2 Local Plan-making

The light-touch review identified concern about the slow roll-out of Local Plans and the ability of local authorities to meet the Government's requirement of having an up-to-date Local Plan (in the current system) by 2023. As at 2020, only 50% of local authorities had a Local Plan in place. The evidence base identified three capacity and skill factors that affect the development of Local Plans:

**1) Local Plans require major financial resources and time.** Evidence suggests that developing a Local Plan can cost around £300,000 to £400,000 [10] and can take, on average, seven years [8]. This includes money and time for developing an evidence base and consulting with the community, as well as staff costs, costs for inspection, and legal fees.

This resource and time requirement is expected to increase further following the planning reforms, given the additional detail and public engagement that is required, as well as investment in IT systems and related skills. It is not clear how this can be delivered in the current funding environment.

Conversely, there were reports that Local Plan budgets were reduced by around 25% over the three years to 2018 [3]. To address this, the evidence base suggests that planning departments require political recognition of the need to dedicate funding to deliver Local Plans, which can help deliver the corporate growth agenda.

**2) Staffing shortages and turnover.** Staff reductions have left smaller teams to prepare the same outputs, such as evidence documents to support the Local Plan strategy [3]. Combined with this, staff turnover has meant the loss of deep knowledge of the local area, as well as technical understanding [3]. However, despite being an important factor, it is not the case that slow progress can be solely attributed to staffing shortages and turnover. Analysis in 2017 by Planning Futures did not find a clear link between changes in planning staff and the production of Local Plans [2].

**3) Staffing knowledge and skills.** At a high level, there are gaps in staff knowledge about what is required with respect to Local Plans. Evidence suggests that local authorities feel that national policy changes (through White Papers) were poorly communicated, with new approaches floated by the Government with little detail and uncertain timescales. Managers argued that this causes uncertainty, particularly in terms of the preparation of Local Plans, and creates delays [2].

The expertise required for Local Plans is often not available in-house, so much of the work surrounding the preparation of Local Plans is outsourced [2]. Furthermore, there are anticipated shortfall in the skills needed for the proposed new Local Plan-making processes. These include digital and geospatial skills, skills needed to produce design codes, and skills for calculating developer contributions.

#### **12.4.3 Development management**

The evidence review found that local authorities are currently unable to recover their costs of development management through planning application fees alone. Although fee increases have been proposed, the evidence suggests that the scale of the shortfall means increasing fees alone would be unlikely to provide a cost-neutral development management service. The LGA has estimated that the level of subsidy required means that local taxpayers would be paying £1 billion to fund the planning service over five years [2].

Despite this situation, the evidence base identifies a trend of increased income from development management activities [3; 11] – although the planning application cost gap remains. In many instances, the additional income that is generated in local authorities is used to cross-subsidise other council services, rather than being re-invested in planning delivery.

Consideration of staffing numbers reveals that many local authorities have reduced their development management teams, with an average loss of 13% between 2006 and 2016 [2]. Local authorities are also dedicating a greater proportion of their staff to reactive development management work [11].

This reduction in the scope and autonomy of the professional planner is reported to be impacting on the reputation of the profession, and subsequently the training, recruitment

and retention of planners. For example, 80% of respondents to a Planning Resource survey in 2019 said they were finding it difficult to recruit development management professionals [7]. The inability to recruit staff was viewed as impacting the ability of planning reforms to dramatically improve development management processes.

#### **12.4.4 Design**

Consideration of local authority design capacity and skills should in part be viewed by reference to its historical trajectory. Successive administrations since 1980 have prioritised design but have then taken it off the planning agenda, only to return again. This has meant that a sustained sectoral response has been difficult to achieve, leading to problems with maintaining skills and inconsistency in development industry outputs. The new planning system will require authorities to rapidly build capacity in design to support the growing use of design review and design codes.

Design skills in local authorities have been reported to be far below where they need to be in order to address the ambitious national agenda on raising the design quality of new development. For example, a 2021 survey by the Place Alliance found [14] that 41% of local authorities had no access to urban design advice, 61% had no access to landscape design advice, and 76% had no access to architectural advice. Budget cuts have also been found to have lessened access to skills development for staff within local authorities and few authorities have a “design champion” to promote design quality at the local level. Where training is available, such as urban design-related training, this focuses on raising awareness, rather than on delivering increasing skills [1].

Capacity within teams is a major constraint. In 2021, the Place Alliance [14] identified a growth in the average number of design experts per planning department across England: from 1.6 design experts in 2017 to 1.7 in 2021. However, this growth was small – equivalent to some 30 designers across the country – and from a small base. Over half of that growth occurred in the relatively few authorities that already had larger design teams, with only 10 local authorities having design expertise in 2021 when previously they did not. It was reported that at the current rate of change it will take until 2077 to have at least one urban design officer in every planning department in England. In some cases, there has been no actual reduction in the number of staff but rather that resource is now shared across more than one planning department. As well as sharing posts between neighbouring local authorities (10% of local authorities), a range of professionals with non-design backgrounds – planners, arboriculturists, and particularly conservation officers – cover the roles of urban designers.

Given in-house capacity constraints and skills shortages, many local authorities are dependent on agency staff and consultants. The 2021 Place Alliance survey [14] found there was increased use of external consultants and agency staff to cover design issues (up by 9% and 5%, respectively, since 2017), with 40% of local authorities filling design skills gaps through such means. Their evidence suggests that around 60% of local authorities relied on external consultants or developers to produce design guidance and frameworks, while only 14% produced their current design codes in-house. Despite a strong desire that codes should be produced in-house in the future, only a third of local authorities thought this would be the case. If authorities are unable to produce design codes at the speed and scale necessary to keep pace with their development pipeline,

there will inevitably be calls to reduce delays by allowing the private sector to take over the production of these frameworks [11].

Design reviews are often seen as a means of filling design skills gaps, rather than complementing in-house design capacity. The 2021 Place Alliance survey [14] evidence suggested that around 40% of authorities were using design review to mitigate the issue of a lack of trained in-house staff. A fifth (up 4%) were turning to their highways colleagues for design advice, despite the fact that the Housing Design Audit for England found that highway design was the most consistently substandard of the 17 design considerations audited in 2019.

However, many planning departments do not have the staff resource to establish a panel, despite seeing their value. At the same time, it has been reported that there is a feeling that the recommendations of panels are resisted by developers, and there is concern about the cost of taking schemes to design review.

Regionally, regular use of design review occurs only in London and parts of the South East, whereas elsewhere practice is typically more intermittent, with notable absences through large parts of East Anglia, the North West, swathes of the South and South West, and across the West Midlands. This is consistent with earlier evidence [1] that the use of design review is concentrated in a few places. About a third of local authorities that use design review manage their own design review panel, while others look to a wide range of providers, including other local authorities, to deliver a design review service.

#### **12.4.5 Infrastructure**

The evidence base identified a lack of funding available to local authorities for infrastructure investment, alongside uncertainty about the long-term availability of funding. The RTPI reported [6] that councils are required to put together a “cocktail” of funding to realise their infrastructure priorities. As part of this, planning departments are unduly reliant on developer contributions to fund local infrastructure.

In terms of staff capacity, over 60% of respondents to the RTPI survey either “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” with the statement “my authority has sufficient staff capacity to support effective infrastructure planning”. There was very little variation reported by type of local authority, although it was notable that all combined authority survey respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed.

The RTPI report [6] identified unease within the planning community about the extent and nature of the skills and knowledge needed to support effective infrastructure planning and delivery. To some extent, this unease reflects a lack of staff resource since staff often cover infrastructure planning as part of a wider portfolio.

#### **12.4.6 Environmental / ecological**

Failure to address skills challenges and gaps could negatively impact on the sector’s ability to support the delivery of a range of national policy priorities, including achieving net zero emissions by 2045 and new housing targets (affordable and socially rented accommodation) [19]. There are critical skills gaps in specialist areas like ecology, with widespread outsourcing of work in this area [3].

The delivery of climate adaptation and mitigation “on the ground” is generally poor [12]. This is in part the result of uncertainty produced by government policy and an overwhelming focus on house building, and severe under-resourcing in planning departments.

The LGA has warned that only a third of local authorities have access to their own in-house ecologist, and that this is at odds with a national focus on tackling the climate emergency and the loss of biodiversity [15].

#### **12.4.7 Digital skills**

Digital technology and skills are core underpinning components of the planning reforms, so that planning systems can be more efficient and more certain, and to make it easier for citizens and communities to engage in planning and development.

The existing situation is that technology is not available in planning departments to support modern services. Whilst PropTech firms are developing new apps and other digital services that enable communities to engage with development in new ways, there are few places where this can be captured by the local authority. As it is, planning systems are reliant on legacy software that burden the sector with repetitive tasks, with many planning processes reliant on documents rather than data.

However, planners see investment in basic IT infrastructure as a higher priority. Investment in improved planning application management systems is seen as a key step to delivering efficiency savings in the spirit of “doing more with less” and “getting the basics right”.

#### **12.4.8 Summary**

This section has considered local authority capacity and skills by specific planning domains: Local Plan-making, development management, design, infrastructure, environmental and ecological and digital. Consistent with the overall situation provided in Section 3, it has identified concerns about current capacity and skill levels across the six planning domains.

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## 13. Appendix D – Technical annex

### 13.1 Methodology overview

The technical annex covers each element of the data collection and delivery process of the web survey, including questionnaire design, cognitive testing, sampling, and fieldwork. It also covers data processing and analysis, including information on coding and weighting, and details of the quality assurance processes followed throughout the research.

### 13.2 Questionnaire design

#### Questionnaire design workshop

A questionnaire design workshop was held on 12 May 2023, attended by key stakeholders from MHCLG policy and planning teams, LGA, RTPi, the Planning Advisory Services, and CRESR at Sheffield Hallam University. The key aims of the workshop were to:

- gain a deeper contextual understanding of the key research objectives
- understand stakeholder priorities for the questionnaire, including research themes and prompts
- identify any issues or concerns in the questionnaire design
- discuss logistical considerations in respect of the questionnaire (e.g. timing)

#### Design

MHCLG gathered provisional questions and research themes from stakeholders across the department and shared them with Verian. Verian and MHCLG then worked together to develop and refine questions. The questions were also informed by the evidence review conducted by CRESR. Questions were then cognitively tested.

### 13.3 Cognitive testing

Verian conducted four cognitive interviews via Zoom and Teams in June 2023. The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes each.

The primary purpose of the cognitive testing was to examine how well the questions performed when asked of survey respondents. This included exploring if the respondents understood the questions correctly, if they could provide accurate and consistent answers and most importantly, if they felt that the questions could be feasibly answered by people of their seniority level and in their profession in planning.

Cognitive testing was run in the form of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a small number of respondents – senior planning professional contacts shared by MHCLG.

The objectives of cognitively testing the questionnaire were to:

- ensure questions and concept descriptions for planning could be readily understood and responded to as intended, including question wording and phraseology pertaining to the subject matter of planning (e.g. skills groups within planning)
- understand what decision processes the respondents used in arriving at an answer
- test overall feelings about the questionnaire, including length and the complexity of the questions asked
- make recommendations on how the questions could be improved or refined

Respondents were recruited based on a spread of region and type of authority, where possible, with initial recruitment managed by MHCLG.

### Sample

With the help of MHCLG, we conducted four interviews with planning professionals from different types of local authorities:

**Table 13.1: Cognitive interview spread by local authority**

Type of local authority	
London Borough	1
District Council	1
Metropolitan District	2

After the cognitive testing, a report by Verian was delivered to MHCLG, setting out recommended changes. The primary change was to reduce the length of time needed to complete the survey. Verian and MHCLG further refined the questionnaire. The questionnaire was then signed off and scripted in the web survey (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing - CAWI). This web survey was checked extensively by the Verian research team. Once initial checks were complete, “dummy” data was run through the online survey and downloaded as a raw data file. The routing of each question was then double-checked using this data. Finally, after all amendments had been made, the survey was signed off by a senior researcher in the Verian team.

### 13.4 Sampling

The database of Chief Planning Officers provided by MHCLG was used as the sample frame to facilitate 100% census coverage. MHCLG provided Verian with a sample frame consisting of the 317 local authorities in England, and 10 National Parks. The sample frame included the local authority name, individual contact names, and email addresses. Email address details of a named contact were available for 271 local authorities. A generic contact email address was available for 56 local authorities.

Verian appended the sample frame file to include agreed typologies, which included population density and rural/urban classification where available.

## 13.5 Fieldwork

MHCLG engaged in various awareness-raising activities prior to the survey going live. This included promoting the survey through several routes, including direct email, the Chief Planner's newsletter, the RTPI, and the MHCLG networks built through external working groups and forums with local government.

Fieldwork began on 14 July 2023 and ended on 8 September 2023. No incentives were offered to respondents for taking part in the research.

### Invite letters

On 14 July 2023 Verian sent out invitation letters to the 317 local authorities in England explaining the research and why it was important, and that it was being carried out by Verian on behalf of MHCLG. The letters provided further information on instructions on how to complete the survey, a unique link to the survey, when the survey would close, and contact information for Verian.

### Reminder activities

Verian sent six reminder letters over the course of the fieldwork. The reminder letters were tailored based on whether a local authority had begun to complete the survey or had not yet started it. For example, if a local authority had completed several questions but not submitted a full response to the survey, the letter thanked the local authority for their responses so far and encouraged them to complete the remaining questions. The reminder letters also included a "final call to action" letter notifying local authorities that the survey was closing the following day.

MHCLG engaged in reminder activities throughout fieldwork, including direct emails with local authority contacts to encourage engagement, and reminders in the Chief Planners' newsletter.

### Response rates

A total of 118 local authorities and national parks completed the survey, out of the sample of 327, giving a response rate of 36%. The sample consisted of 252 named contacts and 75 generic contacts.

Tables 13.2 and 13.3 below show the response rate by region and type of local authority.

**Table 13.2: Response rates by region**

Region	Number invited	Number completed	Response rate
East Midlands	40	16	40%
East of England	51	22	43%
London	33	12	36%
North East	13	8	62%
North West	37	8	22%
South East	70	25	36%

South West	32	10	31%
West Midlands	33	11	33%
Yorkshire and the Humber	18	6	33%

**Table 13.3: Response rates by type of local authority**

Local authority type	Number invited	Number completed	Response rate
District Council	164	58	35%
County Council	22	9	41%
London Borough	33	12	36%
Metropolitan District	36	9	25%
Unitary Authority	62	25	40%
National Park Authority	10	5	50%

## 13.6 Analysis

### Weighting

The survey was a census, as all local authorities in England were invited. However, as indicated earlier, there were variations in the response rate between regions, as well as between types of local authorities. The extent to which this differential survey response is associated with the answers to the topic under study can affect the representativeness of the survey estimate.

To mitigate this issue, weighting was needed. Regions and types of local authorities were two variables that were used to create the non-response weight (the categories are in brackets).

- **Region where the local authority is located** (East Midlands/East of England/London/North East/North West/South East/South West/West Midlands/Yorkshire and the Humber).
- **Type of local authority** (District Council/County Council/London Borough/Metropolitan District/Unitary Authority/National Park Authority).

Compensating for these two factors helps improve the representativeness of the survey findings and, more importantly, allows for analysis to be conducted at those levels (i.e. comparing regions or different types of local authorities).

Raking (sometimes also referred to as iterative proportional fitting) was used to create the non-response weight. This is a standard weighting method that is widely used in social research surveys. Only the population count for the category of each variable (e.g. count

of local authorities in North West, count of district counties) is required in the weighting. This is beneficial in practice, as it is not always possible to know the population count of the variables combined.

The design effect of the non-response weight is 1.07, and the effective sample size is 110. The precision of survey estimates can be affected by different aspects of study design. For this survey, the precision of estimates is reduced as a result of the weighting, which was required to compensate for systematic non-response. This loss in precision can be summarised by the design effect (deff).

The deff is the ratio of the achieved sample size for the survey to the sample size of a simple random sample (with no systematic non-response) that would offer estimates of the same level of precision. A deff of 1 means that the survey offers the same precision as the simple random sample. A deff greater than 1 means that the survey weighting leads to some loss in the precision of the estimates.

In this survey, the deff after weighting is close to 1 (1.07 to be specific). This means that the weighting has little impact on the precision of the estimates.

## **Data processing**

Verian produced a data processing specification for how the raw survey data should be processed into an SPSS file and Excel tables. Open questions were coded to a coding specification that was also created by Verian. The table specification contained a list of cross-breaks corresponding to key subgroups which were agreed in discussion with MHCLG. The specification also detailed the base that should be used to analyse each question. The Excel data tables were used for analysis that fed into the report writing, both for reporting headline results for each question and for investigating variations by specific subgroups. The data tables and SPSS files are not publicly available. When determining a minimum base size for reporting headline findings, each question was looked at individually. Where indicative findings were reported from a small base size, this is flagged in the report, and these findings should be treated with caution.

### **13.7 Quality assurance**

The Verian team checked all data outputs for the research. For the SPSS file, each variable in the SPSS output was checked against a raw SPSS download and the SPSS specification. Amendments were recorded in the specification, marked as completed by data processors, then marked as checked by the research team. These included checking that:

- all variables were present and in the correct order
- for each variable, the number and percentage of respondents giving each response matched the raw SPSS derived variables and were correctly calculated
- base sizes were as specified
- question wording matched the table titles

Researchers also carried out the same checking process for the Excel tables. The tables were compared to raw SPSS files, with any amendments logged in the specification form. Cross-breaks were checked for correct bases and sense-checked against the variable from which they were derived. Verbatim coding was checked independently of the SPSS files and Excel tables. This included checking that responses were appropriate for the question, whether question codes matched up between different audiences, and that the answers given had been assigned the correct code. Verian carried out additional checks once both the Excel tables and SPSS file were finalised. These checks focused on base sizes and cross-break checking, but also included spot checks of all data tables and back-coding. A senior team member then carried out final spot checks on the tables.

## 14. Appendix E – Fieldwork documents

### 14.1 Invitation to the survey

#### **[EMAIL SUBJECT LINE:] Invitation to take part in the Local Planning Authorities Skills and Resource Survey**

Dear **[INSERT TITLE AND SURNAME IF NAMED]** **[INSERT ‘Dear Colleague’ IF GENERIC]**,

We would like to invite **[INSERT LOCAL AUTHORITY]** to take part in the **2023 Local Authorities Planning Skills and Resource Survey**.

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) has commissioned Kantar Public, an independent research agency, to undertake research in understanding capacity and capability in the planning system.

We are asking senior leaders of planning departments to take part in collecting data covering topics about their planning team or department – including staff profile, staff recruitment and retention, skills gaps, and operating models.

We appreciate how busy planning departments are, but the information will help us at MHCLG to better understand the scale of challenges facing planning departments in recruiting and retaining the key skills needed in the system right now and into the future, and to help target our support.

**[SHOW THIS IF NAMED]** We would like you to help facilitate the completion of an online survey on behalf of **[INSERT LOCAL AUTHORITY NAME]**.

**[SHOW THIS IF GENERIC]** We would like you to nominate a senior leader in your planning department to complete an online survey on behalf of **[INSERT LOCAL AUTHORITY NAME]**.

This survey has been developed alongside colleagues working in the planning and local government sector and builds on the work of the Royal Town Planning Institute, the Planning Officers Society and the Planning Advisory Service.

### **Completing the survey**

Please use the following link to start the survey.  
**[INSERT LINK]**

Please refer to the **[INSERT DOWNLOADABLE ATTACHMENT LINK:] [survey guidelines document](#)** when completing the survey.

**Please note that if you want to save and consult your colleagues or come back to finish the survey later, you can close the page and click back into the *same survey link* from this email invitation. This will automatically take you back to your progress so you can continue the survey at another time.**

The survey will close on **Friday 1 September 2023**. Please make sure you fully complete all questions up to the very end of the survey by this deadline.

If you have any queries about the research, please contact the Kantar Public research team at [laplanningskillsresourcesurvey@kantar.com](mailto:laplanningskillsresourcesurvey@kantar.com), or if you have specific queries for MHCLG, please contact [capacityandcapability@levellingup.gov.uk](mailto:capacityandcapability@levellingup.gov.uk).

## 14.1 Generic reminder email

### **[EMAIL SUBJECT LINE:] Reminder to take part in the Local Planning Authorities Skills and Resource Survey**

Dear **[INSERT TITLE AND SURNAME IF NAMED]** **[INSERT 'Dear Colleague' IF GENERIC]**,

We recently invited you to take part in the **2023 Local Authorities Planning Skills and Resource Survey** on behalf of **[INSERT LOCAL AUTHORITY NAME]**.

As a reminder, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) has commissioned Kantar Public, an independent research agency, to undertake research in understanding capacity and capability in the planning system.

We are asking senior leaders of planning departments to take part in collecting data covering topics about their planning team or department – including staff profile, staff recruitment and retention, skills gaps, and operating models.

We recognise how busy planning departments are, but the information will help us at MHCLG to better understand the scale of challenges facing planning departments in recruiting and retaining the key skills needed in the system right now and into the future, and to help target our support.

The survey is a key part of our capacity and capability programme, which is about providing the support that planning departments need. You can read more about our programme [here](#), including our recent announcements on the Planning Skills Delivery Fund and standing up a programme that will deploy teams of specialists into local authorities.

To underline, the survey results are an important input to inform the focus of this programme and of funding priorities, as well as helping support the case for future funding rounds.

If you have not yet completed the survey, we would be grateful if you could do so.

Given that we are aiming for a 100% response rate across England, we aim to provide updates on response rates throughout the fieldwork period. We recognise this comes at a busy time, and alongside other requests for information, but we hope you are able to participate.

### **Completing the survey**

Please use the following link to start the survey.  
**[INSERT LINK]**

Before you start the survey, please make sure to refer to the **[INSERT DOWNLOADABLE ATTACHMENT LINK:] survey guidelines document** when completing the survey.

**Please note that if you want to save and consult your colleagues or come back to finish the survey later, you can close the page and click back into the *same survey link* from this email invitation. This will automatically take you back to your progress so you can continue the survey at another time.**

The survey will close on **Friday 18 August 2023**. Please make sure you fully complete all questions up to the very end of the survey by this deadline.

Participation is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw from the research at any point. We would like to assure you that all answers will be treated confidentially in line with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. All findings will be made anonymous in the



reporting of results and no local authority will be identified in any of the published research findings.

If you have any queries about the research, please contact the Kantar Public research team at [laplanningskillsresourcesurvey@kantar.com](mailto:laplanningskillsresourcesurvey@kantar.com), or if you have specific queries for MHCLG, please contact [capacityandcapability@levellingup.gov.uk](mailto:capacityandcapability@levellingup.gov.uk).

### 14.3 Targeted reminder email

#### **EMAIL SUBJECT LINE:] Reminder to take part in the Local Planning Authorities Skills and Resource Survey**

Dear **[INSERT TITLE AND SURNAME IF NAMED]** **[INSERT 'Dear Colleague' IF GENERIC]**,

Thank you very much for making a start in answering the **2023 Local Authorities Planning Skills and Resource Survey** on behalf of **[INSERT LOCAL AUTHORITY NAME]**.

As you know, this survey is a key part of our capacity and capability programme, which is about providing the support that planning departments need. You can read more about our programme [here](#), including our recent announcements on the Planning Skills Delivery Fund and standing up a programme that will deploy teams of specialists to local authorities.

We recognise how busy planning departments are, but the information from this survey will help us at MHCLG to better understand the scale of challenges facing planning departments in recruiting and retaining the key skills needed in the system right now and into the future, and to help target our support and future funding, particularly ahead of new fiscal events. *The survey results are an important input to inform the focus of this programme and of funding priorities, as well as helping support the case for future funding rounds.*

If you have not yet finished the survey, we would be grateful if you could submit your final response as soon as possible. The survey will close on **Friday 1 September 2023**.

### **Completing the survey**

Please use the following link to start the survey.  
**[INSERT LINK]**

Before you start the survey, please make sure to refer to the **[INSERT DOWNLOADABLE ATTACHMENT LINK:] survey guidelines document** when completing the survey.

**Please note that if you want to save and consult your colleagues or come back to finish the survey later, you can close the page and click back into the *same survey link* from this email invitation. This will automatically take you back to your progress so you can continue the survey at another time.**

Participation is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw from the research at any point. We would like to assure you that all answers will be treated confidentially in line with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. All findings will be made anonymous in the reporting of results and no local authority will be identified in any of the published research findings.

If you have any queries about the research, please contact the Kantar Public research team at [laplanningskillsresourcesurvey@kantar.com](mailto:laplanningskillsresourcesurvey@kantar.com), or if you have specific queries for MHCLG, please contact [capacityandcapability@levellingup.gov.uk](mailto:capacityandcapability@levellingup.gov.uk).

#### 14.4 Final reminder email

**[EMAIL SUBJECT LINE:] We want to hear your voice. FINAL CALL to complete the Local Planning Authorities Skills and Resource Survey.**

Dear **[INSERT TITLE AND SURNAME IF NAMED]** **[INSERT 'Dear Colleague' IF GENERIC]**,

We recently invited you to take part in the **2023 Local Authorities Planning Skills and Resource Survey** on behalf of **[INSERT LOCAL AUTHORITY NAME]**.

To date, many local authorities have completed the survey, and your response would be very welcome. To ensure we can capture responses from as many local authorities as possible, we have extended the deadline for completing this online survey to **Friday 8 September 2023**.

As a reminder, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) has commissioned Kantar Public, an independent research agency, to undertake research in understanding capacity and capability in the planning system.

This survey is a key part of our capacity and capability programme, which is about providing the support that planning departments need. You can read more about our programme [here](#), including our recent announcements on the Planning Skills Delivery Fund and standing up a programme that will deploy teams of specialists to local authorities.

This survey is a key part of our capacity and capability programme, which is about providing the support that planning departments need. The survey results are an important input to inform the focus of this programme and of funding priorities, as well as helping support the case for future funding rounds.

We are therefore asking senior leaders of planning departments to take part in collecting data covering topics about their planning team or department – including staff profile, staff recruitment and retention, skills gaps, and operating models.

If you have not yet completed the survey, we would be grateful if you could do so. We recognise this comes at a busy time, and alongside other requests for information, but we hope you are able to participate.

### Completing the survey

Please use the following link to start the survey.

**[INSERT LINK]**

Before you start the survey, please make sure to refer to the **[INSERT DOWNLOADABLE ATTACHMENT LINK:] survey guidelines document** when completing the survey.

**Please note that if you want to save and consult your colleagues or come back to finish the survey later, you can close the page and click back into the *same survey link* from this email invitation. This will automatically take you back to your progress so you can continue the survey at another time.**

The deadline for completing this survey is **Friday 8 September**. *Please make sure you fully complete all questions up to the very end of the survey by this deadline.*

Participation is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw from the research at any point. We would like to assure you all answers will be treated confidentially in line with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. All findings will be made anonymous in the reporting of results and no local authority will be identified in any of the published research findings.

If you have any queries about the research, please contact the Kantar Public research team at [laplanningskillsresourcesurvey@kantar.com](mailto:laplanningskillsresourcesurvey@kantar.com), or if you have specific queries for MHCLG, please contact [capacityandcapability@levellingup.gov.uk](mailto:capacityandcapability@levellingup.gov.uk).

## 14.5 Questionnaire

### MHCLG Local Authorities Planning Skills and Capacity Survey Questionnaire – 21 June 2023

#### Introduction

Thank you for completing this survey on behalf of your organisation.

This survey asks a range of questions about your local authority planning department's workforce. The survey comprises a number of thematic areas, including: recruitment, retention, skills and challenges, and staff/workforce profile.

**Please make sure that only ONE person in your organisation submits this survey.**

You can save your response at any time using the "Save and continue later" button should you need to consult with colleagues in other parts of your organisation.

A hard copy of the questionnaire (PDF and Word) has been enclosed with your survey invitation pack so this can be shared with colleagues, in order to fill out key details before entering them into the online survey.

**Please refer to the survey guidance manual before beginning the survey.**

#### SECTION 1: RECRUITMENT

**INTRO1:** This section of the survey explores recruitment and your department's experiences in recruiting staff currently and over the past year.

*Please refer to the **guidelines in the email invitation** when starting this survey. Please answer the survey questions to the best of your knowledge or ask another colleague who you think might be able to help with the answers. Please make sure to save your progress as you are completing questions or sections (or ask your colleague to do so if they are completing a given question / section).*

**Please only click SUBMIT when all sections of the survey are completed and ready to submit.**

**Q1.** Approximately how many vacancies do you currently have across the role groups defined below?

*Please enter a number for each.*

		998. Not applicable	997. Don't know
1. Chief planners and heads of planning and management level – heads of policy/Local Plans and heads of development management			
2. Development management – <b>senior level</b> (team leaders, principal planners, senior planners)			
3. Development management – <b>entry and mid-level</b> (planner, planning officer, junior planning officer, graduate planning officer)			
4. Policy – <b>senior level</b> (team leaders, principal planners, senior planners)			
5. Policy – <b>entry and mid-level</b> (planner, planning officer, junior planning officer, graduate planning officer)			
6. Natural environment (ecologists, environmental design, landscape and EIA, tree officer)			
7. Geographic information system (GIS) and digital mapping officers			
8. Digital support			
9. Design and urban design officers			
10. Heritage and conservation officers			
11. Monitoring and CIL officers			
12. Enforcement and compliance officers			
13. Other specialist planners			
14. Transport			
15. Minerals and waste			
16. Administrative / support staff / application validation			
17. Other (Please specify)			

999. We currently have no staff vacancies

**VARIABLE NAME: GRADUATE**

**Q2.** In the last 12 months, approximately how many graduate planners have joined your planning department?

*Please consider all graduates (including those with associated degrees but not planning degrees) who have joined an entry-level planning position.*

*Please enter a number. If NONE, please enter zero.*

--

997 Don't know

**VARIABLE NAME: DIFFICULT**

**Q3.** In the last 12 months, which, if any, of the following role group(s) have you had difficulties in recruiting for?

*Please include any roles that you have tried recruiting for, but for which you have experienced difficulties.*

1. Chief planners and heads of planning and management level – heads of policy/Local Plans and heads of development management
2. Development management – <b>senior level</b> (team leaders, principal planners, senior planners),
3. Development management – <b>entry and mid-level</b> (planner, planning officer, junior planning officer, graduate planning officer)
4. Policy – <b>senior level</b> (team leaders, principal planners, senior planners)
5. Policy – <b>entry and mid-level</b> (planner, planning officer, junior planning officer, graduate planning officer)
6. Natural environment (ecologists, environmental design, landscape and EIA, tree officer)
7. Geographic information system (GIS) and digital mapping officers
8. Digital support
9. Design and urban design officers
10. Heritage and conservation officers
11. Monitoring and CIL officers
12. Enforcement and compliance officers
13. Other specialist planners
14. Transport
15. Minerals and waste
16. Administrative / support staff / application validation
17. Other (Please specify)

999 None of these

997 Don't know

**VARIABLE NAME: RANKDIFF**

**Q4.** And which of the following role group(s) have been the most difficult to recruit for?

Please select **up to three** role groups that were difficult to recruit for, with one being the most difficult role group to fill, followed by the second and third most difficult jobs to fill.

	Most difficult	Second most difficult	Third most difficult
1. Chief planners and heads of planning and management level – heads of policy/Local Plans and heads of development management			
2. Development management – <b>senior level</b> (team leaders, principal planners, senior planners),			
3. Development management – <b>entry and mid-level</b> (planner, planning officer, junior planning officer, graduate planning officer)			
4. Policy – <b>senior level</b> (team leaders, principal planners, senior planners)			
5. Policy – <b>entry and mid-level</b> (planner, planning officer, junior planning officer, graduate planning officer)			
6. Natural environment (ecologists, environmental design, landscape and EIA, tree officer)			
7. Geographic information system (GIS) and digital mapping officers			
8. Digital support			
9. Design and urban design officers			
10. Heritage and conservation officers			
11. Monitoring and CIL officers			
12. Enforcement and compliance officers			
13. Other specialist planners			
14. Transport			
15. Minerals and waste			
16. Administrative / support staff / application validation			
17. Other (Please specify)			

997 Don't know

999. Not had recruitment difficulties

**VARIABLE NAME: REASON**

**Q5.** When thinking about recruitment in general, which, if any, of the following reasons explain why it has been hard to fill these vacancies?

*Please select all that apply.*

1. Not enough people interested in doing this type of job
2. Uncompetitive salary offer
3. Uncompetitive terms and conditions offered
4. Uncompetitive hybrid or flexible working conditions
5. Low number of applicants with the required skills
6. Low number of applicants with the required attitude, motivation or personality
7. Low number of applicants generally
8. Lack of work experience the authority requires
9. Lack of qualifications the authority requires
10. Poor career progression / lack of prospects
11. Planning is not considered an attractive career path
12. Job entails long/unsociable hours work
13. Remote location/poor public transport
14. Other (please specify)

999 No particular reason

997 Don't know

**VARIABLE NAME: CONSEQUENCE**

**Q6.** Thinking about all of the current vacancies that have been hard to fill for you over the last 12 months, which (if any) of the following issues have you experienced as a result of hard-to-fill vacancies?

*Please select all that apply.*

1. Difficulties in meeting workload demands
2. Backlogs in progressing planning applications
3. Unable to progress Local Plan
4. Difficulties in meeting quality standards
5. Difficulties in introducing new working practices or technical systems
6. Increasing workload for other staff
7. Having to outsource work to consultancies
8. Have to use agency staff
9. Difficulties in meeting customer services objectives
10. Issues with lower staff morale / satisfaction
11. Difficulties in retaining existing staff
12. Difficulties with upskilling or training existing staff
13. Other (please specify)

999 None of these

997 Don't know

**VARIABLE NAME: ACTIONS**

**Q7.** Thinking about those hard-to-fill vacancies, which, if any, of the following actions have you taken which have been **the most successful**?

*Please select all that apply.*

1. Offer more flexible working
2. Run targeted recruitment campaigns
3. Grow your own planners through graduate/apprenticeships schemes
4. Increase salaries in general
5. Use agency / contractor staff
6. Procure external consultants
7. Re-deploy internally
8. Find external secondments from outside the authority
9. Outsource services
10. Work collaboratively with other local authorities
11. Share resources within the local authority
12. Recruit outside the planning discipline
13. Run additional training/upskilling for existing staff
14. Organise internal secondments from other departments within the local authority
15. Create career frameworks/career grades
16. Expand training programmes
17. Recruit less qualified staff and train them up
18. Other (please specify)

999 None of these

997 Don't know

## SECTION 2: RETENTION

**INTRO3:** Thank you for your responses so far. This section involves some questions about your planning department's experiences in retaining your staff.

*Please refer to the **guidelines in the email invitation** when starting this survey. Please answer these questions to the best of your knowledge or ask another colleague who you think might be able to help with the answers. Please make sure to save your progress as you are completing questions or sections (or ask your colleague to do so if they are completing a given question / section).*

**Please only click SUBMIT when all sections of the survey are completed and ready to submit.**

### VARIABLE NAME: RETENTION

**Q8.** Over the past 12 months, has your planning department experienced any difficulties in retaining staff?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't know

### VARIABLE NAME: RGRETAIN

**Q9.** Which, if any, of the following role groups are you currently experiencing difficulties in retaining staff for?



Please select all that apply.

1. Chief planners and heads of planning and management level – heads of policy/Local Plans and heads of development management
2. Development management – <b>senior level</b> (team leaders, principal planners, senior planners),
3. Development management – <b>entry and mid-level</b> (planner, planning officer, junior planning officer, graduate planning officer)
4. Policy – <b>senior level</b> (team leaders, principal planners, senior planners)
5. Policy – <b>entry and mid-level</b> (planner, planning officer, junior planning officer, graduate planning officer)
6. Natural environment (ecologists, environmental design, landscape and EIA, tree officer)
7. Geographic information system (GIS) and digital mapping officers
8. Digital support
9. Design and urban design officers
10. Heritage and conservation officers
11. Monitoring and CIL officers
12. Enforcement and compliance officers
13. Other specialist planners
14. Transport
15. Minerals and waste
16. Administrative / support staff / application validation
17. Other (Please specify)

999. Not had difficulties recruiting for any of these

997. Don't know

#### VARIABLE NAME: IMPACT

**Q10.** To what extent do you feel that the difficulties that you are experiencing in retaining staff are having an impact on your planning department's ability to fulfil services or business needs?

Please select one answer.

1. Very significant impact
2. Some significant impact
3. Not very significant impact
4. No significant impact at all
5. Don't know

#### VARIABLE NAME: RETAINACT

**Q11.** Thinking about the last 12 months, which, if any, of the following actions have you taken which have been **most successful** in retaining your staff?

Please select all that apply.

1. More flexible working
2. Enhanced pay
3. Better career frameworks/career grades

4. Organisational re-design
5. Job re-design
6. Retention payments
7. Personal development offers
8. Merit/incentive awards
9. Other (please specify)

999 None of these

997 Don't know

**VARIABLE NAME: LEAVE**

**Q12.** Compared to a year ago, which of the below best describes your experience of the numbers of staff **leaving** your planning department?

*Please consider all staff on permanent or fixed-term contracts.*

1. **More** staff have left
2. Number of staff leaving feels **around the same**
3. **Less** staff have left than before
4. Don't know

**VARIABLE NAME: WHYLEAVE**

**Q13.** Which, if any, of the following are reasons for why staff have left your planning department?

*Please select all that apply.*

1. Retirement
2. Ill health
3. Better pay and conditions
4. Moved to work for a different local authority
5. Decided to go freelance/self-employed
6. Moved to the private sector
7. Moved to a different department in the local authority
8. Moved to a government department or a statutory body
9. Political or culture issues in the workplace
10. Low morale due to workload/resourcing issues in the team
11. Other (please specify)

999 None of these

997 Don't know

**VARIABLE NAME: BARRIER**

**Q14.** Thinking about resourcing overall, which, if any, of the following do you think are barriers to meeting your resourcing or capacity needs?

*Please select all that apply.*

	1. Significant barrier	2. Occasional barrier	3. Not a barrier at all	997. Don't know
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1. Lack of funding for staff				
2. Uncertainty over funding in the medium to long term				
3. Complexity of the recruitment process, e.g. cost and time				
4. Resources required in recruitment, e.g. requirement to re-deploy existing staff				
5. Difficulty in attracting appropriately qualified or skilled candidates				
6. Image and perception of local authority/public sector as an employer				
7. Difficulties in retaining staff				
8. Difficulty in setting appropriate pay scale for the skills required				
9. Issues with using certain recruitment platforms, e.g. LinkedIn, or recruitment agencies				
10. Difficulties competing with other organisations in both public and private sector for talent				
11. Not enough people in the market with the appropriate qualifications				
12. Not enough people who are studying to obtain the appropriate qualifications				
13. Low interest among graduates in taking up courses towards qualifications				
14. Other (please specify)				

### SECTION 3: SKILLS, CHALLENGES, SHORTAGES

**INTRO4:** Thank you for your responses so far. This section involves some questions about skills and training in your planning department, including any needs or gaps in skills that you might be experiencing. Please think about gaps in skills **within your existing workforce**.

*Please refer to the **guidelines in the email invitation** when starting this survey. Please answer the questions to the best of your knowledge or ask another colleague who you think might be able to help with the answers. Please make sure to save your progress as you are completing questions or sections (or ask your colleague to do so if they are completing a given question / section).*

**Please only click SUBMIT when all sections of the survey are completed and ready to submit.**

**VARIABLE NAME: SKILLSHORT**

**Q15.** Thinking about planning skills you have in the planning department, which of the following statements best describes your team?

1. There are currently no skills gaps
2. There are some skills gaps
3. There are a lot of skills gaps
4. Don't know

**VARIABLE NAME: PLANSK**

**Q16.** Which, if any, of the following **planning skills** does your planning department currently have **gaps** in?

*Please select all that apply. If you have **formal arrangements** with other planning departments that use these skills, **please include them as a gap.***

1. Development management
2. Planning policy
3. Strategic planning
4. Regeneration and property development, site delivery and capital delivery
5. CIL, S106 and viability assessment
6. Community engagement and participation
7. Geospatial Information Systems (GIS) and digital mapping
8. Digital planning – data, innovation and tools
9. Infrastructure and utilities
10. Transport planning and highways
11. Equality, diversity, inclusion and gender mainstreaming in planning
12. Economic development
13. Urban design and architecture
14. Masterplanning and design codes
15. Ecology and biodiversity,
16. Landscape architecture
17. Conservation and heritage
18. Flooding
19. Minerals and waste
20. Archaeology
21. Energy and climate change
22. Environmental sustainability, including environmental impact assessment (EIA) and strategic environmental assessment (SEA)
23. Other (please specify)

999 None of these

997 Don't know

**VARIABLE NAME: SOFTSK**

**Q17.** Thinking of broader skills beyond planning, which, if any, of the following does your planning department currently have gaps in?

*Please select all that apply. If you have **formal arrangements** with other planning departments that use these skills, **please include them as a gap.***

1. Managing change
2. People management (e.g. recruiting/coaching/motivating staff)
3. Equality, diversity and inclusion
4. Managing organisational performance
5. Assessing environmental impact
6. Project management
7. Project commissioning
8. Financial management
9. Digital skills, including use of technology, software and data
10. Access to lawyers
11. Other (please specify)

999 None of these, there are no gaps in broader skills

997 Don't know

**VARIABLE NAME: GAPSOE**

**Q18.** Thinking about both skills for planning and skills more broadly, which skills gap(s) would you say have the greatest negative impact on your planning department, and why?

*Please list the skill(s) and be as specific as possible.*

997 Don't know

**VARIABLE NAME: SKIMPACT**

**Q19.** Overall, how has your local authority planning department been impacted by the skills gap(s) you mentioned?

*Please select all that apply.*

1. Preparing the Local Plan
2. Adapting the Local Plan
3. Preparing Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs)
4. Adopting policy and practice to new national policy and guidance
5. Readiness for Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)
6. Speed of determining planning applications
7. Capacity to take enforcement action
8. Number of complaints
9. Number of appeals
10. Risk of designation
11. Other (please specify)

999 No impact

997 Don't know

**VARIABLE NAME: SKACTION**

**Q20.** What actions, if any, has your organisation undertaken to help address these gaps in skills?

*Please select all that apply.*

1. Offer more flexible working practices to attract/retain skilled staff
2. Run targeted recruitment campaigns
3. Grow skilled staff internally through graduate/apprenticeships schemes
4. Market supplements
5. Increase salaries in general
6. Use agency staff
7. Procure external consultants
8. Re-deploy internally
9. Find external secondments from outside the authority
10. Outsource services
11. Work collaboratively with other local authorities
12. Share resources within the local authority
13. Recruit outside the planning discipline
14. Run additional training for / upskilling existing staff
15. Organise internal secondments from other departments within the local authority
16. Implement career frameworks/career grades
17. Expand training programmes
18. Recruit less qualified staff and train them up
19. Other (please specify)

999 None of these

997 Don't know

**VARIABLE NAME: GAPCHANGE**

**Q21.** Overall, how has the size of skills gap(s) across your planning department changed in the past 12 months?

1. Significantly increased
2. Somewhat increased
3. Stayed the same
4. Somewhat decreased
5. Significantly decreased
6. Don't know

**VARIABLE NAME: UPSKILL**

**Q22.** Which, if any, of the following do you believe are key barriers to upskilling staff?

*Please select all that apply.*

1. Lack of time

2. Lack of training budget (including constraints on paying staff to attend training, e.g. train fares)
3. Lack of capacity to deliver or attend training
4. Fear that once staff are upskilled they could leave /move on
5. Lack of appropriate external training courses
6. Other (please specify)

999 None of these

997 Don't know

**VARIABLE NAME: PLANPRIORITY**

**Q23.** Looking ahead to the next 12 months, which **planning skills** are you looking to **prioritise** for your planning department?

*Please select up to three planning skills you are looking to prioritise, with one that is high priority, one that is medium priority, and one that is low priority.*

	1. High priority	2. Medium priority	3. Low priority
1. Development management			
2. Planning policy			
3. Strategic planning			
4. Regeneration and property development, site delivery and capital delivery			
5. CIL, S106 and viability assessment			
6. Community engagement and participation			
7. Geospatial Information Systems (GIS) and digital mapping			
8. Digital planning – data, innovation and tools			
9. Infrastructure and utilities			
10. Transport planning and highways			
11. Equality, diversity, inclusion and gender mainstreaming in planning			
12. Economic development			
13. Urban design and architecture			
14. Masterplanning and design codes			
15. Ecology and biodiversity			

16. Landscape architecture			
17. Conservation and heritage			
18. Flooding			
19. Minerals and waste			
20. Archaeology			
21. Energy and climate change			
22. Environmental sustainability, including environmental impact assessment (EIA) and strategic environmental assessment (SEA)			
23. Other (please specify)			

999 None of these

997 Don't know

**VARIABLE NAME: SOFTPRIORITY**

**Q24.** Looking ahead, which of the following **broader skills** are you looking to **prioritise** for your planning department?

*Please select **up to three** planning skills you are looking to prioritise, with one that is high priority, one that is medium priority, and one that is low priority.*

	1. High priority	2. Medium priority	3. Low priority
1. Managing change			
2. People management (e.g. recruiting/coaching/motivating staff)			
3. Understanding equalities and diversity			
4. Managing organisational performance			
5. Assessing environmental impact			
6. Project management			
7. Project commissioning			
8. Financial management			



9. Digital skills, including use of technology, software and data			
10. Understanding legal and regulatory requirements			

999 None of these

997 Don't know

**VARIABLE NAME: LURB**

**Q25.** Thinking about the changes to planning set out in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, which of the changes do you think will be the **most challenging** to implement given the current skills available in your local authority?

*Please select up to top three changes – one that you think is the most challenging, one that you think is the second most challenging, and one that you think is the third most challenging.*

	1. The most challenging	2. Second most challenging	3. Third most challenging
1. Changes to Local Plans			
2. Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)			
3. Environmental Outcomes Reports (EORs)			
4. Street votes			
5. Design codes			
6. The role of supplementary plans			
7. CIL			
8. National Development Management Policies			
9. Data standards			
10. Other planning reforms and changes (e.g. nutrient neutrality, NSIP regime) (please specify)			

998. None of these are challenging

997. Don't know

**VARIABLE NAME: DIGITAL**

**Q26.** There are a number of new and emerging digital planning tools (including PropTech and digital community engagement). Beyond your day-to-day operating systems, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the below statements about your staff’s skills in using digital tools required for planning?

	1. Strongly agree	2. Agree	3. Neither agree nor disagree	4. Disagree	5. Strongly disagree	997. Don't know
1. Staff have the necessary skills / knowledge to <b>identify</b> the right available digital planning tools						
2. Staff have the necessary skills / knowledge to <b>source and procure</b> new digital planning tools						
3. Staff are competent in the use of <b>digital</b> planning tools						

**VARIABLE NAME: BUDGET**

**Q27.** What is the current size of the annual training budget for your planning department?

1. None
2. Less than £29,999
3. £30,000 – £59,999
4. £60,000 – £99,999
5. £100,000 – £149,999
6. £150,000 or more

997 Don't know

**VARIABLE NAME: FUTUREBUD**

**Q28.** Thinking about the next financial year (2024/25), how do you think your annual training budget will change?

1. Budget is likely to increase
2. Budget is likely to remain the same
3. Budget is likely to decrease
4. Don't know

**VARIABLE NAME: DEMANDS**

**Q29.** What kinds of demands or workload draw or use up the most resource within your planning department?

*Please provide detail and be as specific as possible.*

997 Don't know

**VARIABLE NAME: TRAINING**

**Q30.** Have members of your planning committee received mandatory training in the last two to three years?

- 1. Yes
- 2. No
- 3. Don't know

**VARIABLE NAME: LOCALPLAN**

**Q31.** What is the status of your current Local Plan?

- 1. Not yet started
- 2. Currently stalled
- 3. We have started it
- 4. It is completed
- 5. It has been adopted
- 6. Don't know

**SECTION 4: OPERATING MODELS**

**INTRO5:** Thank you for your responses so far. We would like to ask you some questions about your operating model and how that works in your organisation.

*Please refer to the **guidelines in the email invitation** when starting this survey. Please answer the questions to the best of your knowledge or ask another colleague who you think might be able to help with the answers. Please make sure to save your progress as you are completing questions or sections (or ask your colleague to do so if they are completing a given question / section).*

**Please only click SUBMIT when all sections of the survey are completed and ready to submit.**

**VARIABLE NAME: MODELS**

**Q32.** Which of the statements below best describes how your planning department is organised within the local authority?

- 1. Standardised local authority departmental structure, perhaps headed by Chief Planner or Head of Planning, with a conventional corporate structure and all planning services within the same directorate.

2. A planning department embedded across combined services and where planning services sit in multiple directorates and management is shared across disciplines (e.g. planning policy and development management services operate in separate corporate directorates).
3. A “flat” organisational structure with cross-role working and responsibility, where officers and management operate in multiple disciplines.
4. None of these, we’re restructuring right now, with a new set of roles and responsibilities.
5. Don’t know / not sure.

**VARIABLE NAME: SERVICES**

**Q33.** Does your local authority planning department share any services with other local authorities through a contract or formal agreement?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don’t know

**VARIABLE NAME: SHAREOE**

**Q34.** Overall, approximately how many staff do you share with other local authorities?

*Please enter a number.*

999. None, we don’t share any staff with other authorities

997. Don’t know

**VARIABLE NAME: SHARELA**

**Q35.** How many other local authorities do you share staff with?

*Please enter a number.*

999. Don’t know

**VARIABLE NAME: SHARESKILL**

**Q36.** Do you share any of the following planning skills with other local authorities?

1. Development management
2. Planning policy
3. Strategic planning
4. Regeneration and property development, site delivery and capital delivery
5. CIL, S106 and viability assessment
6. Community engagement and participation
7. Geospatial Information Systems (GIS) and digital mapping
8. Digital planning – data, innovation and tools

9. Infrastructure and utilities
10. Transport planning
11. Equality, diversity, inclusion and gender mainstreaming in planning
12. Economic development
13. Urban design and architecture
14. Masterplanning and design codes
15. Ecology and biodiversity
16. Landscape architecture
17. Conservation and heritage
18. Flooding
19. Minerals and waste
20. Archaeology
21. Energy and climate change
22. Environmental sustainability, including environmental impact assessment (EIA) and strategic environmental assessment (SEA)
23. Other (please specify)

999. None of these

997. Don't know

## SECTION 5: STAFF PROFILE

**INTRO5:** Thank you for your responses so far. This section involves some questions about your planning department staff. When answering questions in this section, **please only consider the staff who are employed directly by the planning department and exclude any staff that are employed elsewhere, e.g. as part of a shared service.**

*Please refer to the **guidelines in the email invitation** when starting this survey. Please answer the questions to the best of your knowledge or ask another colleague who you think might be able to help with the answers. Please make sure to save your progress as you are completing questions or sections (or ask your colleague to do so if they are completing a given question / section).*

**Please only click SUBMIT when all sections of the survey are completed and ready to submit.**

## SUBHEADER: Your current workforce

### VARIABLE NAME: STAFFNUM

**Q37.** Thinking about your current workforce (June 2023), how many members of staff (including full-time, part-time and fixed-term appointment staff) are currently employed within your planning department?

**Please do not include agency staff. Please type in a number.**

997 Don't know

998 Prefer not to say

**VARIABLE NAME: EMPLOYSTAT**

**Q38.** And how many of your planning department staff are employed on the following basis?

*Please type in a number for each. Numbers should add up to the total number of employed staff at your planning department.*

1. Full-time permanent	
2. Part-time permanent	
3. Temporary/fixed-term contract	
4. Agency	
5. Other type of role	
6. <b>Total number</b> of employed staff	

997. Don't know

**VARIABLE NAME: JOBROLE**

**Q39.** Approximately how many of your current workforce staff as at June 2023 are employed within the following job roles?

*Please type in a number for each. Please note this should be the number of employees, **not** the number of full-time equivalents (FTE). Please do not include posts that are kept vacant due to budgetary measures.*

1. Chief planners and heads of planning and management level – heads of policy/Local Plans and heads of development management	
2. Development management – <b>senior level</b> (team leaders, principal planners, senior planners)	
3. Development management – <b>entry and mid-level</b> (planner, planning officer, junior planning officer, graduate planning officer)	
4. Policy – <b>senior level</b> (team leaders, principal planners, senior planners)	
5. Policy <b>entry and mid-level</b> (planner, planning officer, junior planning officer, graduate planning officer)	
6. Natural environment (ecologists, environmental design, landscape and EIA, tree officer)	
7. Geographic information system (GIS) and digital mapping officers	
8. Digital support	
9. Design and urban design officers	
10. Heritage and conservation officers	

11. Monitoring and CIL officers	
12. Enforcement and compliance officers	
13. Other specialist planners	
14. Transport	
15. Minerals and waste	
16. Administrative / support staff / application validation	
17. Other (Please specify)	

**VARIABLE NAME: OUTPLAN1**

**Q40.** Does your planning department regularly draw upon any policy or specialist skills, areas or services that are external to the department from elsewhere within the local authority to help meet service demand?

*For example, these may include legal, finance and IT services.*

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't know

**VARIABLE NAME: OUTPLAN2**

**Q41.** Please can you provide more details on the types of policy or specialist roles your department is **most reliant** on to help deliver services.

997. Don't know

998. Prefer not to say

**VARIABLE NAME: QUALIFICATION**

**Q42.** Overall, how many current members of staff (as at June 2023) in your planning department have a relevant related qualification, e.g. RTP1 qualified?

*Please type in a number. Please include permanent full-time, part-time or fixed-term/contract staff.*

997. Don't know

**VARIABLE NAME: PROPORQUAL**

**Q43.** If you are struggling to put a number to qualified staff, please can you estimate the proportion of your current planning department workforce who have professional qualifications, e.g. RTPI qualified?

1. Less than a quarter
2. A quarter to a half
3. A half to three quarters
4. Over three quarters
5. Don't know / not sure

**VARIABLE NAME: MAKEUP**

**Q44.** To what extent do you agree with the following statement in regard to your planning department?

*There is adequate experience, skills and knowledge within the planning department to deliver the services and work required.*

1	Strongly agree
2	Agree
3	Neither agree nor disagree
4	Disagree
5	Strongly disagree

997 Don't know

**SUBHEADER: Changes in your workforce over the past 12 months**

**VARIABLE NAME: STAFFCH**

**Q45.** In the last 12 months, how has the total number of employees (full-time, part-time but **not** temporary contract or agency) in your planning department changed?

*Please exclude any vacant posts that are held for budgetary management purposes.*

*Please select one answer.*

1. It has increased
2. It has stayed the same
3. It has decreased

997 Don't know

**VARIABLE NAME: STAFFCHOE**

**Q46** You said that the total number of employees (full-time, part-time but not temporary contract or agency) has increased/decreased/stayed the same in the last 12 months. Can you tell us why?



997 Don't know

**VARIABLE NAME: FUTURESIZE**

**Q47** In light of intended increases to planning fees and thinking about the next financial year (2024/25), which of the following would best describe the total number of posts (filled and unfilled) within your planning department?

*Posts refer to roles or positions in the planning department that are currently filled, or which are open and for which you are recruiting, or any other roles that you want to create in the future.*

1. Number of posts will increase
2. Number of posts will stay the same
3. Number of posts will decrease

997 Don't know

**VARIABLE NAME: SIZEOE**

**Q48.** You said that the number of posts in your planning department will increase/decrease. Why do you think this?

997 Don't know

**SECTION 6: THANK YOU AND RE-CONTACT**

**INTRO6:** We now have a few final questions regarding future research.

**VARIABLE NAME: RECONTACT1**

**Q49.** It is possible that the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (MHCLG) may want to undertake further research on particular issues arising from this survey or other issues this survey has not been able to cover. Would you be willing to be re-contacted by someone from Kantar Public or MHCLG for this purpose in the next 12 months?

Please be reassured that the purpose of this re-contact would be for research only. Taking part will be voluntary and you can decide to take part if and when we contact you.

1. Yes – happy to be contacted
2. No – please do not contact me

**VARIABLE NAME: RECONTACT2**

**Q50.** If you are willing to be re-contacted to take part in further research, please enter your contact details below.

Full name:

Phone number:

Email address:

999. I do not want to be re-contacted to take part in further research

#### **VARIABLE NAME: DETAILS**

**Q51.** Finally, we ask that you, as the person who has completed this questionnaire on behalf of your local authority, please enter your name, contact details, job title and name of your local authority below. This is for our quality assurance processes and so that the research team at Kantar Public can contact you if we need to clarify any information on your responses.

*Please be reassured that none of your individual survey responses or your local authority name will be identifiable in any published findings based on this research, as all findings will be reported on at an aggregated level.*

Full name:

Job title:

Local authority:

Phone number:

Email address:

#### **Thank you very much for participating in this survey.**

Everything you have told us will be anonymised and protected under GDPR and strict data protection guidelines at Kantar Public. For more information about our privacy policy see: [kantarpublic.com/uk/surveys](https://kantarpublic.com/uk/surveys).

Nobody outside of Kantar Public will be able to link any of your answers to your name, your role/position, your contact details or your specific local authority. For the purposes of this research, nothing will be reported on at a specific local authority level, as any findings will be aggregated. Please refer to the detailed guidelines in the email invitation for more information about this survey, how your data will be used and protected, your rights of participation, and more.

If you have any questions or concerns about yours or your department's data, or any questions about this survey, please email [laplanningskillsresourcesurvey@kantar.com](mailto:laplanningskillsresourcesurvey@kantar.com).