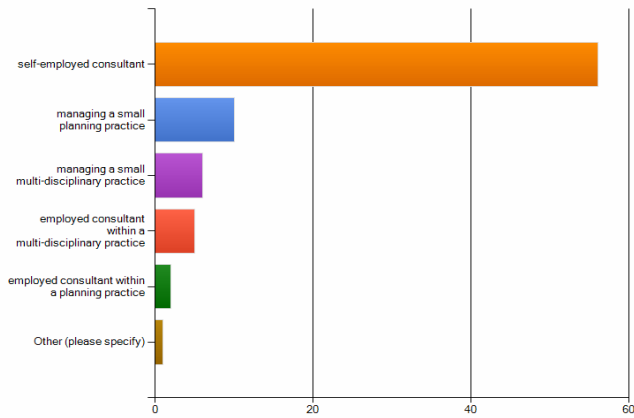


# RTPI Independent Consultants Network survey 2009

## 1. About you:

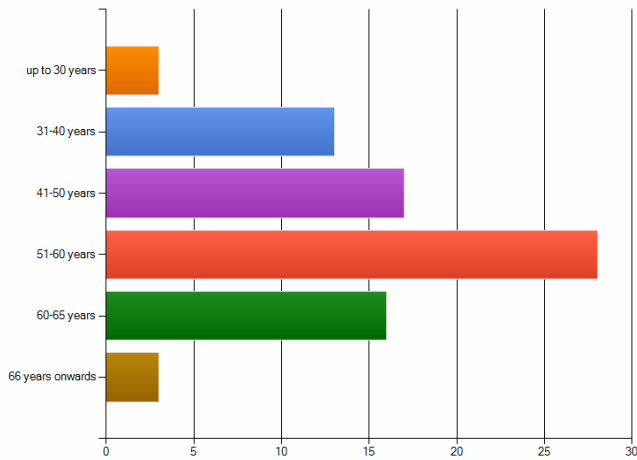
Employed status



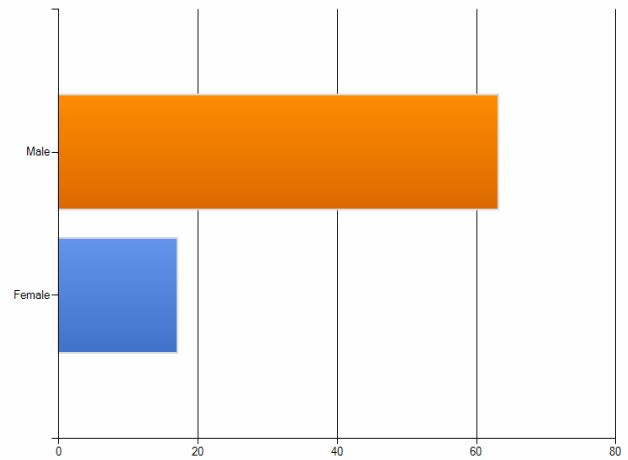
(comments from respondents)

- two person partnership

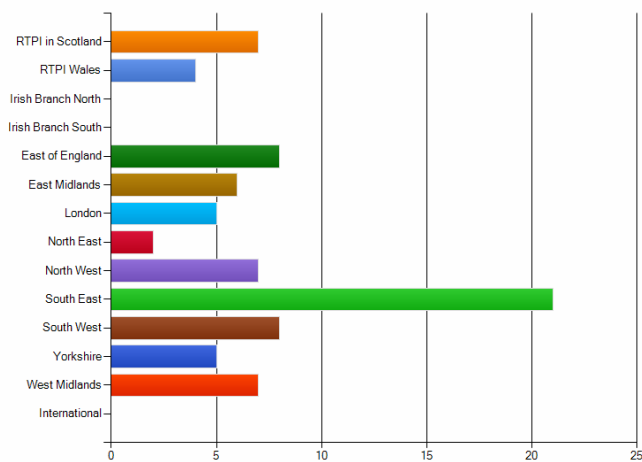
Your age group



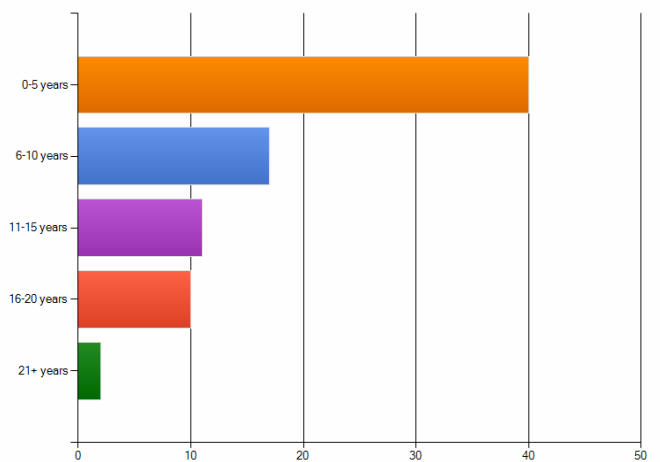
Are you:



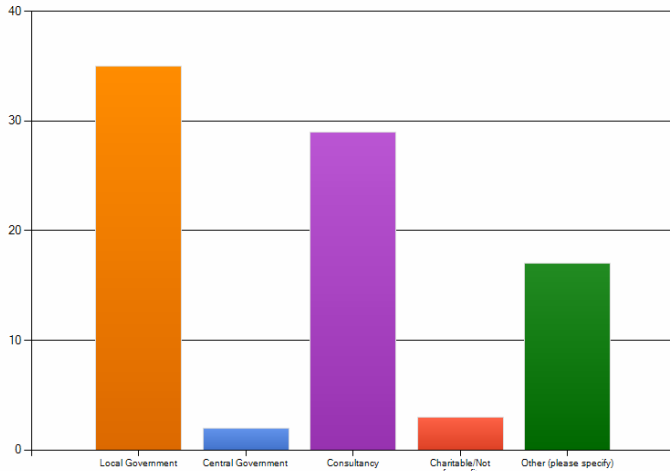
Your location (as defined by RTPI Regions and Nations)



If you run your own practice then how long have you been in business?

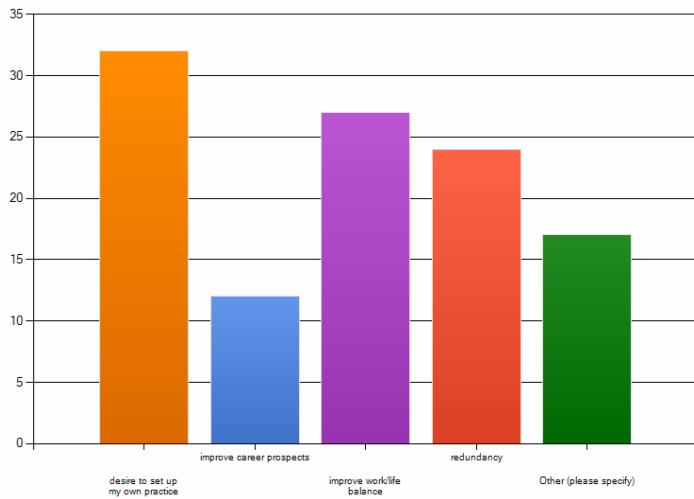


**What was your type of employer before you set up your own practice?**



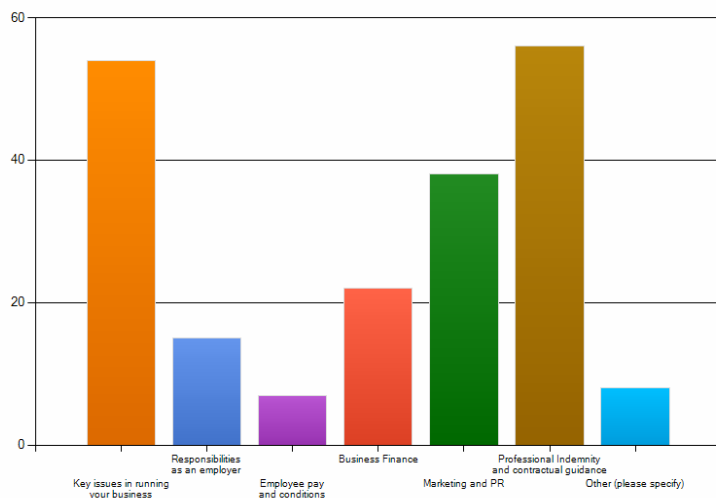
(comments from respondents)  
 • academia, but previously local govt mainly & consultancy  
 • Government Agency • National Park Authority • English Heritage  
 • public utility • solicitors  
 • investment Fund • developer.

**What circumstances led you to becoming an independent planning consultant?**



(comments from respondents)  
 • early retirement • increase earnings • provides the flexibility I need to care for my family  
 • improve career potential • managing work & clients in the way that suits me  
 • to be free to practice town planning away from politics and poor leadership  
 • ability to choose what work I undertook • desire to do more voluntary work for RTPI.

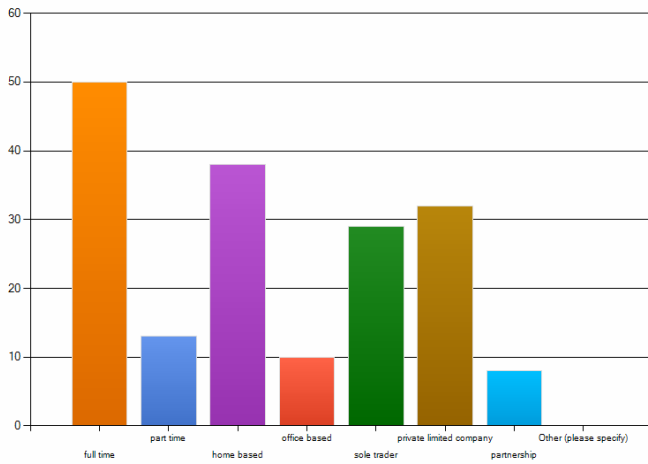
**The RTPI is developing the range of management guidance available to members. Please select the following areas that you feel would be of most use to you either now or in the future.**



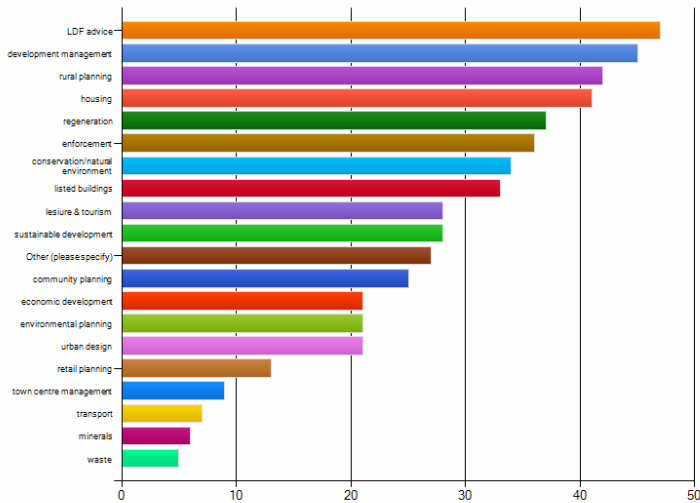
(comments from respondents)  
 • working as a freelancer • all this is available elsewhere so I do not see the need for the RTPI to provide it  
 • what is helpful is the initial guidance for those thinking about private practice / public procurement - an area of great concern  
 • conflict of interest issues with local council's where previously employed  
 • succession planning • The fast changing nature of the consultancy sector  
 • something about procurement and finding new contracts.

## 2. About your practice:

How would you describe your practice?



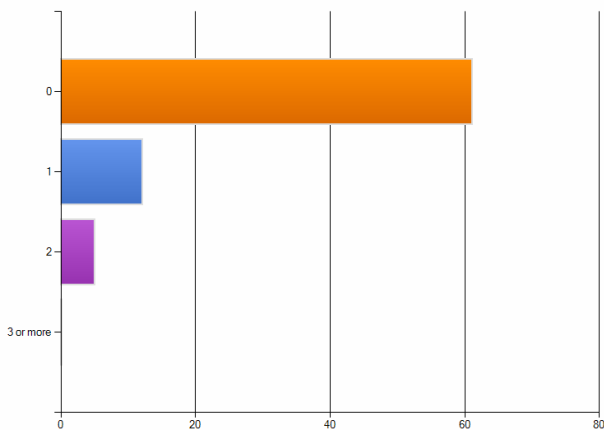
Do you/your practice offer the following services



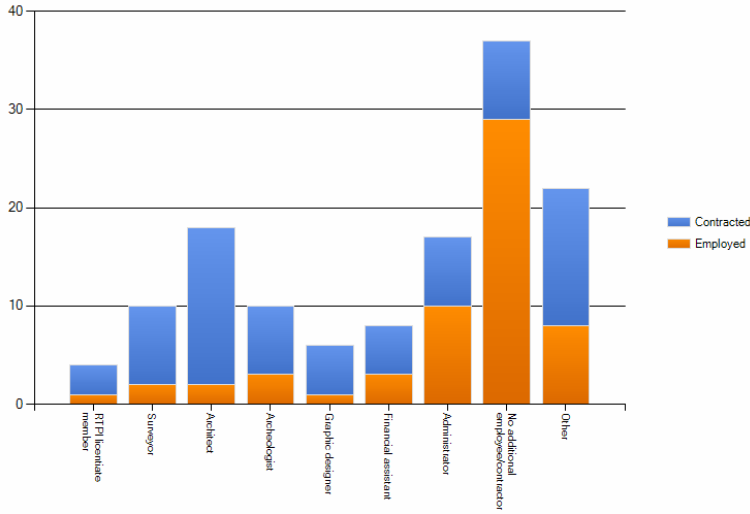
(comments from respondents)

- eco towns
- close liaison with related professional suppliers locally
- mainly appeals and advice on planning applications
- EIA & SEA
- project appraisals and evaluations
- planning and renewable energy
- project management of large or sensitive schemes
- flood risk
- conservation areas
- training, management consultancy
- policy development and review
- developing and delivering training, interim management
- writer on planning and consultant inspector
- training in the planning system
- sport and recreation
- commercial agricultural and horticultural
- planning appraisals, third party representations, appeals etc.
- business development
- conservation of the built environment
- policy analysis.

In addition to yourself, how many professional planners do you employ?



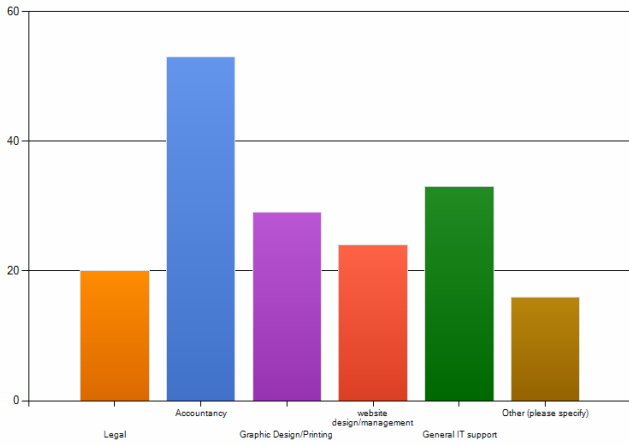
**In addition to professional planners, who else do you employ or contract work to on a frequent basis?**



(comments from respondents)

- housing, regeneration and economic development professional
- ecologist
- transport specialist
- landscape designer
- arboriculturalist
- acoustician
- architectural technician
- landscape architect and various specialist consultants - traffic, noise etc
- Plan drawers more than architects
- civil engineers
- economists
- legal barristers advice
- solicitors advice
- graphic designer
- sustainable development consultant
- market researcher
- energy assessors
- community liaison
- ecologists
- engineers
- soil scientists
- agricultural economists
- agricultural practitioners

**What services do you employ externally to support your business operation?**

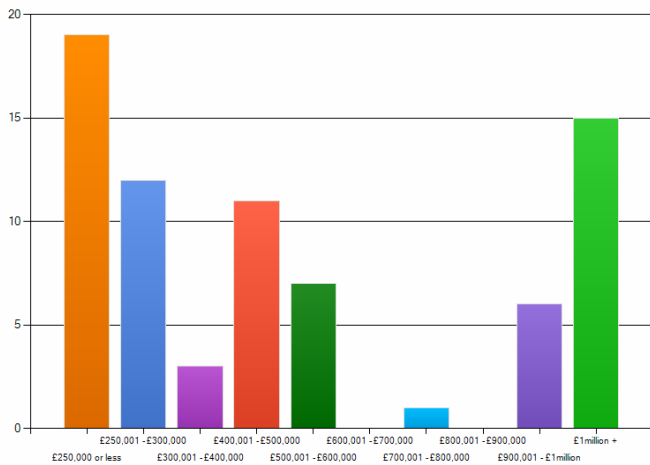


(comments from respondents)

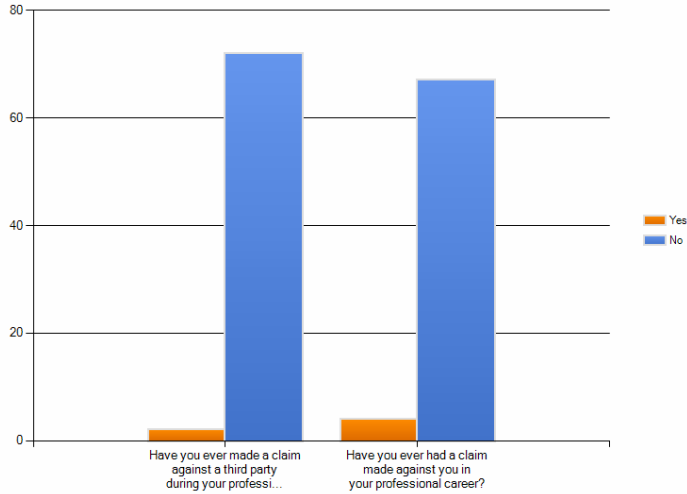
- surveyors
- structural engineers
- marketing
- quantity surveyor
- property surveyor
- structural engineer
- human resources consultant
- GIS support
- barristers
- planning and design consultants
- architectural services
- ecological advice
- Architects

**3. Professional Indemnity Insurance:**

**What level of PII cover do you hold?**



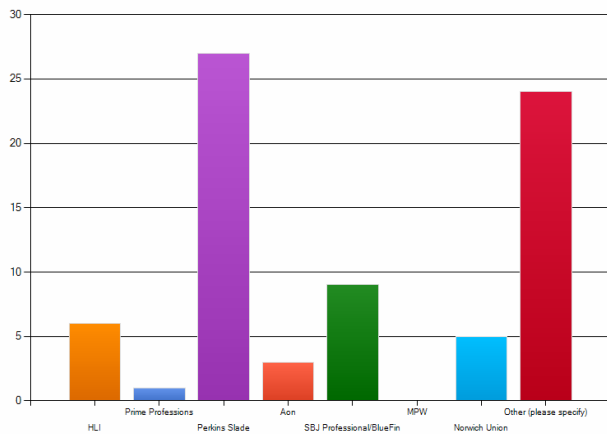
### Any claims history



#### (comments from respondents)

- claim related to incorrect volume calculations on a waste disposal site – a long time ago - I was employed by a consultancy at the time; ultimate outcome not known
- Initial indication of potential claim - not proceeded with
- claim for omitting a defect in a structural survey.

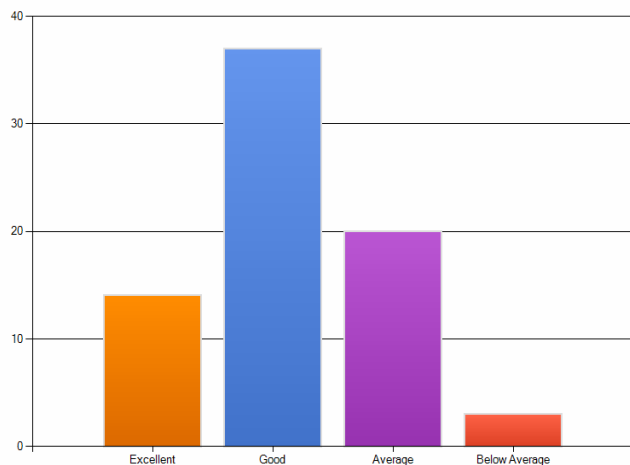
### Which of the following insurance brokers do you use?



#### (comments from respondents)

- Hiscox
- Insurance
- Anchorman Insurance and Catlin Insurance Co
- HSBC Insurance
- JC Roxburgh & Co
- Towergate Risk Solutions
- Professional Insurance Agents Limited
- Alliance Cornhill
- Mparland Finn (via Landscape Institute)
- Rawlins
- Simply Business
- NFU
- Farmers and Mercantile
- Brunel Professional Risk
- Smith and Pinching
- Axa
- Howell Shone.

### How would you rate the quality of service they provide?

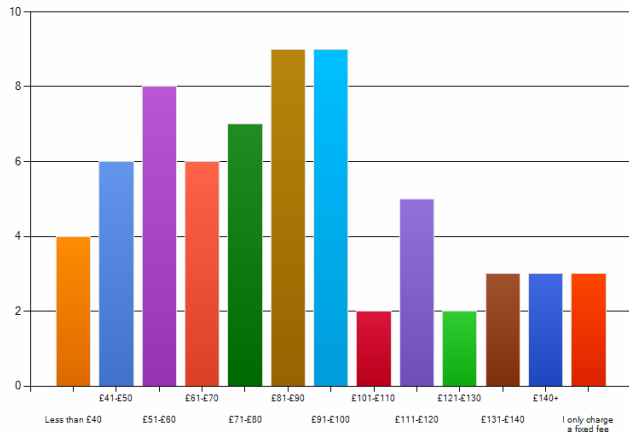


#### (comments from respondents)

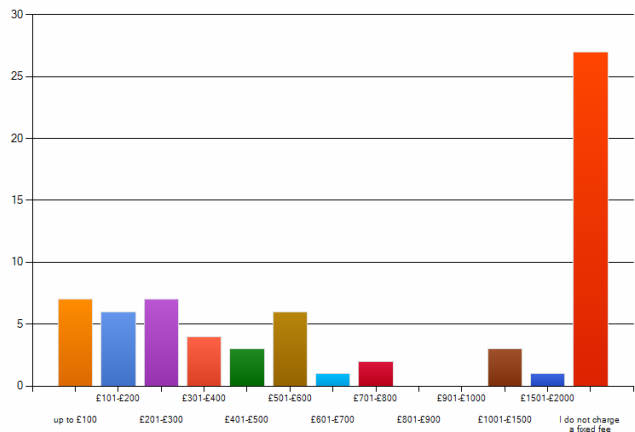
- No way of judging it as I have not made a claim. I pay money, they take it
- I am pretty sure this form of insurance is a cash cow for insurers and agents. I can think of very few circumstances in which a claim could be substantiated against my business.
- The insurers do not have a separate form for RTPI and we are lumped in with surveyors. I think we pay similar rates as surveyors, even though the risks for planners must be significantly lower, particularly for those like my business who specialise in public sector and training work. I would be very pleased if the RTPI could investigate the level of claims against planners and to make a case for lower premiums if indeed the insurance risks are shown to be relatively low
- They seem efficient in dealing with policy renewals, but the test will come if I have a claim against me!
- Pay the annual invoice - no service offered. Consider it a tax imposed by RTPI just to be able to trade
- Broker has become complacent because we have been hooked for years. We are now going for a quotation at two thirds the cost.
- The limited cover is good as goes but quotes for cover over £10,000 income are shocking especially as planning is less a technical exercise and more a political one and any outcomes always possible. By this I mean that in my experience consultants advise on a multiple of possible outcomes. Where is the risk in this?
- Changed broker this year as previous insurer's premiums were uncompetitive.

## 4. Your income:

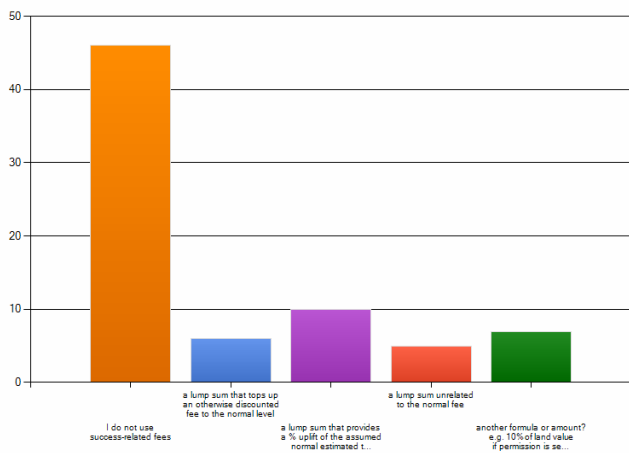
If you charge an hourly rate then please indicate which one you usually charge (or the average if you have a variable rate)



Do you charge a fixed fee for a complete job? If so what is the minimum fee you would charge?



If you include a success-related element to your fees, is it;



(comments from respondents)

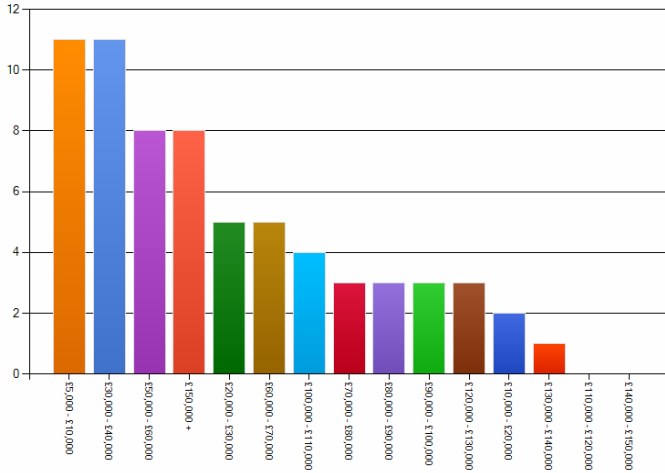
- most frequent option is to suggest 50% of normal fee on "failure", and double normal fee on "success"
- offer job at £1.5 K flat fee /or/ £1K and double the discount as success fee if pp granted (ie another £1K)
- client judgement call on basis of my advice / 25% - 30% bonus fee
- 50% • 5-10% • totally dependant upon the circumstances and research necessary
- I sometimes offer a discounted fee in exchange for twice normal fee on success.

## With what types of work would you normally negotiate success-related fees?

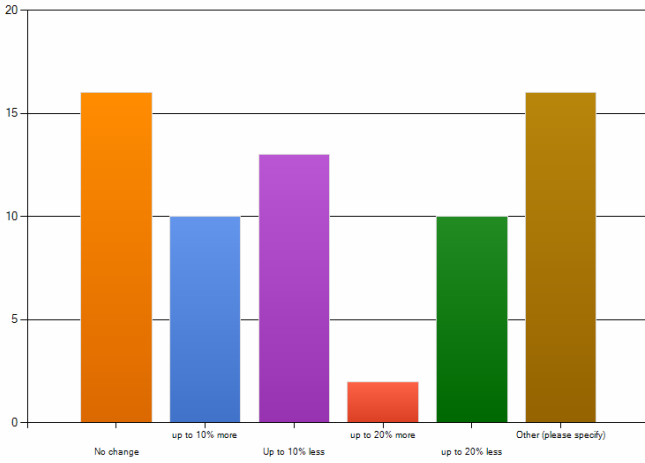
(replies from respondents)

- wherever the client is willing to consider this
- appeals, some applications
- none yet, but may consider for achieving planning permission or reduction in cost of planning obligations
- consents
- residential development / hot food takeaway applications, appeals
- I do not consider that success related fees are appropriate for professional advice
- appeal work, or for success where there is a history of refusals
- speculative schemes where the client can only afford a low hourly rate
- longer term projects eg. linked to success at allocation with LDF
- regeneration projects that take longer than the norm to bring to fruition
- LDF land promotion considered
- none - most people do not want to sign up to increase in fee required
- complex, time consuming and difficult major cases only. Do not include appeal work at all as inappropriate to do so.

Please indicate your net fee income year end 31 March 2009

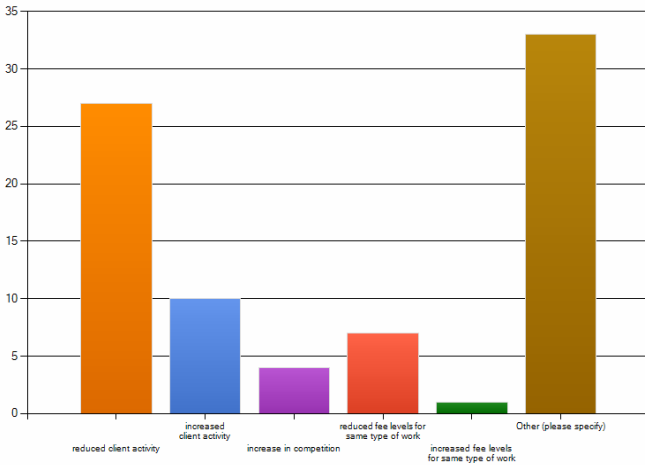


How did this compare with last year's net fee income



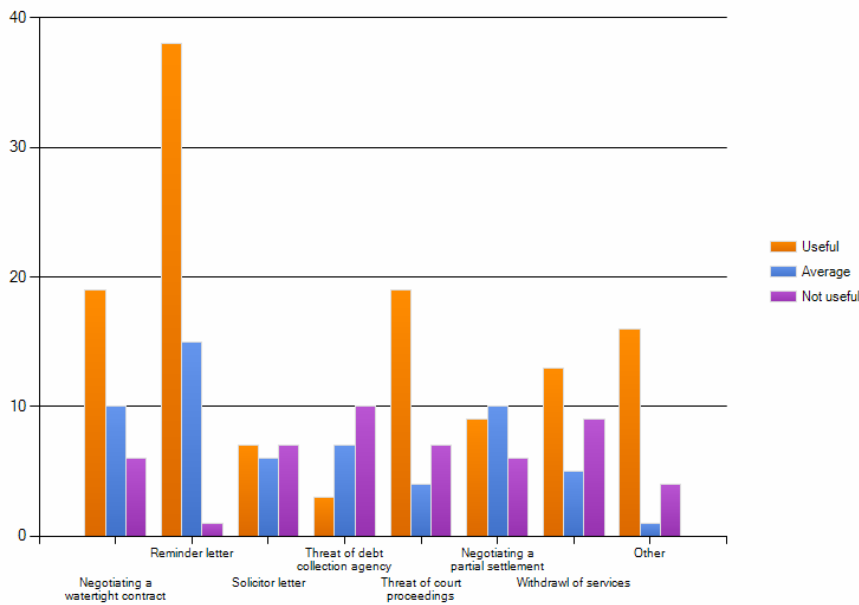
(comments from respondents)  
 • 30% less • first year trading, so no comparison • 25-30% less • some efficiencies being achieved • 2% increase • 50% drop in income

what are the principle reasons for this change?



(comments from respondents)  
 • Move to semi-retirement • no change • annual fee income varies depending on success rate and timing of payouts • recession • Increase in work and additional employee to deal with that work • personal commitments • difference in the type of work noticed in last 12 months and more complexity • decision to not take on so much work • additional staff to undertake the work.

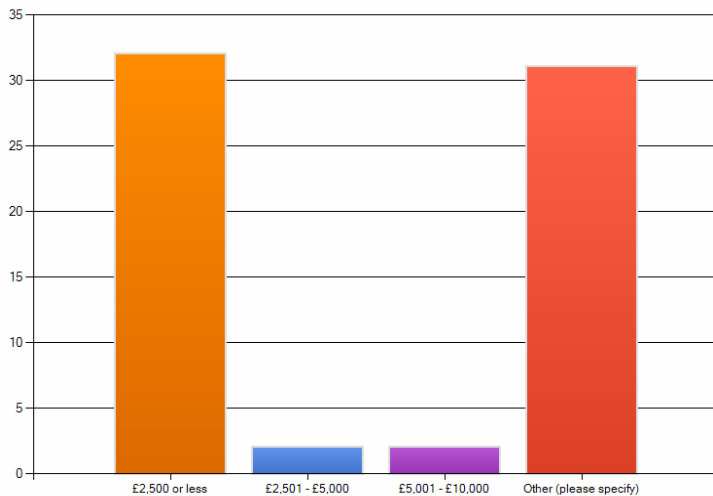
**In the recovery of unpaid fees, which of the following has your practice found most useful?**



(comments from respondents)

- reminder email and complaint to the local authority director of finance (although I received no reply to any of these but did eventually get paid several late fee payments in succession from one local authority)
- the best way is to keep on top of invoicing and use a bookkeeper to chase up first orally and then by letter - this generally avoids bad debts
- threat of publicity can help, depending on the organisation concerned
- clear initial instruction and fee information help prevent this happening
- always recovered fees eventually
- persistent telephone calls
- threat of interest on fees outstanding
- I tend to call a client as soon as payment not made
- the telephone and a personal call to the door - nothing better
- 25% estimated fees always required in advance
- sadly there is no such thing as a watertight contract

**At what level do you consider it not worthwhile pursuing a debt (for example with debt collection agencies or through the small claims court).**



(comments from respondents)

- £200
- Less than £1000
- always pursue
- £1000 or less
- £50
- under £1,000
- there is no level unless the County Court is too far away that it results in a loss
- £1000
- less than £150
- I will always pursue a debt
- we recover all unless bankruptcy has occurred
- under £500
- less than
- £500.00
- all claims are pursued as a matter of principle
- always pursue debtors.

**What impact is the recession having on your business? What would you suggest are your main concerns?**

(comments from respondents)

- Local government (and Irish Government) cut-backs (including HPDG) mean less money available to councils to employ consultants. Also Irish appeal work dried up due to slump in property market. Moreover redundancies in private sector mean staff vacancies in councils are filled so less need for assistance
- A large proportion of my work is for Local Authorities. The reduction in Development Control work load has had a significant impact on my business
- To date no major implications, but as recession continues noting that work coming on-stream is reduced.
- Change in type of work - renegotiating approved scheme etc
- less exciting schemes - only safe bets
- Clients seeking reduced fees
- Bad debts and increasing time spent chasing
- More risk averse, but no shortage of employment opportunities
- Lower levels of development activity are also having an effect on the rate at which new business arrives reduction in development activity and pressure on local government spending
- A generally lower local authority interest or value placed on urban design and conservation.
- Reduced willingness to negotiate good design solutions is sometimes justified by authorities as necessary in order not to discourage investment during difficult times.
- There seems to be less funding for regional training bodies which has greatly reduced the amount of training work available to urban designers
- Loss of local authority clients which were main source of income
- Slower payment: delays to confirmation of instructions
- Considerable reduction in new instructions. Business has kept going so far but the prolonged nature of the downturn is starting to have an impact

- Business is holding up. In recent months have seen a significant improvement - partially due to new business coming from property owners that are struggling and looking to obtain planning permission for development
- Huge; fewer jobs, lower fees quoted to get jobs and harder haggles from clients
- Public sector procurement practices which discriminate against new and small practices. Also, they are designed with little skill to produce huge advantages for long established large practices at higher costs than need be the case. Inflexible and poorly administered 'one size fits all and tick the box' approaches generally adopted.
- Very little, because my clients are not affected by the recession
- I have just set up the practice in April 2009. I cannot therefore answer the above question. I have found that there are plenty small jobs suited to my practice as a sole trader and the LDF is providing interest from landowners wishing to promote sites.
- Creating downward pressure on fee rates, coupled with generally lower volume of work despite increasing information needs for application proposals. Pressure on us to absorb additional work required at no extra cost to client. Fee undercutting by non-RTPI qualified professionals (eg designers and surveyors) carrying out planning work as work in their professions reduces.
- work in the pipeline is much less leading me to believe next year will be worse. Leads are also less.confidence in the housing market and lack of funding.
- Greater need for networking
- There are fewer tendering opportunities. Turnover will be down
- The future impact on public sector finance post election
- Much less work and uncertainty about prospects for recovery. Difficult to predict timing of new work and fees having to be reduced to secure new work.
- Lack of development activity and retaining work in-house rather than seeking external consultancy inputs
- more smaller domestic work and more enforcement - houses in gardens extensions conversion to flats
- The recession is not having a direct impact on business at present. My client base is focused on public and voluntary sectors and other factors such as uncertainty over European and other sources of funding support have a greater bearing.
- No adverse impact. Business is continuing to grow despite the current financial climate.
- Securing work in new markets, advertising costs, insurance costs are all our main concerns.
- Reduced client activity and reduced scope of assignments. Some training sessions cancelled due to suppressed demand.
- I have planned for the downturn over 18 months ago, and altered my service offer/mix in advance. Clients welcome the fresh modern approach compared to some very dull and staid competitors.
- New modern 'products' have been developed in house by trial and error and that now places me at a competitive advantage. My network is growing as I provide value for money and service with the new offer. I have built out the specialised part of the business too as a diversification.
- I decided to take on some public sector work to bolster me through the change period but I do not want to do this too long. It has also been a learning curve though working in a different public team environment again. Its good experience and it gives me more business ideas for the private clients.
- Dealing with the interface with Public Sector planners is becoming worse and this is a constant complaint from other professionals and clients. However, on the bright side it allows my business to flourish and plenty of job satisfaction getting results.
- I think there is a growing call for experienced private professionals. However, the profile of the Institute needs to alter to reflect the work the self employed do on our own and in teams, rather than being hung up too much on public sector which will have to seriously contract in the next 3 years. The independent has to be given more support.
- Delayed payments, thus affecting cash flow. Some clients are now on 90 days payments and many on 60 days, whereas my Terms are 30 days.
- More developers want us to do planning work upfront before committing to paying a fee. As a relatively new business our flow of work has remained steady and at present we are not particularly concerned.
- I have not noticed much change. Less housing projects but more educational work and I am less choosy about the projects I take on. Fewer larger projects around but I can more or less make up with smaller ones.
- My business is picking up now but some regular clients, esp architects practices, have gone very quiet. I have used it to turn the emphasis of my business more distinctly towards historic conservation and currently have a contract as a conservation officer in a LPA three days per week.

## Do you have a view as to how long a recovery will take in your sector? How long do you think it will take to return to the levels of previous activity?

(comments from respondents)

- am budgeting for 12 to 18 months
- improvements autumn 2009 expected as residential and leisure clients are looking to purchase new land / late 2010 at earliest for full recovery, but this is aggravated at present by coinciding with an awful lot of delay on LDF site allocations, reducing client confidence on development prospects of existing sites where funds are tied up / at least 18 months / 2.5 years / 2 years / gradual recovery over next 2-3 years...
- I feel that local authority planning, and therefore the client base for much of my work will not return to previous levels for 5 years. If a conservative government gets into office then the delay may be longer or shorter depending on whether they rediscover community and environmental values in planning through David Cameron's quality of life agenda, or continue with the simplistic new labour regeneration approach of getting rid of 'constraints' on economic growth that in my view characterises this government.
- I would hope things to be better by the spring
- With likely reductions in local authority expenditure, expect long-term decline (5-10 years) in work in this sector.
- I expect to see some positive movement during 2010, but may not be until mid-year. I doubt there will be a recovery to previous levels until well into 2011, assuming no other issues arise. The General Election may stall progress for a time.
- I have found that clients are now used to working within a market where values have fallen. Now that house prices have bottomed out, particularly in the £1 million and above price bracket, developers are back in the market as they can earn more building than through other investments. The banks are still proving difficult and employees do not appear to understand the development process. They are reluctant to lend, even where the client is providing significant funding himself, and when they do lend, the rates are prohibitive and security requirements over the top.
- At least another 12 to 18 months - probably longer.
- Although the level of development is down, my core work in minerals and waste planning is holding up well.
- 2 years, another dip due this Nov.
- There is likely to be a long and slow recovery, especially if people continue to ignore some basic economic realities. We have been here before. Life goes on. There is still a pressing need for the right type of investment in the right places.
- Cut back in regional budgets may well be permanent.
- I am only involved in a small amount of small scale work and have not noticed any change.
- At least a year - and things will change as much work is required up front by the new planning system so the activity could start a lot sooner with preparation to submit applications.
- 2-3 years
- 3-4 years
- We only work for the public sector so we don't think we have bottomed out yet. Recovery may take years.
- 3 years, as we have not seen the plateau of job losses feeding through yet into the wider economy.
- 12-18 months.
- Big opportunity to review skills and diversify client base, if survive.
- For some work 3-4 years but for commissions involving large scale developments over 5 years
- This year's performance so far has improved and I would say is back to former levels. This is not directly related to the state of the economy.
- Could be up to 5 yrs but maybe less.
- I am not sure matters will return.

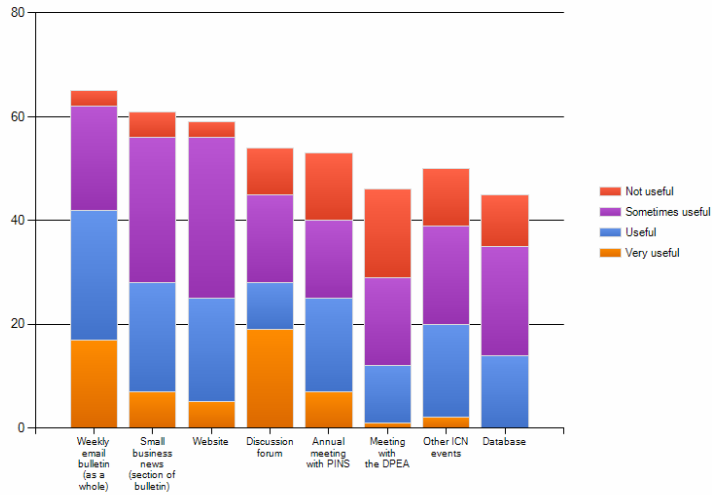
## How can the RTPI better support independent consultants during the recession?

(comments from respondents)

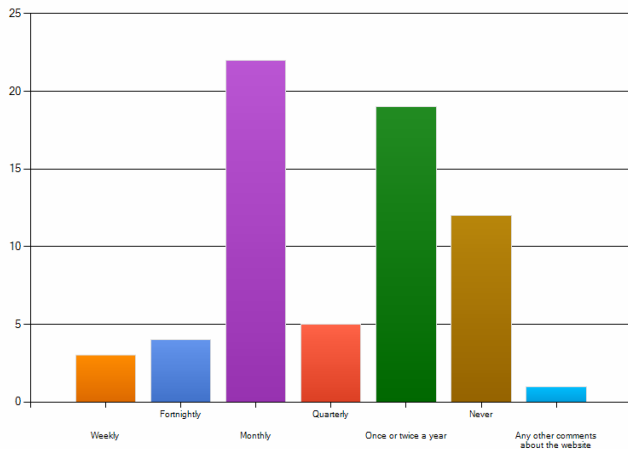
- Assistance with marketing - including free entry into RTPI consultants' register
- Provision of more low cost training
- Awareness of legislation changes that may result in potential work eg information regarding recent extensions to the life of planning permissions legislation
- Reduced charges negotiated for training and conferences
- Raise profile to emphasis value and skills of Consultants
- Regular and timely advice and free training opportunities not necessarily in core hours
- Promote to the government the value of planning and design as a means of creating value in places as a whole. Promote the full planning spectrum which balances and maximises benefits from community, environment and economic interests as a means of enhancing the quality of life of citizens as well as a means of adding economic value. Explain that well planned and designed places deliver higher economic returns and increasing rental values year on year because they build quality into the intangible 'whole' place rather than simply provide a sequence of quick and easy investment opportunities.
- Make a stand against the disastrous waste of resources and destruction of communities that has arisen as a result of the Housing market renewal Pathfinder programme.
- Continuing support for free/low cost CPD/networking as currently provided through networks.
- Clear advertising opportunities; wider publicity of planning in the private sector
- I do not believe that the RTPI can do much to affect fee income for consultants at my level. However, information regarding new legislation etc, and analysis of it, is always useful to consultants working in relative isolation.
- Can't do much about the economy but could promote planning consultants services in appropriate forums/press etc when relevant
- Use its best endeavours to simplify the planning process. Current complexity and requirements for excessive information is clearly preventing some applications coming forward.
- Keep providing tips on business, etc via the independent consultants web site.
- Tell Planning Aid to punt tightfisted but monied clients to us and to not help everyone only the truly needy. Run the Yellow pages adverts for free.
- I think that the RTPI is doing a good job and have found them to be helpful. The best support that you can offer is to tackle stupidity like public sector tenders asking for things like inappropriate levels of PI cover.
- Being available for advice
- Negotiation of discounts for external non planning professional advice.
- In Scotland it is very demanding at present to keep up with the new legislation as well as building the business - the Scottish Govt web site provides all the legislation but it may be helpful to have a summary pulled together.
- Increased promotion of the relative skills and advantages (and potential long-term cost savings) that can result from the use of qualified RTPI professionals at all stages of the development process.
- Support, but don't try to take over, regional CPD programmes.
- Provide better advice and guidance...
- reduce the admin hoops we have to jump. lobby for a simpler validation system for planning applications
- Publishing a discreet and an on-going list of emerging and draft policy guidance updated regularly.
- Continue as you are.
- Encourage local authorities to maintain high standards of environmental management.
- Remind Councils that smaller professional practices can offer cost effective rates and seniority than larger multi-disciplinary firms.
- Promote short term contract work opportunities.
- Networking events / publishing a skills and availability register
- By developing a more demanding professional code regarding the quality of advice - so that there is a clearer demarcation between Chartered Town Planners and the rest - so the professional product is more clearly defined as with lawyers and architects
- promoting the need for sound commercial planning advice - promoting skills in enforcement issues as LPA planners look for work!
- As my business is not focused on traditional land use planning it is difficult to identify types of support that could be relevant.
- Ensure that the RTPI is a voice for all, not just LPAs and large consultancies.
- Marketing training and advice.
- Best practice case study business examples - webcasts, youtube videos as well as emails etc.
- Advice on marketing may be useful.
- Negotiate a reasonable PI cover
- assist with fee recovery advice, with standard letters etc
- Look at the self employed they are the hardest hit now and are the future of the profession in terms of flexibility, new cutting edge standards and employment for others. The big boys have too much of the action but quickly become yesterday.
- continue to provide a dialogue in understanding mutual problems and opportunities promoting the use of consultants as part of the professional body of planners with a range of experience and qualifications
- Emphasising the message that early engagement of the right planning consultant enables the project to progress more swiftly and saves money.
- Clearly we need a voice to champion the work we do, the RTPI probably being the best placed to do this.
- Promoting the profession, organising affordable and regular CPD courses.
- up front media involvement
- suggest LPAs consider adopting policies and guidance that facilitate good development and acknowledge creativity and local distinctiveness
- Promote LA p/t or interim work
- don't pester us for PII or CPD record details etc. make CPD events far more affordable to sole traders - RTPI events are very, very expensive. recognise that more than half RTPI members now work in the private sector and aim content of Planning magazine towards this fact. take criticisms that we make on the chin! Higher profile, shorter, cheap events on a regional basis, interview features in planning magazine?
- It does a pretty good job already
- having more affordable meetings/seminars and importantly encouraging others to do the same. I can't afford to attend the widely advertised Northern Regen Summit - and the free seminars aren't always relevant.
- Could publicise the availability of advice to members in particular aspects of planning
- Reduce the fee burden for RTPI membership (for instance cut the membership costs say by half for those that participate in RTPI activities) and also stop promoting courses that cost hundreds of pounds. It must be remembered that to attend a day course costs a huge amount of money, not just in the entrance fee and travel but in terms of lost working time
- Do what we are doing and hold down costs such as subscriptions and reduce the costs of courses etc.
- Commercial advice

## 5. Independent Consultants Network

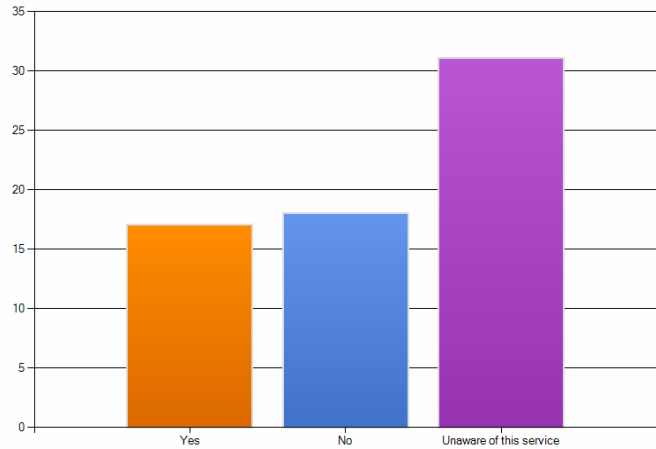
Please let us know what you think of the Independent Consultants Network's (ICN) services:



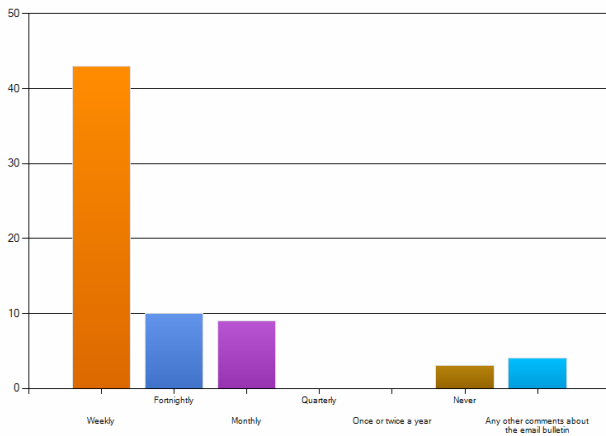
How often do you use the ICN website?



Do you access 'Information and Support for Consultants' through the RTPI's Planners in the Workplace Service?(www.rtpi.org.uk/member\_services/piwpp/)



How often do you read your email bulletin?



(comments from respondents)  
 • Good to see points picked up from the discussion forum  
 • looking forward to seeing it  
 • much of advice is stating the obvious

## Please let us have any suggestions for improvements to the ICN and the services it offers. What would you like from the Network?

(comments from respondents)

- More focused town planning business related topics
- More opportunity to contribute views as a network group to consultations on procedural changes and emerging strategies. We have wide experience and a lot of enthusiasm, and like to be asked our views.
- Might be useful if information was tailored more specifically to the type of business the company is involved in. Recognise that this would be costly to execute.
- Promotion of the good value that small consultancies can bring to clients.
- Asking larger consultancies to support their smaller cousins with CPD, advice, how to market etc (would help with networking)
- Recognition that freelancing with LPA's has also been hit by application downturn.
- Local networking events
- a campaign to get fair insurance rates for professional indemnity.
- Persuade local authorities to drop their punitively high thresholds for PI insurance cover, as these penalise small businesses. For example, some authorities require £5,000,000 insurance whereas a small practitioner might well only have 300,000
- More interaction with branches to run local CPD events
- I would like the ICN to keep me up to date with emerging legislation and current topics.
- I find the discussion forum very useful, but not much else.
- I liked the idea of meeting the Planning inspectorate (recently arranged) and think that the ICN can provide opportunities for small practices to meet with officialdom
- Special section for Scottish planning
- email bulletin is excellent and my main contact with the ICN. Otherwise, I have no particular needs/requirements
- Daily updates by email rather than weekly.
- Better publicity and user-friendliness for accessing the ICN website.
- Business development and operational support through the provision of advice
- email all new circulars
- Good as is.
- I would really like an on-line database/library of up to date planning legislation, government advice and guidance etc.
- Less repetition across other Network newsletters. Make the RTPi website less clunky, more manageable and I can't see why we should have to sign in - it's not as if there are any state secrets!
- Best Practice Guidance / Debates on LDFs and Sustainable Development.
- Marketing advice.
- Work tender opportunities. 36. I feel that creating opportunities for sole practitioners to network and share experiences would be most useful
- This questionnaire has raised my awareness of services offered. I will utilise more.
- it always seems to be london / south centric
- More frequent short seminars and meetings on a wider variety of planning topics. Although 2 hrs is a bit short (consider extending to 3 hrs), I find these sessions useful.
- It works well and the members email forum is very helpful
- More of a campaign for private practice and more people willing to air their views about it without being handbagged by the public sector types. Maybe we need our own newspaper separate from the RTPi which is a lot more focused on business people than Planning. I find its relevance diminishing in my practice week by week. I find out things from other sources first which is terrible for the profession.
- Increased frequency of CPD events, especially on Legal issues etc.



**RTPi**

mediation of space · making of place

Royal Town Planning Institute  
41 Botolph Lane  
London  
EC3R 8DL  
[www.rtpi.org.uk](http://www.rtpi.org.uk)

Registered Charity No 262865  
Registered Charity number in Scotland SC 037841

© 2009