



**RTPI Cymru**  
Royal Town Planning Institute  
Sefydliad Cynllunio Trefol Brenhinol

**RTPI  
Research  
Paper**

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# **THE BIG CONVERSATION:**

**The well-being of planners and the impact  
on the planning system in Wales**



**RTPI champions the power of planning in creating prosperous places and vibrant communities. We have over 27,000 members in the private, public, academic and voluntary sectors and over 1,300 members in Wales. Using our expertise and research we bring evidence and thought leadership to shape planning policies and thinking, putting the profession at the heart of society's big debates. We set the standards of planning education and professional behaviour that give our members, wherever they work in the world, a unique ability to meet complex economic, social environmental and cultural challenges.**

## **Acknowledgements**

**RTPI Cymru is grateful to everyone who engaged in the Big Conversation and shared their views and experiences.**

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# Executive Summary

Planning plays a crucial role in delivering a wide range of valuable outcomes – addressing the climate and biodiversity emergencies, economic development and supporting communities across Wales. However, it is widely recognised that Local Planning Authorities (LPAs), along with the wider public sector, are struggling to meet expectations and unlock the value planning has to offer with the current investment.

Responding to a request by Julie James MS, Minister for Climate Change, to understand the well-being of planners in Wales operating under challenging circumstances, RTPI Cymru has explored the issues, impacts, causes and potential solutions to support the profession deliver the planning system in Wales, through the Big Conversation. The Big Conversation aims to better understand the pressures being faced and undertake a health check of the profession in Wales; it provides a detailed evidence base on which to take action. It provides indicators of action which could be taken by a range of stakeholders.

The Big Conversation is focused on the well-being of those working in and delivering the planning system; it is not a review of the planning system or its policies but does reflect on changes which could support the well-being issues identified and explore ways to alleviate pressures.

RTPI Cymru recognises that fully addressing the shortfall in investment and budgets for planning at the current time is not straightforward and there is a need to consider wider additional solutions.

As previously identified by Audit Wales and Senedd Cymru's Public Accounts Committee the workload of LPAs has increased alongside significant budget cuts. The Big Conversation found high levels of planners being overstretched in their work and this was having an impact on their well-being. 61% of all respondents reported being overstretched at least several times a week, 74% of LPA officers felt overstretched; a staggering 21% of all respondents felt they were overstretched all of the time.

The need for planning to become more resilient as a profession was identified and particularly the resilience of planning officers in relation to handling difficult situations and high expectations.

Whilst the Big Conversation identified weaknesses, it is also clear that services continue to be delivered and planners take pride in their role and they value what they are delivering.

A wide variety of issues were identified as the reason for the increase in workload. Reoccurring themes include staff resources and recruitment difficulties linked to pay and rewards, the expectations of developers, their agents, the public and politicians, the broadening of planning and process requirements.

Availability of other specialist officers including ecologists, highways and drainage officers, was also identified as having an impact on workload. Staff resource issues of Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales (NRW) were also raised as impacting on the delivery of services. There was also a suggestion that the private sector was under pressure and this was resulting in poorer quality designs and applications, further impacting on the workload of LPAs.

A lack of investment in digital resources to support planning delivery and a move to hybrid and remote working were also raised as factors.

There were alarming levels of abuse, partly encouraged through social media, reported by those working in planning, as well as intimidation, raising safety issues. The increasing levels of formal and informal complaints is having an impact on workload and time resource.

A range of solutions were proposed which are centred around increasing public sector resources to support planning, improving the understanding of planning to support engagement and appreciation by others of the role of planning. This included providing better information for the public, but also targeting senior officials in local authorities, politicians and other public sector bodies. Exploring opportunities to grow the profession and encourage new entrants, as well as providing skills training across the profession were also suggested. Investment in digital planning is an area which needs addressing. Although the Big Conversation was not a review of the planning system, there were some suggestions for amendments to the operation of the system to alleviate pressures. Regional planning was suggested as a way of sharing evidence gathering and pooling specialist resources. Finally, sharing good practice was an area raised which to provide a source of learning and development for individuals and organisations.

This report of the Big Conversation will be provide to Welsh Government for their response. The RTPI is also able to respond to some of the issues and provide support and we will be responding through our own action plan.

# 1. Introduction

Planning plays a crucial role in delivering a wide range of valuable outcomes – addressing the climate and biodiversity emergencies, economic development and supporting communities across Wales. However, it is widely recognised that Local Planning Authorities (LPAs), along with the wider public sector, are struggling to meet expectations and unlock the value planning has to offer with the current investment.

Responding to a request by Julie James MS, Minister for Climate Change, to understand the well-being of planners in Wales operating under challenging circumstances, RTPI Cymru has explored the issues, impacts, causes and potential solutions to support the profession deliver the planning system in Wales, through the Big Conversation. The Big Conversation aims to better understand the pressures being faced and undertake a health check of the profession in Wales; it provides a detailed evidence base on which to take action. It provides indicators of action which could be taken, not just by the RTPI, but also Welsh Government and other stakeholders.

RTPI Cymru recognises that fully addressing the shortfall in investment and budgets for planning at the current time is not straightforward and there is a need to consider wider additional solutions.

The Big Conversation is focused on the well-being of those working in and delivering the planning system; it is not a review of the planning system or its policies but does reflect on changes which could support the well-being issues identified and explore ways to alleviate pressures.

## 2. Methodology / What we did

The principal source for investigating the issues has been through a survey. The survey explores the experiences of working in the planning system today and was aimed at the whole profession.

The aim was to have a wide response across Wales, different sectors and parts of the profession, and also those that are not RTPI members. It was promoted to all RTPI members in Wales via e-mail and in our e-bulletins. Targeted e-mails were also sent to PEDW, Welsh Government, planning consultancies, and POSW (Planning Officers Society for Wales) to encourage engagement.

The survey was supplemented by roundtables and discussions with planners across Wales, including Young Planners Cymru.

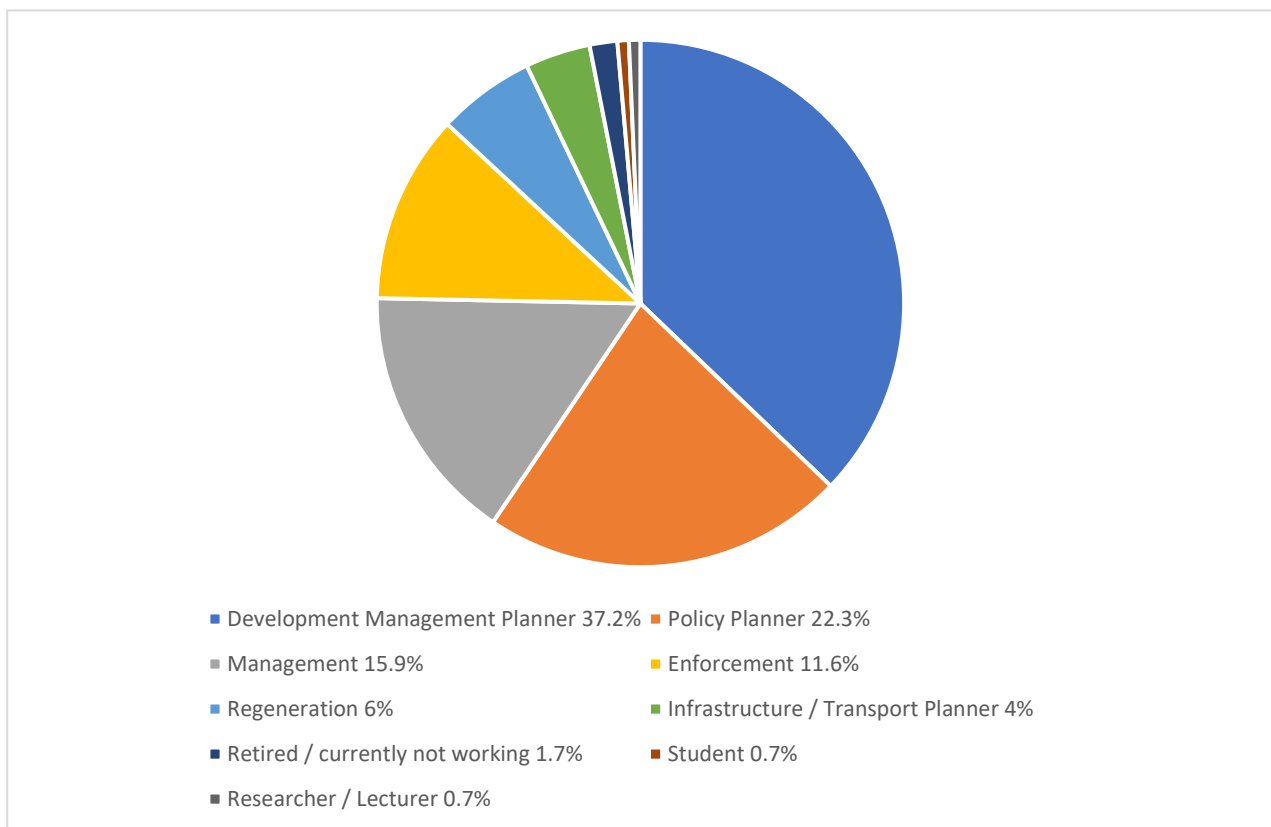
The survey, which was available in Welsh and English, ran from the beginning of August until the 9<sup>th</sup> September. We had a very good response to the survey and incredibly valuable information has been shared.

The response rate can be summarised as follows:

- Total of 209 responses (7 in Welsh)
- The average time taken to respond was around 40 minutes, demonstrating the effort responders put into their responses
- 18% of respondents were not RTPI members (reaching beyond the RTPI membership)

- 15% of our members in Wales have responded – this is a high rate compared to other surveys we have run and other similar surveys
- This rises to 21%, if you take out those members not currently working such as students and retired members (it is less relevant for them).
- 23% of respondents are in the private sector, 63% in Local Planning Authorities, 9% in other public sector, 3% 'other' (mainly third sector) and 2% not working, which reflects the RTPI membership.
- The geographic spread of responses is in line with the general population. (18% all-Wales, 11% Mid Wales, 20% North Wales, 37% South East Wales, 14% South West Wales).

In terms of roles, the spread of respondents was as follows:



The response rate gives us confidence that the survey results are reliable and representative.

We also note a meeting of the Executive Board of Wrexham County Borough Council held on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2022, discussed a Planning Performance Review<sup>1</sup> undertaken by the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) with support from the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA). This report was commissioned in response to concerns raised by Elected Members and some local residents regarding the Council's performance in the area of planning. We have reflected on the key findings of this report where it provides evidence for the Big Conversation also.

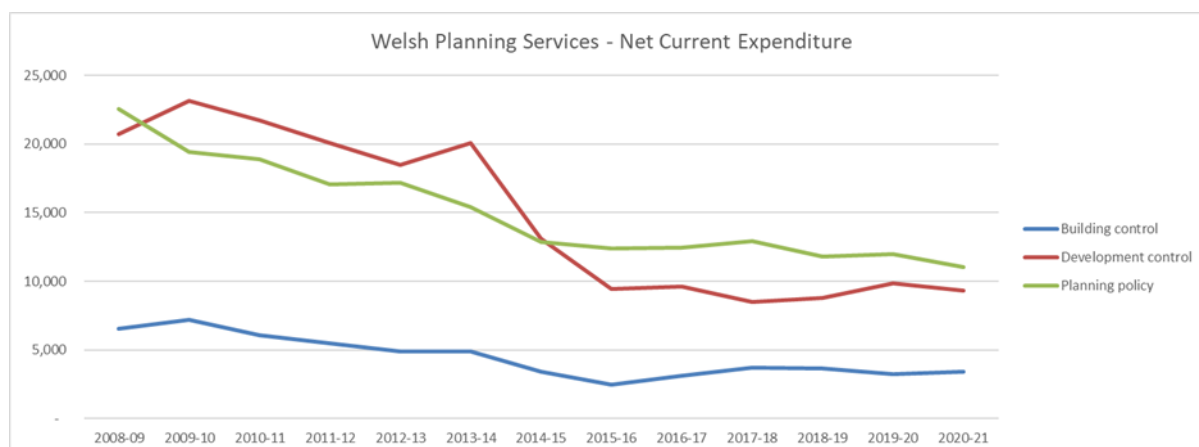
<sup>1</sup> <https://moderngov.wrexham.gov.uk/documents/s24598/Item%2011.pdf?LLL=0>

### 3. Background

For the planning system in Wales to fulfil its statutory duties and deliver quality placemaking there is a critical need for more investment. LPA departments are significantly underfunded, and research shows that planning services are suffering most severely of all local government services due to budget cuts.

In 2019, Audit Wales published a report on a national review of the planning system in Wales. The review focused on all key functions of LPAs - planning policy, development control, and building management. Overall, the review highlighted a planning system that was struggling to deliver against the ambitions of the Planning (Wales) Act 2015 and to implement national policy. Specifically in terms of development management, the review found that capacity was stretched, planning authorities were struggling to deliver key functions, and there was limited progress on improving resilience.

Analysis by Audit Wales<sup>2</sup> shows that “*all planning services – policy, development and building control – have, since 2008-09, seen significant cuts in expenditure with budgets having fallen by 50% in real terms, considering inflation. Net expenditure has fallen from £45 million in 2008-09 to £22.8 million in 2017-18. The biggest cut has been to development control budgets where spend has reduced by 59%.*”



Senedd Cymru / Welsh Parliament's Public Accounts Committee published its report into The Effectiveness of Local Planning Authorities in Wales<sup>3</sup> in June 2020. The report stated:

**“Our overall conclusion is that Planning is critical but at present it is not able to deliver the aspirations of the Planning, Environment and Well-being of Future Generations Acts because of reductions in resources.”**

The Committee reached the same conclusions as the Auditor General for Wales and the issue that planning services are not adequately resourced to undertake their important role. This is a critical issue and has increased in importance in the response needed to address the economic and

<sup>2</sup> [https://audit.wales/sites/default/files/planning-services-2019-full-report-english\\_5.pdf](https://audit.wales/sites/default/files/planning-services-2019-full-report-english_5.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://business.senedd.wales/documents/s102542/Committee%20Report%20-%20Effectiveness%20of%20Local%20Planning%20Authorities%20in%20Wales%20June%202020%20PDF%201196KB.pdf>



place-based inequalities caused and highlighted by the pandemic. The lockdown situation has also drawn wider attention to the positive value of our local areas and communities, lower levels of pollution and the benefits of walking and cycling. Planning can help retain and embed these benefits.

RTPI Cymru welcomed the Committee's attention to the need to raise the status of and recognising the central importance of planning to the well-being of future generations.

## 3.1 Recent RTPI research outside Wales

### 3.1.1 Scotland

RTPI Scotland its published analysis<sup>4</sup> of resourcing in the Scottish planning service in 2022. This reflects the position that planning authorities' budgets have diminished in real terms by 38% since 2009. The key findings are:

- The planning service is the one of the most severely affected of all local government services in terms of budgets with a reduction of 38% since 2010;
- A quarter of planning department staff have been cut since 2009;
- Planning application fees do not cover the costs of processing planning applications;
- The new Planning Act has introduced 49 unfunded duties to local authorities which could cost between £12.1m and £59.1m over ten years to implement;
- It is estimated that over the next 10 to 15 years the planning sector will have demand for an additional 680 - 730 entrants into the sector; and
- The planning workforce has both demographic and succession challenges in the short, medium and long term.

### 3.1.2 Enforcement in England

In England, at the request of the UK Government's Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities the RTPI published research<sup>5</sup> in 2022, with the aim of attaining a clearer understanding of what is happening on the ground with planning enforcement.

The research highlighted a crisis in planning enforcement with unmanageable workloads and insufficient staff, leading to an inability to meet public demand.

## 3.2 Opportunities and Challenges

We asked what the greatest opportunities and challenges were for the profession and planners in Wales, we have summarised these below to help set the context for the Big Conversation.

### 6.1 Opportunities

Planning in Wales has the opportunity to create positive and proactive change and to encourage better quality design and more environmentally conscious construction.

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<sup>4</sup> [www.rtpi.org.uk/research/2022/december/resourcing-the-planning-service-key-trends-and-findings-2022/](http://www.rtpi.org.uk/research/2022/december/resourcing-the-planning-service-key-trends-and-findings-2022/)

<sup>5</sup> [www.rtpi.org.uk/research/2022/november/planning-enforcement-resourcing/](http://www.rtpi.org.uk/research/2022/november/planning-enforcement-resourcing/)

To become recognised as the leaders for promoting and delivery of the Well-being of Future Generations Act and raising the planning profile.

Welsh Government Ministers value the contribution planning makes to their agenda.

Having a new younger workforce will bring a new dynamic.

To deliver fantastic schemes, homes, communities, improve infrastructure, better communities, provide jobs.

## 6.2 Challenges

Under-resourced LPAs including the recruitment and retention of competent officers, making it attractive to young people and salaries.

Raising climate change / nature recovery to the top agenda in national and regional policy.

Raising the profile of the profession especially with local politicians and elected representatives who do not understand the planning system and do not seem to value it and the negative press.

Passing experience on to young colleagues.

Consistency of decision making and improving development.

Stakeholders too unaccountable for their actions and implications it has on the planning process.

Public perception of what the role is and this insufficient interest in people joining the profession and maintaining a career in planning.

The 'drifting of knowledgeable and experienced staff into the private sector'.

# 4. How is your well-being?

At the heart of the Minister's request for the Big Conversation was the well-being of those delivering the planning system.

**“To identify actions to protect and strengthen the profession to be able to carry out the vitally important work we ask of it.” Julie James MS, Minister for Climate Change**

Respondents shared with us their experiences and clearly set out the challenging environment they are operating in.

**“Last two years [during the pandemic] have been extremely challenging and have left their psychological scars.”**

The survey found high levels of planners being overstretched in their work and this was having an impact on their well-being. 61% of all respondents reported being overstretched at least several times a week, 74% of LPA officers felt overstretched; a staggering 21% of all respondents felt they were overstretched all of the time. Just 9% of respondents do not feel overstretched and a further 6% who whilst overstretched, liked it that way.

**“A combination of a reduction in staff, an increase in unnecessary correspondence, unnecessary workload / complexity in some simple processes.”**

**“I can’t really express how difficult planning is as a career at the moment. It used to be enjoyable and now it feels like walking through treacle (even for applications which should be simple), due to ridiculous decisions being made by local authorities (largely councillors, not officers) and Welsh Government.”**

In the current situation with the cost of living crisis etc. concern was raised which will not be exclusive to the planning profession:

**“The worry of paying for the bills and working is overbearing at times.”**

The need for planning to become more resilient as a profession was identified and particularly the resilience of planning officers in relation to handling difficult situations and high expectations.

## 5. Findings

The effects of the budget cuts and impact on those working in planning in Wales are multi-faceted, and we set out the principle ones raised in the Big Conversation here.

### 5.1 Workload

**“There is a desperate need for solutions to address workload issues.”**

The majority of respondents reported an increase in their workload and remit in the past two years. The survey reports to significant periods of time where most respondents are unable to carry out their work. The majority of LPA respondents (74%) feel overstretched several or more times a week. This is less of a case with those in other sectors, especially private consultancy respondents who mostly felt overstretched on an occasional basis. Predominantly respondents aged between 45 and 64 years’ experience being overstretched all the time, which is more than other age groups; this may be down to experience and more senior roles which have increased responsibilities or wider portfolios.

The data clearly shows those working in enforcement are most likely to feel overstretched all of the time (37.1%), followed by Development Management Planners (29.2%) then Management (27.1%).

North, South East and South West Wales respondents saw the highest number of those who are overstretched all the time. Whereas those in Mid Wales had a doubling of the percentage of respondents seeing an increase in the past six months. It is to be noted that all Regions across Wales are overstretched at least occasionally and often more frequently.

Across all sectors, it can be seen that there are significant periods where there is not enough time to carry out workloads. 20% of LPA respondents never have enough time and 50% have significant periods where there is not enough time.

There seems to be a common pattern that the workload has increased over the past two years for about 60% of the respondents. This points towards the pandemic and the recovery, on top of periods of austerity and public sector budget constraints.

There is also a clear lack of sufficient time for Welsh Government bodies to carry out their work. The capacity of the Planning Directorate of Welsh Government was highlighted as an issue, with a reduced number of staff and impacting on the ability to support the system in terms of policy updating and supporting the roll-out and implementation of planning. This is impacting on all others involved in delivering planning services.

**“Really, for private sector planners, the main issue ... is workload which is being compounded at the moment because there simply aren't enough planners. Recruitment is an absolute nightmare.”**

An issue raised across public sector respondents:

**“It is so frustrating to feel unable to deliver that [effective LPA] service. It's not what any of us want.”**

A wide variety of issues have been raised regarding the reason for the increase in workload. The reoccurring themes, are:

- Staff resources
- Operational issues
- Public expectation
- Broadening of planning
- Process requirements
- Politics

Across the majority of responses and discussions to the Big Conversation, there was an overarching need identified for a great deal more resources to address the issues.

**“The cuts over the past decade have had a detrimental effect on the sector”.**

**“Demands on the sector continue to increase, and public and developer expectations are very high”.**

**“There is little recognition for the enormous commitment conscientious officers give”.**

**“The sector is in very bad shape – this is not sustainable at all”.**

Many private sector respondents felt that resourcing LPAs would be a solution to their workload issues.

**“It has become increasingly difficult to speak to Local Authority planners and to get a useful response from them. This impacts on my work and how we in the private sector are viewed by clients as they don't believe us when we say that we can't get a response or have a conversation.”**

**“Better resourced and staffed local authorities, with a better customer facing culture, more communicative, accessible and constructive will reduce wasted time and stress for me and less despair and despondency among clients.”**

There were also many positive viewpoints, such as:

**“I work with a fantastic team so it would have to be a very interesting and well paid role for me to consider leaving.”**

The report for Wrexham Council<sup>6</sup> also highlighted the need for a review of staff resources:

**“Financial pressures over recent years have led to reductions in staffing levels in the normal establishment. Furthermore, in common with many authorities, Wrexham has experienced problems in recruiting and retaining staff, particularly suitably qualified planning officers. This has meant that staff have been working under significant pressure and where staff have changed roles to deal with peaks in workload, the problems have been exacerbated by a lack of continuity.”**

## 5.2 Workforce / Employment

The lack of staff resource was consistently raised by most respondents as a reason for an increase in workloads, compounded by the need to cover vacant posts and sick leave.

An important factor is to recognise the wider picture of ‘resources’ and the interlinked issues of budgets, skills, experience, salaries, training, and career progression opportunities in relation to recruitment.

### 5.2.1 Recruitment

Recruitment is a significant challenge across the board. Recruitment of talented people is challenging in Wales given the smaller pool of planners, there is a lot of competition and *“we are seeing a merry-go-round in both public and private sectors”* .... *“which creates an unsettled work environment”*.

**We are “carrying a number of vacancies and recruiting the right officers is proving very difficult”.**

There is also an identified need for more experienced and specialist staff.

Those with temporary contracts in their structure point to some flexibility but also the inability to renew temporary contracts would have a significant impact on delivery. There is also a risk that temporary employees could be lost if they were to look for permanent posts elsewhere.

Responses indicated that smaller planning teams, with less capacity to cover sickness and vacant posts etc. are finding themselves particularly stretched in terms of staffing and workload, with the added difficulties of recruiting in rural areas of Wales. There is also little scope for career progression in these instances.

The need for Welsh language as an essential requirement for post holders is an issue compounding recruitment of planners in a number of areas across Wales.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://moderngov.wrexham.gov.uk/documents/s24598/Item%2011.pdf?LLL=0>

### 5.2.2 Pay and Rewards

Salaries were regarded as not competitive enough to attract the right talent needed, and *“compared to other professions, ... particularly in Wales, which may be giving rise to issues of recruitment.”*

A particular issue was raised in relation to local government salaries which are assessed through a standardised Job Evaluation process. This restricts the opportunity to enhance salaries to make them competitive and attractive to potential candidates. There were several recent cases highlighted where no candidates applied for posts.

A problem specific to planning recognised by respondents across all sectors was that *“We deal with a lot of controversial things in planning.” In local government “There are officers who are project managers who don't deal with [controversial matters] and are paid a similar amount.”* It was considered that commitment and expertise are not fairly re-numerated. There appears to be little incentive for people to become Chartered and hold the benefits that come with a professional.

### 5.2.3 Career Changes

It appears that most people are looking to stay in their job or a planning role, however around 10% are looking to move out of planning. LPAs have the highest percentage of respondents looking to exit the planning sphere (15%), as well as the highest percentage of those who are looking for another job in planning (24%). However, it is to be noted that there is a strong majority amongst all sectors intending to stay in their current role (89.4%), which is positive.

Those in enforcement work were the majority looking to move outside of planning 14.3%, followed by development management, planning policy and regeneration.

### 5.2.4 Employer Support

There is acknowledgment from LPA respondents overall of support from employers (Somewhat - 65%), However, only a third of Development Management Planners and Enforcement Officers believe they have the right support. 64% of private consultancy respondents believe they have enough support.

All age groups experience relatively similar levels of support; although those in the 18-24 and 55–64 year-old groups reported the highest number indicating they do not receive the right support (21 and 25% respectively).

### 5.2.5 Training and development

Training was considered an issue for both the private and public sectors. One LPA respondent felt *“Inappropriate training – with not enough focus on design skills and [perhaps an] increase in agents who are not architecturally trained.”* Another respondent noted, *“I have no specialist training and would fail under cross examination at appeal.”*

Support for training and development has reduced and is impacted on time to attend and reduced budgets, including for travel if a face-to-face option, which gives other benefits than on-line training with the opportunity for wider exchange of experience and discussion.

Mentoring from senior members of staff was highlighted as a benefit, particularly for new members of teams. Informal advice and support from experienced colleagues was highlighted as a good way forward, however new working patterns and the volume of work makes it difficult to adopt a mentoring relationship between more and less experienced colleagues.

### 5.2.6 Wider Staff Resources

Although the need for additional qualified planners (at all levels) is critical, one of the biggest issues currently relates to 'supporting functions' and their own inability to source and retain staff, notably biodiversity and drainage. Like planning, these critical functions are similarly under-resourced and lack sufficient training pathways to ensure that LPAs can support the delivery of quality development quickly.

**“Priorities of disciplines that the planning service rely upon are not always responding to planning consultations.”**

One LPA respondent noted that when the new TAN15 comes into force, new duties will be difficult to assess without specialist input e.g. surface water drainage plans. Biodiversity / ecology and flooding / drainage were seen as the most difficult specialist issues needing resourcing. However, closely behind is Impact Assessment and viability.

The importance of adequate resources to support statutory consultees and other organisations and services that work closely with planning was also identified as needing to be addressed. The need for high quality, timely input from specialist and statutory consultees came out strongly and relates back to the issue of resources for planning and support services.

**“Performance relies on the speed of our consultees such as Highways and Ecology and these local authority departments are also struggling with resources and recruitment which means that they cannot respond quickly or in full and this impacts on LPA services both in terms of the ability to provide timely and informed decisions and the perception of the planning process by customers.”**

Contributions from Natural Resources Wales (NRW) were raised in particular, as well as other stakeholder / statutory consultees. Engagement from NRW was reported as poor, often rejecting paid for requests for advice or discussion, and significant inconsistencies between advice across Welsh regions.

The need for Cadw to offer a formal advice service during the determination of Listed Building consents applications and planning applications which may affect a heritage asset in the same way NRW provide advice to LPAs, was also raised.

Legal support for LPAs was raised as an issue:

**“Lack of appropriate legal support in planning ranging from planning obligations delivery to expert advice / guidance on legal matters / case law interpretation.”**

Other local government services were also highlighted as impacting on planning services indirectly. For example, the capacity of HR Departments to support recruitment exercises and one case noted the time delays caused by Welsh translation, indicating that the wider support system also needs resourcing. The issue of Welsh translation was raised specifically in relation to Local Development Plan (LDP) drafting: *“Welsh translation is now on our risk register for the delivery of the LDP within the necessary timescales.”*

**“The need to have every technical document which informs the evidence base translated into Welsh is having negative impacts on delivery and lead-in timescales, particularly with the need to front-load to get to Preferred Strategy. With the best will**

**in the world, there are only a finite number of Welsh translators who can handle technical planning documents and they are being pulled in a number of directions.”**

## 5.3 Understanding of Planning and its Services

Better understanding that planning is not just a 'tick box' exercise by those outside the profession is essential. It was suggested there needs to be acknowledgement that planning is a profession with necessarily high standards and an appreciation of the complexity of its processes. Understanding of the wider beneficial impacts of good planning would bring benefits to local authorities, businesses and communities.

### 5.3.1 Media

The impact of the UK Government's perceived lack of value of planning was raised by private and public sector responses; it was felt that planning was used as a “*political football*” and this is captured by the UK media and the messaging is then picked up by the public in Wales, even though the planning system is devolved and operates differently.

It was suggested that local media needed to be better informed on planning, as current reporting “*tends to stir up misconceptions*”. The problem “*is the constant undermining and criticism of the profession by media, politicians, celebrities on TV. etc at every opportunity*”.

A number of respondents highlighted the need for the RTPI to be more proactive with the media to support planners and “*speak out for us*”. It was suggested that other professions are more vocal than the RTPI on these issues.

**“We are a very insular profession often talking largely to ourselves. We need to be more vocal and take steps to spread the positive message. This message needs to be spread with both politicians and non-politicians.”** There is a “**big role for the RTPI who are noticeably quieter and less impactful than other similar professional bodies.**”

### 5.3.2 Corporate Public Sector Understanding

Particularly in LPA responses there was a need identified for wider appreciation and understanding of planning services by senior management in local authorities. “*There is no corporate awareness of the complexity of planning and the pressures which the sector and those who operate in this sector.*”

**“At the top level, there is sometimes a lack of understanding of just how difficult a work area planning is - there is a perception that lots of issues and negative feedback from outside the organisation means that the planning service is failing - but nothing could be further from the truth.”**

**“The pressure to be helpful and 'developer-friendly' inevitably leads to some compromises regarding professional ethics. Balanced views are not always presented to committee or within reports.”**

**“There is a lack of recognition across the wider organisation of what planning is, planning does and the benefits of good planning.”**

Planning services are often described as a barrier, a problem, or as an obstacle to be overcome.



**“This is disheartening, demotivating and whether intentional or not at times actively undermining. This wider recognition and support would make a huge day-to-day difference.”**

#### 5.3.4 Members and Politicians

Local politics was raised in relation to workload, indicating there was more political interest in minor policy areas. While it equally reads like good practice in supporting the planning process through democratic engagement; this constructive political engagement could be more efficiently embedded into the early stages.

There was a need identified for politicians to understand the complexity of the system and the impact they can have on timescales for developments.

Respect for officers by councillors was another issue raised by several respondents. This is not relevant to all Authorities, but some referred to *“appalling treatment from elected members”* and *“unreasonable and unrealistic demands of Councillors”* with *“Officers frequently reduced to tears”*. Some referenced the loss of staff *“mainly and largely due to the parochial and appalling treatment of members and the inertia of monitoring officers”*.

Consideration of ways to improve the working relationship between members and officers would be helpful, but resources are so stretched that good practice may be difficult to embed and put into practice. Controversial Local Development Plan (LDP) consultations or applications were put forward as an example where this would be beneficial. It was asked if more controversial consultations and development would be better managed and communicated to the public with more staff and / or with a better working relationship with Members.

The report for Wrexham Council<sup>7</sup> identified that behaviours at Planning Committee “are in the most part appropriate but there is a general acceptance that relationships between some Councillors and officers have deteriorated.”

#### 5.3.4 Public expectation

The public’s expectation of planners and the system is considered by many respondents (mainly LPA respondents) to have risen and attitudes changed towards planners. The expectation from the public is that planners should / must respond immediately.

**“The main negative is the relentless complaints and criticism from the public - often vitriolic and personal. ‘Thank you’ from senior management and Councillors helps, but ultimately the current situation with the public makes it a thankless task and pretty depressing.”**

**“People’s expectations to respond immediately to emails and the volume of emails is unsustainable and prevents me from getting any work done.”**

#### 5.3.5 Developers and Other Built Environment Professionals

There was a clear message of need for other professions to see the bigger picture to achieve better outcomes for competing consenting regimes. Planning is frequently, and not always fairly, blamed for holding projects up or for being bureaucratic.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://moderngov.wrexham.gov.uk/documents/s24598/Item%2011.pdf?LLL=0>

Developer expectations of when applications should be determined is a regular source of pressure. Expectations need to be managed but it is not uncommon for developers to approach line managers / senior officer / politicians to influence the timescales.

Some identified there was a need for clients to be advised their expectations and timescales are not always reasonable, and they are not the only client, and it is important to provide all the information required as early as possible in the process.

## 5.4 Delivering Planning Services

The Big Conversation is not intended as a review of the planning system or policy, but is concerned with finding opportunities for relieving pressures and enabling the system to work more efficiently and effectively to deliver outcomes and support those delivering the system.

**“We believe that Welsh Government’s planning policy is far superior to that in England, but there is a need for policy to move up a gear quickly in terms of responding to the climate and biological emergency.”**

Comments on resources are closely linked with operational issues, such as ways of working and roles. Many of the operational issues are interlinked, impacting on each other and other areas. For the purposes of this ‘operational issues’ include planning administration, communication, ways of working, digital planning and IT i.e. the issues which impact on the day to day running of the service or business.

LDP drafting, adoption and decision making within LPAs is considered to be slow, however one respondent noted that:

**“A high approval rating and appeal-winning are not necessarily evidence of commitment to improve the environment for all”.**

An over-reliance on external consultants to undertake regulation work was highlighted as not always the most cost-effective approach and the money may be better invested on developing staff resources.

Some referred to too much reliance on specific individuals within the team to plan, manage and deliver, which can be beyond their responsibilities *“This causes anxiety and resentment.”*

Time availability is an important point to consider. *“Time to think about casework, to negotiate better outcomes and work together to deliver best practice”* were echoed across a number of respondents.

**“...for staff, it's about having discussions about caseloads, understanding priorities and having reasonable targets to achieve rather than staff feeling overwhelmed and keeping that to themselves. Ways of working, increasing staff, technology etc. can help but not having enough time is about time and work management.”**

### 5.4.1 Development Management

A small few felt there were little or no issues / gaps in LDP or National planning policy affecting the development management process.

**“There are some gaps, but generally it is okay. Would prefer resources put into day to day running of system rather than tinker further.”**

Areas of need identified were more in relation to understanding and applying policy.

Where issues or gaps were raised, there was a re-occurring environmental theme. Although the topic areas were largely environmental, these were broad and varied in themselves, ranging from phosphates to sustainability appraisal. These specialist issues were highlighted as difficult to address for public sector bodies, including LPAs, and also the private sector.

Equally, viability also came up throughout the responses.

**“Viability assessments via the District Valuer delay applications for months ... We need a fundamental review.”**

**“Developers only have a short-term view of viability and do not have a full appreciation of whole life costing. Designs are therefore often biased towards lowest construction costs, which often means much higher whole life costs. This leads to a direct conflict when measuring LDP decisions against the Well-being of Future Generations Act.”**

**“Better powers to meet the requirements of the Environment (Wales) Act. Stakeholders are simply proposing bat boxes as part of any new development as a way to 'enhance' the development biodiversity; whereas more powers need to be conferred on tree, hedge, habitat planting and connectivity so as to enhance the sites naturally through actual habitat implementation and / or bolstering / connecting existing, rather than 'unnaturally' (man-made bat box, which can be nothing but 'box-ticking' when there is no habitat for the bats to use).”**

The Section 6 duty to enhance biodiversity has been raised as not being supported by planners. Although this was also linked to the lack of availability of specialist ecology input. Typically costs of implementation will be argued in terms of viability.

*There is a “general lack of ecological expertise and understanding of the Resilient Wales Goal in the Well-being of Future Generations Act. Mitigation to development is not monitored and generally doesn't happen to result in a net loss of biodiversity. There is no integration or consideration of nature-based solutions. Even when SuDS are implemented, the planting has little ecological value as consultants lack the skills / willingness to adapt planting regimes. Many opportunities to incorporate biodiversity by design are missed as those in the third sector that can advise are not consulted.”*

The issues of flooding, drainage and phosphates were also repeatedly raised by both public and private sectors and the impact this is having in progressing development designs, applications and evidence gathering.

**“Sustainability appraisal is a typical and consistent item not covered enough in terms of training / outcomes and skills. This tool is key to delivery against wellbeing goals and quite often outsourced / not integrated into plan and evidence like flood risk and climate change does influence plan development.”**

This was echoed by:

**“Sustainability - it’s become so complex and there aren’t the tools to make assessments.”**

Some agents feel unable to respond to requests for information, and the time involved, by LPA officers, to justify items for neighbour amenity.

In summary, the topics **most** raised as having an impact on resources are:

| Water based topics                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Natural Environment topics                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SABs and SuDS, in particular SAB process issues. Some referred to <i>“excruciatingly difficult to progress in line with planning timescales.”</i></li> <li>• Phosphates and nutrient neutrality;</li> <li>• Uncertainty around TAN15 and placemaking;</li> <li>• Green infrastructure</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ecology – There appears to be capacity issues in relation to ecology. <i>“We haven’t managed to employ an Ecology Officer for months.”</i></li> <li>• Trees – planting, aftercare and on-going maintenance;</li> <li>• Landscape specialists, visual impact, and cultural heritage, Loss of best and most versatile land</li> </ul> |
| Broader topics                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Viability</li> <li>• Impact assessment (equality, Welsh Language Assessments);</li> <li>• Minerals;</li> <li>• Quality of design skills – <i>“generally poor on applications”</i></li> <li>• Renewables;</li> </ul>                                                                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Net zero;</li> <li>• Transport and highways – still very much focused on car-based solutions;</li> <li>• Conservation heritage;</li> <li>• One planet development;</li> <li>• Understanding infrastructure and service capacity.</li> </ul>                                                                                         |

There was a difference of opinion between some sectors, illustrated by these quotations:

**“Achieving a high quality of design in a protected landscape - agents submit the cheapest form of design possible, which is harmful to the landscape quality. Negotiating redesign to bring up the quality of the scheme is incredibly time consuming. My job does not allow me this time”** versus **“onerous councils who drag feet”**.

A respondent noted:

**“Developers are rarely open book and this can result in severe grind for major applications (and more minor applications in our case), as it is often central to proper consideration of development impacts and mitigation.”**

The quality of applications submitted was raised a number of times,

**“An obvious solution is to increase local government staff / resources, but also the standard of planning applications is generally low – which makes our job more difficult.”**

One respondent felt it was an issue of more training,

**“many applications could be improved on in design terms but Development Management are on the backfoot once an application is registered and feel they cannot go back to improve on design standards.”**

Quality and standards were raised as a factor in increasing workloads. The lower quality of schemes being submitted including drawings, design, and agents not front-loading applications lead to lots of inaccuracies and negotiating on the design within the application process.

Better understanding of the LPA process and what is required at each stage and to process applications was suggested. It was noted *“the private sector are busy, but application quality is suffering because of this”*; a message that resonates with other comments throughout the survey.

**“The problem is more that LDPs are far too detailed to the extent that development management is becoming a box ticking exercise. Officers (and Inspectors) are losing the skills / do not have confidence to take a more balanced approach to decision making.”**

## Administration

Operational and smarter working was discussed throughout the survey responses, including the role of planning administrators and technicians.

A common theme was the amount of administration being carried out by qualified planners. This was raised by both the public and private sectors. Administrative staff can be a more efficient way of undertaking the background checks, managing applications through the system and sending out communications etc. It is important to recognise that planning teams are set up differently across Wales, some with large administration teams, others with smaller or no administration teams.

The survey highlighted that the deletion of administrative posts has placed more pressure on officers and technical staff and this may be part of the cause of the increase in workload for planning officers. Many respondents felt this has risen significantly.

## Minerals and Waste Specialisms

It is important to also recognise the issues impacting on minerals and waste planners, one respondent commented,

**“There has been an increase in DNS (Developments of National Significance) and NSIP (Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects) / DCO (Development Consent Order) projects which we are increasingly dealing with .... Also, the demand for aggregate minerals have increased with a number of sites needing large extensions which is resulting on additional demands on the small service.”**

## Timescales

Greater consistency and timeliness was an issue raised by private sector respondents, as a way of better supporting them. *“Planning departments do not work to planning timescales,”* whereas statutory undertakers and other public services plan through different processes and different timescales, for example water companies work on five years.

Welsh Government's annual capital projects were raised as influencing workloads. The timetable for implementing capital programmes and grant awards often do not take account of the design and planning timescales and frequently planning processes are put under pressure to meet tight timetables and are blamed if not met.

#### 5.4.2 Policy

There is common trend amongst all sectors that a majority of respondents believe there are changes needed to be made to the LDP process to bring forward efficiencies. In particular, there seems to be a lack of sufficient access to external specialist support.

In relation to the LDP process, one private sector respondent commented,

**“As private planners we are often asked to contribute [to LDP process], and we do. The LDP is a larger document which takes months / years to prepare and then the public / consultants / groups are asked to comment. It takes a long time to read, familiarise / absorb / think about and comment on. Could maybe general policies be separated from maps to break down the consultation process and develop policies and maps in tandem? [The] Public are generally interested in what is proposed in their area i.e. the maps. Please note all this contribution by private planners is at our cost!”**

Another perspective given was:

**“There have been major challenges in moving LDP review forward at my authority. Delays have been caused by the Covid pandemic (we had to review the whole plan evidence base and make changes to some parts of it, as well as preparing a Covid impact assessment), the NRW phosphates guidance (a really difficult issue to address, one we are still working on and that will take a long time to resolve), the revision to TAN 15 (again, requiring a lot more work, although the reasons for the revision are understood), the need to also work with other authorities on a regional basis on SDPs, linked to the establishment of the CJCs. We also have the possibility of more guidance on phosphates / nitrates / nutrients in general in prospect for the marine elements of SACs.”**

Evidence gathering is considered time consuming and asked if it could be better supported with digital planning and possibly more support research staff, or better data sharing with other services. One respondent explained that communities often want more information at the early stages and that information is not necessarily available; it takes time to engage and explain this.

#### 5.4.3 Regional Planning

**“Space to get on with the SDP [is needed] - you cannot mandate collaboration. We were making great progress until Welsh Government mandated everything and required CJCs (but without thinking through the tax and funding and governance arrangements - more unintended consequences). Now we've ground to a halt.”**

#### Joint working

It was suggested there is a need to increase working in partnership with other local authority departments, particularly in regard to specialist advice re highways / ecology / conservation.

**“Sharing knowledge / experiences is good and is achieved in the forums that we have set up.”**

One respondent clarified,

**“It’s not so much the lack of expertise which is evident but access to that expertise in a timely manner to support the development sector” “Staff are stretched too thinly which requires expertise to be bought in for policy development.”**

Other specialist policy areas listed in responses are set out below:

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Housing need - more consistent and clear forecasts</li> <li>• Population forecasts and analysis</li> <li>• Welsh language and culture</li> <li>• <i>“Resources in Lead Local Flood Authorities have dropped significantly in recent years, with removal of ring-fenced funding”</i></li> <li>• Place making</li> <li>• Strategic and site viability assessments. Viability and keeping this up to date through the LDP process was considered a challenge</li> <li>• Gypsy and Travellers</li> <li>• Phosphates, including the need for baseline data sets, which are not available</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minerals viability</li> <li>• Heritage and conservation</li> <li>• Trees, including arboriculture and urban forestry</li> <li>• SuDS</li> <li>• Energy policy</li> <li>• The role of smaller scale agriculture in reducing carbon emissions</li> <li>• Water/Electricity capacity</li> <li>• Welsh language</li> <li>• Climate change and net zero</li> <li>• Carbon emissions and efficiency</li> <li>• Health impact</li> <li>• Transport</li> </ul> |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

**“Front loading the policy process is great in theory but impossible to achieve without significant resources up front. The time taken to progress means that studies need updating all the time which is hugely frustrating and adds to the overall cost. Policy teams generally aren't set up for this sort of working. It would be better to have flexible resources to have a large team available for the initial evidence gathering stage and then reduce to a core team for the remainder of the process. We have also had significant issues with site proposers unwilling to invest in viability assessments, surveys and masterplans prior to any form of certainty as previously provided by the Deposit Plan.”**

There was private sector frustration around general LDP issues, suggesting that *“confidence in LDPs is an all-time low.” “LDPs are often poorly drafted with inconsistent use of key decision-making policy tests. Welsh Government and PEDW need to take a lead on ensuring consistency.”*

#### **5.4.4 Rural planning issues**

There is a general feeling that much recent policy has been designed for urban settings, but the context in rural areas is different where public transport is limited, viability is lower, and building

firms are smaller. The ability to deliver the ambitions of Future Wales and Planning Policy Wales is more challenging in rural areas, for example housing sites of fewer than ten homes (considered large by local standards).

Rural planning teams also struggle with more requirements to deliver a sound plan, such as Health Impact Assessments (HIAs), Local Housing Market Assessments (LHMAs), Landscape assessments, Seascape capacity, Green Infrastructure Assessments (GIAs) etc. It was considered that:

**“much of this documentation is overkill for the type of settlements we are trying to support and deliver housing for demonstrating a distinct lack of rural proofing and simply creating more work for consultants as a small team of less than a handful of planners simply can’t deliver this work and don’t have the specialisms to do so - even if we had a budget we are unable to recruit”.**

In specific reference to rivers, it was highlighted

**“solutions are being sought at a catchment level, but there is not necessarily consistency over solutions and cross-border approaches. A nation-wide approach bringing in the rural land-use sector would be extremely helpful.”**

## 5.5 Role and Purpose of Planning

Respondents noted not only a rise in public expectation, but also in Government / political ambition and additional areas of work that planning, and planners must cover. These were seen by some as ‘extra’, going beyond planning, rather than part of a progressive and proactive planning system. This was framed in the wider issue of diminishing resources and capacity:

**“There has been a need for the policy planners to get involved in lots of other work areas - decarbonisation, climate change adaptation, energy planning, etc. It is great to be a part of this, but it brings immense workload pressures.”**

**“The problem is that the LDP / national policy actually covers too many issues, some of which arguably fall outside of the scope of planning. It seems that planning has become a catchall to address all of society's ills, adding more and more considerations in the determination of planning applications. This ‘mission creep’ dilutes the value of planning as a discipline and further burdens officers in dealing with applications.”**

Several subject areas were listed as being an add-on to planning, or a subject that was increasing planners’ workload. These included:

- Climate change (recognising the climate and nature crisis)
- Biodiversity
- Sustainability
- Well-being
- Active travel
- Increase number of assessments



- Phosphates
- Flooding
- Farming and food enterprises
- Covid-19 (impact at the time and ongoing issues)

**“We need to look at how complex and multi-faceted the planning system has become. Individual aspects of the planning process are all in and of themselves important but collectively have moved us a long way from the core idea of 'land-use management'.”**

A need to further strengthen the plan-led approach was raised:

**“Stronger in implementing the plan-led approach ... Housing in unsustainable locations and out of town retail are two common examples that will be permitted every week across the county.”**

## 5.6 Digital Working

Responses highlighted a significant shortfall in the digital support for facilitating planning in LPAs. Many comments referred to a “*bodged*” set up or “*not fit for purpose*”. “*IT systems are slow, over complicated and some basic functions cannot be done easily.*” A significant amount of time is spent doing manual intervention on IT systems<sup>8</sup>.

The report<sup>9</sup> on Wexham’s service reported:

**“The current back office software is outdated and lacks the functionality of a modern system, this leads to significant inefficiencies in the process and makes workflow management difficult.”**

Issues around file sizes able to be accommodated on IT platforms were reported as a common problem.

A shortfall in both LPA and Welsh Government websites was also highlighted. This links with the need identified for better information for the public and non-planners to have better and easier access to information to understand planning policy and processes.

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<sup>8</sup> The most common services referred to in the responses included:

- Idox – process driven software that underpins the management of planning & building control, environmental health and licensing procedures.
- Uniform – a platform with a range of core modules and related applications which provides case management software.
- Web APAS – search engine for planning complaints, pre applications and applications etc.
- Acolaid – an integrated suite of spatially enabled land and property solutions for local authorities and used by over 70 UK authorities.
- Lle – serves as a hub for data and information covering a wide spectrum of topics, but primarily around the environment.

<sup>9</sup> <https://modern.gov.wrexham.gov.uk/documents/s24598/Item%2011.pdf?LLL=0>

Provision of online shared data were highlighted as a weakness.

**“Mapping available to LPAs such as ecological mapping / hot spots not publicly available. This can delay the identification of issues. Better access may smooth process / save resources for all. Clear route finding to the information also. Easily done through a website which is regularly updated.”**

An example of a good resource was suggested as: [SSSI detail \(naturalengland.org.uk\)  
https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/SiteDetail.aspx?SiteCode=UK11081](https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/SiteDetail.aspx?SiteCode=UK11081)

It was reported that platforms e.g. MS Teams have brought benefits and improved communications. Some reported that whilst virtual planning committees had some benefits, they were also very stressful to run.

One respondent usefully framed the need for improved digital planning as part of a wider picture of keeping up with change:

**“I would say digital stability, as trying to keep up to date with constantly changing systems is a big challenge. Constant change is also a feature of the legislative and policy context in Wales - there is a lot happening and it is sometimes difficult to keep on top of it all.”**

## 5.7 Hybrid / remote working

A cumulation of factors including technological advances and a desire to reduce commuting, accelerated by the pandemic, has led to a shift to working from home. Welsh Government are encouraging a policy of remote working where workers can choose their place of work – their central workplace, their home, or a workspace close to their home: *“We now want to work with organisations to support a long-term shift to more people working remotely.”*<sup>10</sup> This shift to a hybrid approach is being explored globally and will take time to find the new balance.

From the Big Conversation responses, it is clear that morale is affected both ways, it all depends on the individual. The responses were clear that the preference to work in the office or from home is very personal, and this is also true of managers which influence the experience of teams.

The majority of respondents reported working from home at least on an occasional basis, through to mainly working from home. The reasons for this were principally based on personal choice to meet own preferences and needs, such as care responsibilities or to overcome long commutes.

There were mixed views as to the productivity and work benefits of working from home / working from the office. However, there was a widespread view that not having teams regularly in the office was detrimental to new colleagues, particularly those starting out in their career. *“The greatest disadvantage of home-working is the genuine loss of opportunity for less experienced staff to benefit from knowledge transfer from more experienced colleagues.”*

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<sup>10</sup> [www.gov.wales/remote-working-policy](http://www.gov.wales/remote-working-policy)

**“I worry that the future generation of planners will not be able to develop the same knowledge and skills as their predecessors who learned through osmosis in an office environment.”**

One private consultancy member noted the difficulties of *“mentoring someone properly from a distance to help them learn on the job, especially when it comes to site visits and more complicated schemes.”* One trainee respondent shared their ‘fear’ of lone site visits in a rural area because there were not enough staff resource to enable someone to accompany them.

The survey data implies working from home / hybrid working does not have a direct correlation with the frequency of being overstretched. Neither does the data support the assumption that working from home would mean less support available – in fact respondents working from the office seem to have less of the right support (25% of those working from the office), this may be because of the working practice of managers and colleagues; however, the majority were positive about the support they received.

An issue raised linked to not working at the office is the availability of officers (internal and external) and a knock on to communications. This was also reported as a benefit to working away from the office, giving the opportunity to work with minimal distractions. Some reported issues associated with being able to have responses to quick questions or soundings when people are working from home, and what could have been a short five minute informal chat, instead resulted in increased e-mail traffic and responses taking far longer and becoming formalised.

Silo working was reported as more prevalent than ever before, even in the same teams.

**“If you're alone at home a small easy question for a colleague can become a really big deal. Dealing with the nasty calls or emails is also more challenging because you're on your own when you're at home. Best practice is picked up when you hear general chatter, a quick question can take hours/days to resolve as you try and book availability with the person that can help (used to be a walk across the office). Paperless is all well and good but it means hours on end of staring at screens instead of being able to review paper copies, look at plans properly.”**

**“WFH has damaged my mental health, made me feel divorced from colleagues and divorced from the community we are supposed to serve. Work is much less efficient, less wholesome, less dynamic, less fun and less rounded than before. 'Meetings' are tiresome, less enjoyable and much less gets taken from them. Some people are very overworked, some people doing very little. The WFH agenda has also exacerbated inequality and set back the climate change agenda (impact on public transport and heating / lighting 50 individual homes rather than 1 large office room). It has made me go from generally enjoying my job to at best tolerating, at worst hating it.”** Although others felt they had **“made a huge reduction to [their] carbon footprint.”**

**“Work is much more isolating, especially for young planners without having the advantage of an office environment.”**

**“There is a greater chance of being misunderstood or missing important information when working from home.”**

**“Looking for a new job because with WFH the planning profession feels divorced from the communities we serve and public sector planning is now much less dynamic and enjoyable than before.”**

While others have seen more positive outcomes:

**“Further encouraging hybrid working - this has been seen to improve staff morale, productivity and reduced sickness levels.”**

One respondent highlighted a desire to return to the office, but this was going to be difficult because there had been a reconfiguration of the employer’s estate leading to a reduction in the availability of desks to accommodate everyone.

Further in-depth analysis would be needed to draw reliable conclusions on ways of working impact on delivery and it may be some time before post-pandemic patterns of working settle down, in order to provide a definitive evaluation. However, there is a clear need to support those new into a position or in the early stages of their career and put in place regular team support.

## 5.8 Public Engagement

**“Customers are far more abrasive, disgruntled and aggressive since the pandemic.”**

This drew out a considerable number of issues resulting in time spent dealing with negative engagement and wasted resource. A key factor underpinning this is a lack of public understanding of the scope and role of the planning system and is linked to the public’s expectation. This was also reported as an issue with others working in the built environment. Community groups may lack the capacity to deal with the complexities of planning. There is a clear need to invest in improving messaging and access to clear and tailored information.

**“Officers’ reports are too long and detailed because of a fear of Judicial Review. Serial objectors are given too much weight, especially for issues that are not relevant to planning. Some legislation e.g. the Advert regulations are too complex.”**

There was clear evidence that LPAs and government bodies experience a considerable amount of abuse or negative incidents: 48.8% reporting occasional incidents and 16% regularly. Welsh Government respondents have also clearly experienced such abuse and incidents (30%).

As expected, because of their role, those in enforcement endure the most amount of abuse with 23.5% reporting regular incidents, followed by management (reporting 17% regular incidents). Moreover, 40% across all sectors experience abuse or negative incidents occasionally. Only around 10-15% of respondents never experience abuse or negative incidents.

One respondent succinctly said what is felt by many planners: *“Planning always attracts criticism”*, whether for approving or not approving a scheme or similarly for what is included or not included in a plan.

48% of all respondents see abuse or experience negative incidents occasionally or more. Both men and women reported experiencing the same level of abuse and negative incidents – potentially proving that abuse / negative incidents are sector / role inflicted. About half of all ages experience abuse occasionally but 19% of 35-54 experience abuse regularly. North Wales respondents reported the most regular abuse (21.4%) followed by South West Wales (13.3%).

This negative impact has been exacerbated by working from home, with no immediate support available from colleagues to diffuse negative experiences.

Serious concern has been raised by incidents where officers have been physically intimidated. A number of situations have been drawn to our attention where officers have been followed and intimidated. One even reported they had been approached by the Police, who had recommended security cameras and panic buttons.

Whilst it is accepted LPAs should provide a good service, there is a severe lack of resourcing, which leads to weaknesses in delivery (varying across LPAs and between services), and this leads to complaints, which in turn take further resource away from delivery and a spiral is set in motion. Some LPA officers said they regularly spent 50% of their time dealing with complaints of varying forms, diverting them away from service delivery. It was felt *“there is a general lack of understanding of how under resourced LPAs are.”*

**“It is not a case of just not doing the cases when you physically don’t have enough time in the week to do the work, it is being bombarded by hostile and aggressive phone calls and emails from people in the queue - they don’t know they’re in the queue, and they don’t understand you as an individual officer have 1.5 people’s workloads you are expected to deliver, and they are the third person who has called to abuse you today. They expect you are sitting around ‘twiddling your thumbs’ not processing their application because you are a public sector lazy employee.”**

#### 5.8.1 Pre-application Community Consultation

The Pre-application Community Consultation (PACC) process was intended to provide a process to promote good practice and ease the planning process. However, responses highlighted it as an area which should be reviewed to provide a more meaningful engagement mechanism for communities which could result in improved developments and a smoother application and help overcome community disenfranchisement.

The process

**“is well-intentioned but of little value in practice. Good advice is offered in the 2017 Best Practice Guidance<sup>11</sup> but in our experience little or nothing more than the minimal statutory requirement is met by developers.”**

**“We have found that PACCs late in the process have done little more than forewarn us of a coming application to which we are likely to make similar representations. We doubt whether any stakeholder in the process sees significant value in the minimal statutory requirement.”**

#### 5.8.2 Social Media

Social media was highlighted as an excellent tool to raise awareness, however it added a further complexity for planners. It was suggested that social media is now the only way to engage with the public. There is good practice on using social media to engage with the public on plans and individual schemes and more awareness and learning from this practice should be shared.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://gov.wales/planning-major-developments-guidance-pre-application-consultation>

The survey reported the negative impact of social media, with 58% of respondents saying social media had, at least somewhat, had an effect on their well-being. Many regarded social media to have given the public the ability to express their opinions without any recourse (insults and abuse) which impacts planners' wellbeing. It was reported that it creates an environment for misinformation and for negative campaigners to skew discussions.

**“The workload has increased massively as well as having fewer staff. We have a bigger and more complex caseload than ever, with more objections, FOIs, complaints and Member enquiries than ever to consider and respond to (due to social media).”**

## 6. Suggested Solutions

The survey invited respondents to put forward solutions to issues raised and these are set out here. Inclusion here does not necessarily indicate agreement or ability to implement by the RTPi or Welsh Government.

### 6.1 Public Sector Resources

The need for more resources for planning was raised by most respondents as the main solution to workload issues. The term resources will have different meanings for different respondents, some provided a detailed explanation on this while others just referred to the need for resources. For the purpose of this summary, 'resources' are taken to include staffing (recruitment and retention), training, funding, salaries, time to carry out the job properly, IT and digital planning.

One respondent proposed a:

**“consensus statement with a range of organisations, unions, LPAs, third party / regulatory bodies on how far short resources are across the industry ... making it clear that Brexit, Covid and huge new environmental requirements have tipped the balance for a service already hampered by generational under funding.”**

#### 6.1.1 Fees

There was a clear call to review planning application fees and the ring fencing of LPA budgets to deliver services, to accept with any increase of fees the service needs to visibly improve.

**“Applicants pay fees to have their applications dealt with efficiently, not to fund all other Council departments. DM departments are critically under resourced as a consequence of application fees being funnelled to other services.”**

There is a *“need to look at full cost recovery. The planning application fee for a single dwelling for example is a fraction of the cost of the overall project.”*

#### 6.1.2 Local Planning Authorities

**“Assisting LPAs would help the private sector directly.”**

More staff / resource-funding / capacity was the main suggestion set out by respondents across the board. This includes funding to adequately staff planning teams, recognising the desperate

need for graduates, experienced planners and specialist planners and the need for these to be accessible. The survey results suggest that since the pandemic LPA officers appear less visible and accessible to those trying to engage with planning. However, the survey also suggests that LPA officers are struggling to cope with constant emails and sometimes difficult applicants. This is a desperate situation which requires attention before worsening.

Linked to this, is the call from LPAs for more respect for the role and the decisions, both from the public and also support internally within LAs. More corporate support was called for in this regard.

The role of planning administration was raised in relation to this question and the opportunity for more support for planners on validation etc.

Smarter working through the process was suggested to support the private sector. One respondent suggested team approaches to big applications and accessible / contactable LPA officers, was repeatedly raised.

### 6.1.3 Other supporting specialisms and Statutory Consultees

Resources for statutory consultees and other services was also repeatedly raised, in particular the need for more highways officers and ecologists, and more resources for Welsh Government, NRW and PEDW. Improved and more timely responses were called for from statutory consultees and better advice and communication with Welsh Government.

Better communication should be championed with the aim of improving relationships across all stakeholders was suggested.

A need to examine the role of specialist bodies was recommended, including the Design Commission for Wales (DCfW), NRW, and Planning Aid Wales. With a view to understanding and exploring the role they can play in supporting LPAs at key stages and if they can be resourced in a way that allows greater support at key stages to individual LPAs.

Healthcare needs are outside the scope of the LPA and rely solely on third party information being readily available in order to assess need. It was suggested local health boards need to allocate resources for this engagement.

Access to specialist and experienced staff was identified as a need:

**“Consultees being contactable and willing and able to attend in-person meetings, organise a round table discussion to discuss difficult issues; avoid default statements.”**

## 6.2 Professional collaboration / communications

A private member offered a solution to workload issues in the form of better communication between sectors:

**“...I believe that improved and better communication between agents and planners is extremely beneficial to both. I am aware that planning authorities can be very defensive about forums but explaining the planning legislative context for example as to why things are asked for, what is new, etc. I always think is worthwhile and helps avoid conflict. It should also be a way to receive feedback - both ways. ... The**

**'them and us' attitude of some planning authorities have displayed during the pandemic period has done nothing to assist the planning process and break down barriers."**

A collaborative proactive approach with developers / private sector and a better understanding of both 'sides' was raised, with suggestions including: developers better engaging with pre-app, better integration with the third sector, shared services across Wales (in particular environmental services) and sharing of best practice.

Better collaboration and working together was called for, including communication, expectation, constructive comments from LPA that help identify solutions etc. which will help improve quality in the process, was raised as an important issue. A need was identified for better engagement between stakeholders early in the application process.

**"More collaboration between private consultants for clearer voices on issues - the public sector has a voice through POSW."**

Improved contact with Welsh Government was raised. One respondent asked about the relationship between Welsh Government and the private sector, and if they have access to Welsh Government notifications, as LPAs do.

**"Build in planning at the early stages of any land-use focused work. Endless examples of planning being considered at the last minute and inevitably posing questions it is too late to answer. Planning is then a problem."**

### 6.3 Growing our own

Some pointed to working collaboratively with Cardiff University to encourage placement and graduate applications.

The introduction of trainee a scheme could pay dividends in future in terms of succession. Mentoring of staff was also suggested as a helpful way of investing in staff.

Creating a career graded post was something one LPA planning manager was hoping to be able to pursue as a possible future solution to recruitment. More and better career opportunities / development to make positions more attractive could help with the retention of staff, which is an issue being raised throughout the survey.

One respondent questioned whether planning related subjects are still attractive to students. A lack of appropriate applicants / candidates when recruiting reflects the need for close working with universities and the education sector, RTPI etc.

Another respondent felt apprenticeships or graduate funding could support the planning system, asking *"Why is the apprenticeship route in England not available in Wales? We urgently need extra staff. Can Welsh Government look at supporting funding for graduates to undertake planning masters?"*

The creation of *"nationwide placement schemes for all planning positions, part funded in order to allow opportunity, experience ... etc."* was another solution put forward to increase capacity in the future.



## 6.4 Training

The need for training was repeatedly raised as a solution, including the regular provision of training for LPA Members as well as officers, along with shared learning across Wales. One respondent felt that training was needed, rather than being 'self taught'. Established regional and national working groups could help to support or develop this solution further.

A suggestion for management training was made, alongside more resources, to help managers support their staff in managing their workload and time more effectively moving forward.

Training was also raised for statutory consultees and private sector consultancy / agents (to drive up application quality) and elected members.

There was a strong environmental theme to the training needs identified across responses, for example HRA was one of many matters raised in relation to training.

## 6.5 Public Engagement

Support / awareness for the profession - constantly being bashed in local media as corrupt or worse when in effect (particularly locally) the decisions they are most cross about are made at committee level.

The effectiveness of the PACC requirements should be reviewed with the aim of ensuring earlier community consultation, and the involvement of the Design Commission for Wales, in many major development proposals. The 2017 guidance on Adding Value remains a sound basis for progress but it was suggested that a statutory means of enforcing it is needed. This would enable the opportunity to harness any relevant expertise in the community without undermining the LPA role.

There was an identified need to create some form of accountability to manage social media. Best practice on managing abuse is needed and to be upheld by employers.

**“All planning officers by default should be given training in how to negotiate aggressive confrontation, unhappy customers, how to de-escalate aggressive telephone calls, as this is as much a part of the job requirement as the interpretation of legislation / processing of applications etc.”**

## 6.6 Politicians and Planning Committees

There were some detailed suggestions for addressing the operation of planning committees, including introducing a minimum of 12 members on Planning Committee; rules for no Councillor in Wales to sit for more than two consecutive terms. It was also suggested that support is required for politicians to make decisions at the CJC level.

The need for training and support for members was raised to help Members understand complex issues relating to LDP and development proposals.

## 6.7 Digital Planning

Consistent IT solutions were suggested as a solution to workload issues, which could allow for better joint working or joint evidence base in the future.

An overarching message was the need for “*digital stability*” to overcome the time and resultant challenges associated with constantly changing systems. There were many suggestions for potential digital solutions. However, the overarching need is to identify a route map and have investment across Wales in a new digital approach.

One respondent called for “*funding support to update policy IT systems (1995 access database currently used to deliver LDP).*”

## 6.8 Changes to Planning System

We are clear the Big Conversation is not a review of the planning system, except where it could offer a positive outcome to address the well-being of those working in it. Many broad solutions to workload were put forward in relation to regulations affecting the implementation of the planning system and policy of specific subject areas, and these are summarised below:

- TAN15 Drainage Statement being made a planning validation requirement;
- Take some things away from planning and into building regulations;
- Simplify policy, there is too much focus on impact assessments;
- Make processing applications simpler;
- More specialised expertise involved in updating legislation, TANs and Policies etc.

Some respondents felt that the 8 / 13 week target deadlines were out of date and needed reviewing and a suggestion to remove the planning application refund provisions. This could build in realistic performance management and incentives, as well as help to manage expectations. A move to a focus on outcomes, not timescales was called for.

There are plans<sup>12</sup> to bring forward a Planning Consolidation Bill which will assist in being clear of the planning law in Wales, which is currently spread over a number of different Acts. However in the short time it was suggested that an up to date version of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order be made available to overcome the time needed to clarify some of the less common uses more easily and present the various changes in a consolidated format.

A review of S106 Agreements and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) to address the significant delay and time resources was called for. This included the need for training and funding for officers with expertise in viability to be embedded in planning teams. This is an issue that erodes CIL/S106 contributions and thus should be given more attention. A national approach should be undertaken to viability as a whole, ensuring it is flexible to allow for local circumstances. It was also suggested there was a need to remove the pooling of contributions.

While there are some comments about specific stages in the process, for example:

**“Remove the Preferred Strategy Stage and revert to the Draft plan stage.” “Remove requirement for evidence base to be translated.”**

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<sup>12</sup> [www.gov.wales/the-future-of-welsh-law-accessibility-programme-2021-to-2026-html](http://www.gov.wales/the-future-of-welsh-law-accessibility-programme-2021-to-2026-html)

One respondent suggested better programme management of LDPs; others called for the removal of the 'drop dead date'. The Candidate sites process was raised as time consuming and impact assessments were also highlighted, with respondents finding them onerous.

There were a significant range of answers to whether there were policy development issues which could be addressed by changes to national policy. Some stand out responses are listed below – although the range was exceptionally broad.

**“Although an overarching approach is needed, each area is different and has its own characteristics and issues, as well as its own political approach, so it isn't a one size fits all matter. In addition to this, areas should be different and not all uniform.”**

**“There needs to be more joined up thinking on certain issues - SuDS, planting, biodiversity, landscape, ecology etc can work cohesively to provide numerous solutions through individual actions.”**

Phosphates and drainage have made the system complex – *“The Planning system reflects political agenda (which itself is not a problem) but does not have the tools to implement - for example phosphates needs leadership not a vacuum / debate - everything just stalls.”* The SAB function should be brought under planning or more resource provided to allow them to deal with both statutory processes.

**“More guidance on how to approach SuDS through the planning process and more thought needed in terms of how planning and SAB integrate with each other.”**

## 6.9 Regional Working

Progressing smart regional working was repeatedly raised as a solution, with wide support for the establishment of SDPs. Alongside this was a suggestion for a reduction of the burden of the evidence base of LDPs and SDPs, which currently tend to have small teams and limited specialisms which often means there is no other option than to outsource. However, others added caution to regional working and commissioning which helps but does not necessarily make the process any quicker because managing consultants is a time consuming process. It was suggested that resources could be maximised by pursuing SDPs and prepare LDP 'lite'.

**“Where a piece of work is outsourced due to a lack of resourcing rather than technical need you lose that internal skill and knowledge base.”**

A regional environmental advice service was suggested, as was joint services for other specialist services such as conservation and minerals. This could provide more staff, in particular specialist officers, creating more capacity and capability in the system.

**“Better resourcing in specialist areas is a solution, but there are known recruitment issues for people with the right skills.”**

**“The approach currently taken is to work collaboratively with other Local Planning Authorities in the region, also with key organisations such as Welsh Government, NRW and Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water. Where budgets allow, we use external commissions to get the expert inputs we need on specialist topics, but budgets will only stretch so far.”**

## 6.10 Sharing Good Practice

Despite the focus in this report on the difficulties of delivering the planning system principally because of shortfalls in resources, it is clear that there is good work taking place and the planning system is functioning. One respondent highlighted the need to:

**“shout about the good things too and ensure positive examples and best practice are shared as widely as possible.”**

# 7. What next?

The findings from the Big Conversation will be provided to the Minister for Climate Change, in response to her request in June 2022.

We appreciate that the issues raised are not solely for Welsh Government to respond to. We will be sharing the findings more widely and encourage others to respond to the clear evidence from this work.

The RTPI will publish its own action plan to respond to the issues raised by the Big Conversation for Wales. We also recognise that many of the issues raised are experienced across the UK and Ireland and are not unique to Wales and so we will consider this in our response to this valuable evidence.



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## For more information about RTPI Cymru's policy work

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