

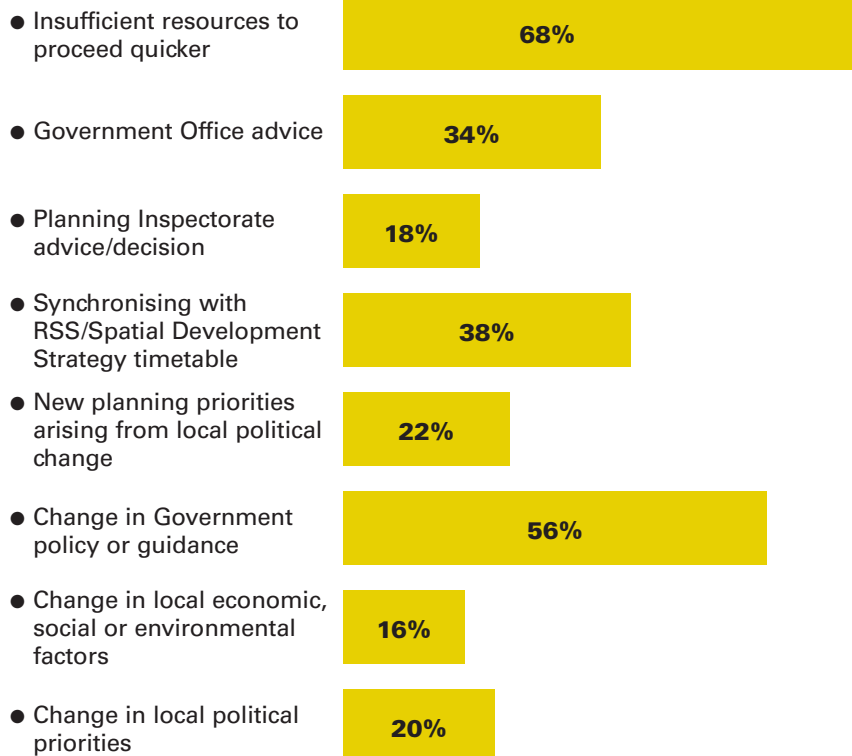
'resource-hungry beast' winning few friends

John Watson reports the findings of a survey of planners' views on the Local Development Framework system

When the Local Development Framework (LDF) system was introduced in September 2004, the Government anticipated that all local planning authorities would have a Core Strategy in place by

2007. But five years on, fewer than 20% of local planning authorities have yet completed their Core Strategy. In the March 2009 issue of *Town & Country Planning*,¹ Michael Crook and I posed some

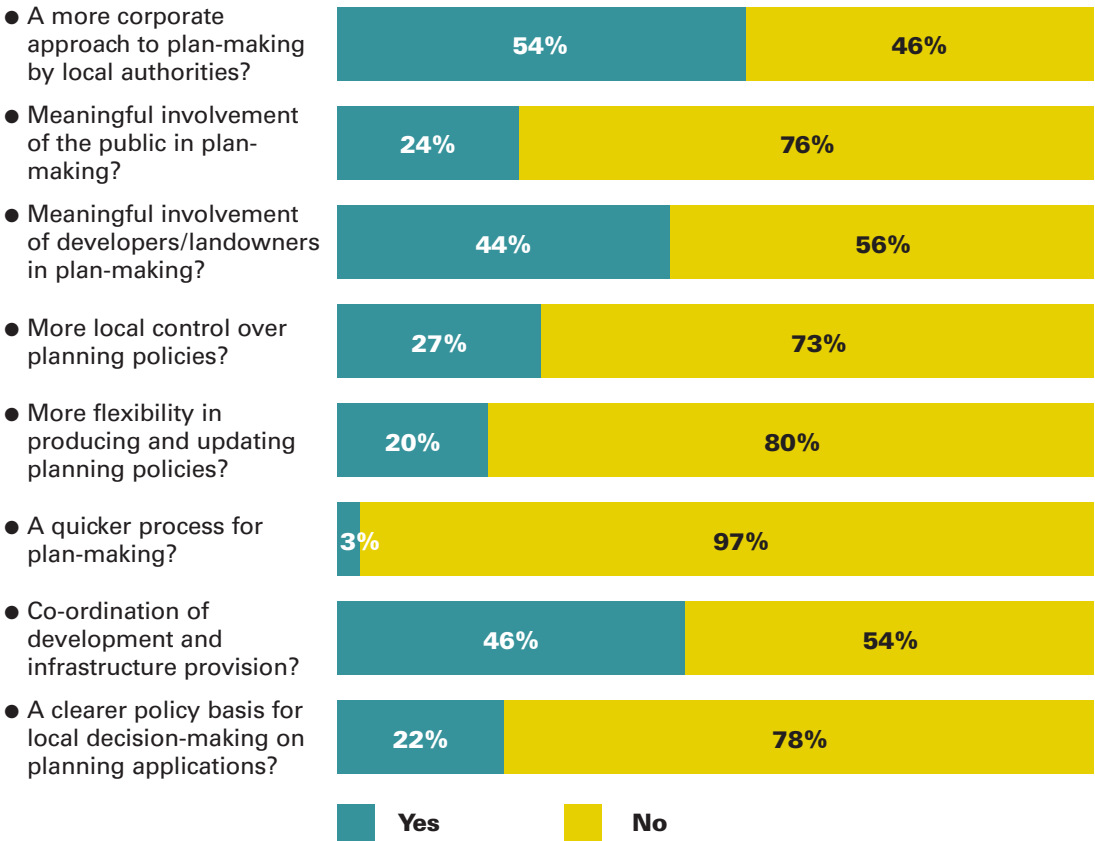
In your experience, what have been the main causes of delay in producing Core Strategies?



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Survey respondents' views on the causes of delay in producing Core Strategies

Is the LDF system resulting in:



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Survey respondents' views on the outcomes of the LDF system

questions about what has gone wrong, and we subsequently joined forces with the TCPA to ask the profession its views. The results of our joint on-line survey are summarised here.

The national email survey of planners was carried out in July and August 2009. The 122 respondents were fairly evenly split between the public and private sectors (55-45).

The survey first asked about the main causes of delay (see Fig. 1). The leading reason given was lack of resources (68%), followed by changes in Government policy/guidance (56%), synchronising with regional policy (38%), and acting on Government Office advice (34%). Only 18% laid blame at the door of the Planning Inspectorate.

Among the comments, respondents referred to the resource-hungry 'LDF beast', with many complaining of the need for a large and growing evidence base to cover all policy eventualities. Linked to this were comments about the underlying

risk-averse approach that local authorities and Government Offices had adopted having seen early Core Strategies being found unsound and bounced back to square one. There were also comments about how the procedural goalposts had shifted in the first few years of the system and how this had led to uncertainties and delays.

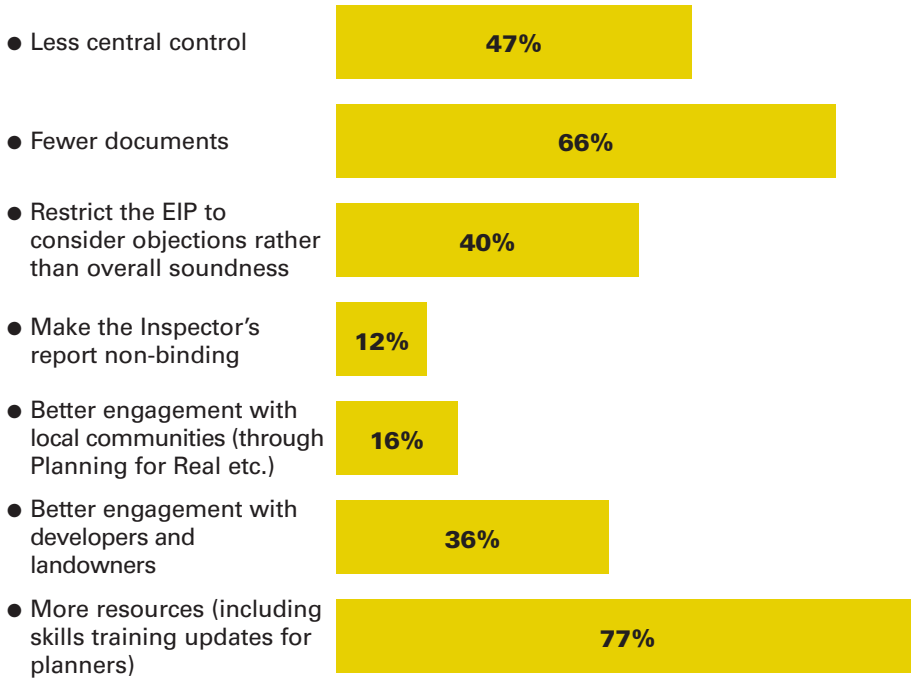
The survey then asked respondents about how the system is operating now (see Fig.2).

Of course, some of the changes made to the LDF system over the past 18 months are still bedding in, including the 2008 Planning Act, amended Regulations and a new Planning Policy Statement 12: *Local Spatial Planning*, so the responses need to be taken in this context. Nevertheless, the results are striking.

Over two-thirds of those surveyed thought the LDF system:

- did not result in meaningful involvement of the public;

How can the LDF system be improved (select as many as required)?



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Survey respondents' views on improving the LDF system

- did not give more local control over planning policies;
- did not provide flexibility in producing and updating planning policies; and
- did not provide a clearer policy basis for local decision-making on planning applications.

community focused, inclusive, flexible, clear and quick.

On the positive side, two-thirds thought the LDF system was resulting in a more corporate approach to plan-making by local authorities, with 92% saying there was high-level political commitment, at least in part.

Recurring themes in the comments included:

- the complexity of the system;
- consultation fatigue on the confusing range of documents; and
- the disproportionate extent of evidence required to 'prove' soundness.

On the latter one respondent put it this way: '... the new evidence-led system mitigates against art and judgement, and the mad tests of soundness, which are an alien concept, have removed the right to object to specific content and proposals...'

Looking to the future, the survey then asked how the system could be improved. Way out in front in the responses were more resources (77%) and fewer documents (66%), with the next most cited being less central control (47%) and a

'Recurring themes in the comments included the complexity of the system, consultation fatigue on the confusing range of documents, and the disproportionate extent of evidence required to 'prove' soundness'

A whopping 97% said that the LDF system did not result in a quicker process for plan-making.

These results are quite an indictment by the profession of a system that was intended to be

restriction in the Examination in Public (EIP) to objections rather than overall soundness (40%). Perhaps surprisingly, given the comments about central control, only 12% thought Inspectors' reports should not be binding.

A future for efficient plan-making?

This was, of course, a limited survey, but the results provide at the very least a gauge of mood in the profession, and reveals a strong consensus over some of the problems with the LDF system.

According to a significant majority of the respondents the LDF system is resource hungry; is prone to delay by changes to national and regional policy; is complex and slow; is alien to the public; is centrally controlled; and requires disproportionate supporting material.

But set against this there is the conundrum that some local authorities have made the system work

'According to a significant majority of the respondents the LDF system is resource hungry; is prone to delay by changes to national and regional policy; is complex and slow; is alien to the public; is centrally controlled; and requires disproportionate supporting material. But set against this there is the conundrum that some local authorities have made the system work – or at least have got Core Strategies adopted'

– or at least have been able to get Core Strategies and other Development Plan Documents adopted. Some are even on a second cycle of review. There must be lessons to learn here in how they have managed the processes, but more importantly whether the documents have made a difference on the ground – a good topic for some TCPA regional masterclasses and study tours.

A tidal wave of Core Strategies is due to come through the system in 2010, but there must be big question marks over how many will reach the shore. For example:

- Public sector spending is going to be squeezed, and it is difficult to see the under-resourced planning policy functions being given priority over other local authority 'front line' services.

- Regional Spatial Strategies (RSSs) have been stalled by legal challenges, and their interim reviews are introducing more uncertainty to the strategic context.
- More fundamentally, the Conservatives have given clear warning that time spent on many current plans is likely to be wasted should they get into power next summer, with the regional planning bodies first in their line of fire.

How can we engineer a new form of efficient plan-making which has a meaningful strategic context? Joint sub-regional working between districts and boroughs is being encouraged, but so often results in tears when the difficult issues need to be grasped. Perhaps we should look again at the other great change introduced by the 2004 Act and wonder if those County planning departments were such a bad thing after all.

● **John Watson** is a Partner with Cushman & Wakefield (John.watson@eur.cushwake.com) and was one of the co-ordinators of the joint TCPA and Cushman & Wakefield survey of planners' views on the LDF system. The views expressed here are personal.

Note

- 1 J. Watson and M. Crook: 'Fewer plans, more planning?'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2009, Vol. 78, Mar., 123-4