

Research Report 2 – Survey on Public Availability and Use of
Guidance on Planning Applications – YouGov

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Guidance on Planning Applications – YouGov

Published by Communities and Local Government on behalf of the Killian Pretty Review

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1 Background

1.1 Research method

The research was undertaken using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods. These were:

- A quantitative survey of users of the planning system
- A quantitative survey of potential users of the planning system
- Three focus groups – two with householders who had submitted an application and one with businesses

Users of the planning system

Users of the planning system were identified as those who had submitted a planning application in the last five years. Users include businesses as well as households but the focus for the research was primarily upon the small, occasional user rather than large developers, retail and commercial users. The reason for this focus was that larger users often have in-house teams or retain specialist advisors to guide them through the planning process. The Killian Pretty Review identified the availability of guidance to the small, occasional user as an area requiring further research.

To obtain the sample of users YouGov surveyed a representative sample of 5,000 adults in England. They were asked whether they had submitted a planning application at any time in the last five years regardless of whether the application had been successful. From this question it was possible to identify 623 users of the planning system. Of these, 95% submitted an application for an extension or minor household works, consent in a conservation area or listed building consent. The remainder submitted an application on behalf of their business or for a housing development of fewer than 10 properties. These figures are in line with the overall breakdown of applications submitted to local authorities - 96.7% of applications are for minor or household developments. This means that the survey is broadly in line with the characteristics of users of the planning system.

A total of 623 people took part in the planning system user survey.

Potential users of the planning system

The sample for this element of the survey was also derived from the representative sample of 5,000 people. Respondents who had not submitted a planning application in the last five years were asked how likely they were to submit an application in the next three years.

A total of 306 potential users took part in the survey.

Focus groups

Three focus groups were held online; two were held with users of the planning system who had submitted an application relating to an extension to their home or other minor development. The third group was held with people who had submitted an application on behalf of a business or for a development of 10 houses or more. The focus groups aimed to highlight the key differences in the use and need for guidance between small (occasional) users and larger users who are more likely to have access to agents or advisors.

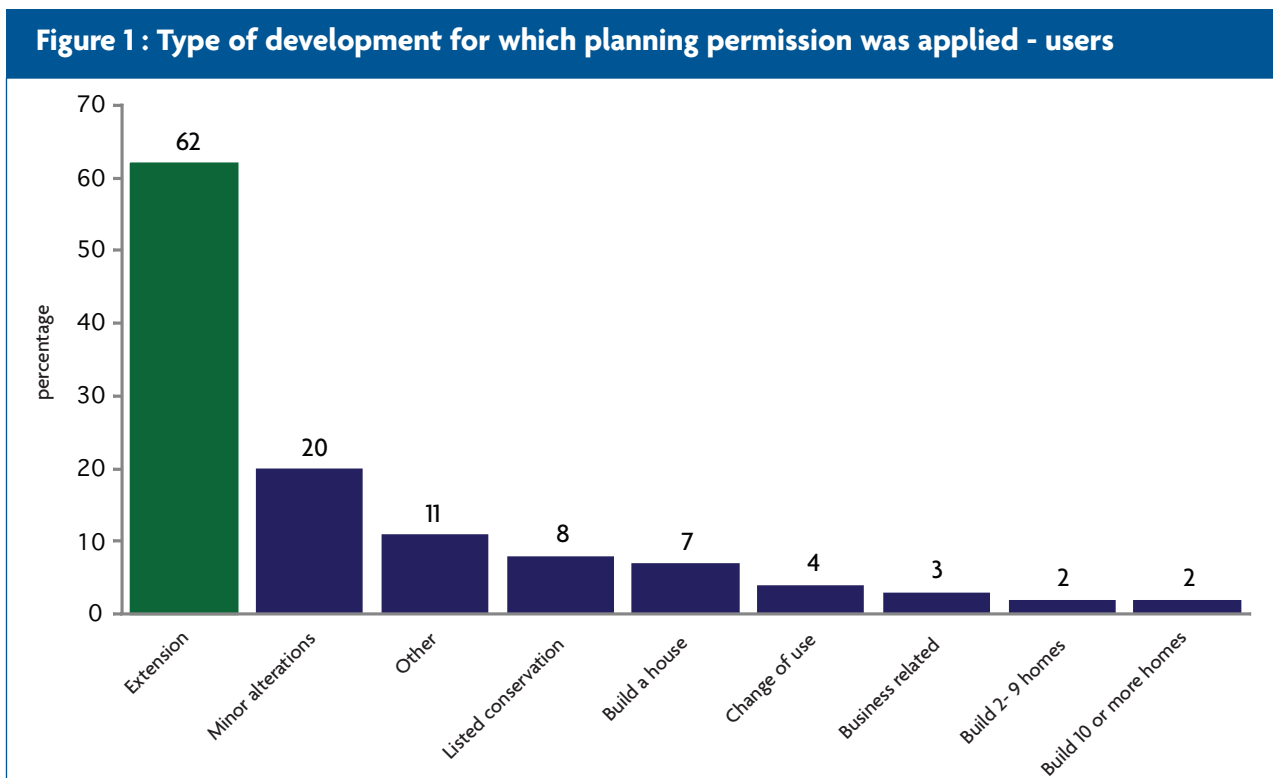
2 Using the planning system

Before discussing the use and need for guidance we will give a brief overview of the developments for which planning permission was sought, whether discussions were held with the local planning officer prior to submitting an application and how effective these discussions were.

It should be remembered that the focus of the research is on small occasional business and domestic users of the system so the chart below excludes, by default, large businesses and developers.

2.1 What is planning permission applied for?

The chart below shows that for over eight in 10 respondents permission was applied for an extension or for minor works to their property (including works to a listed building or where the property is within a conservation area).



Base = 623

The respondents in the sample of users are predominantly one off or very occasional users of the system. Three quarters have only submitted a planning application once in the last five years with a further 15 per cent submitting two applications (which could also have included a second application for the same permission).

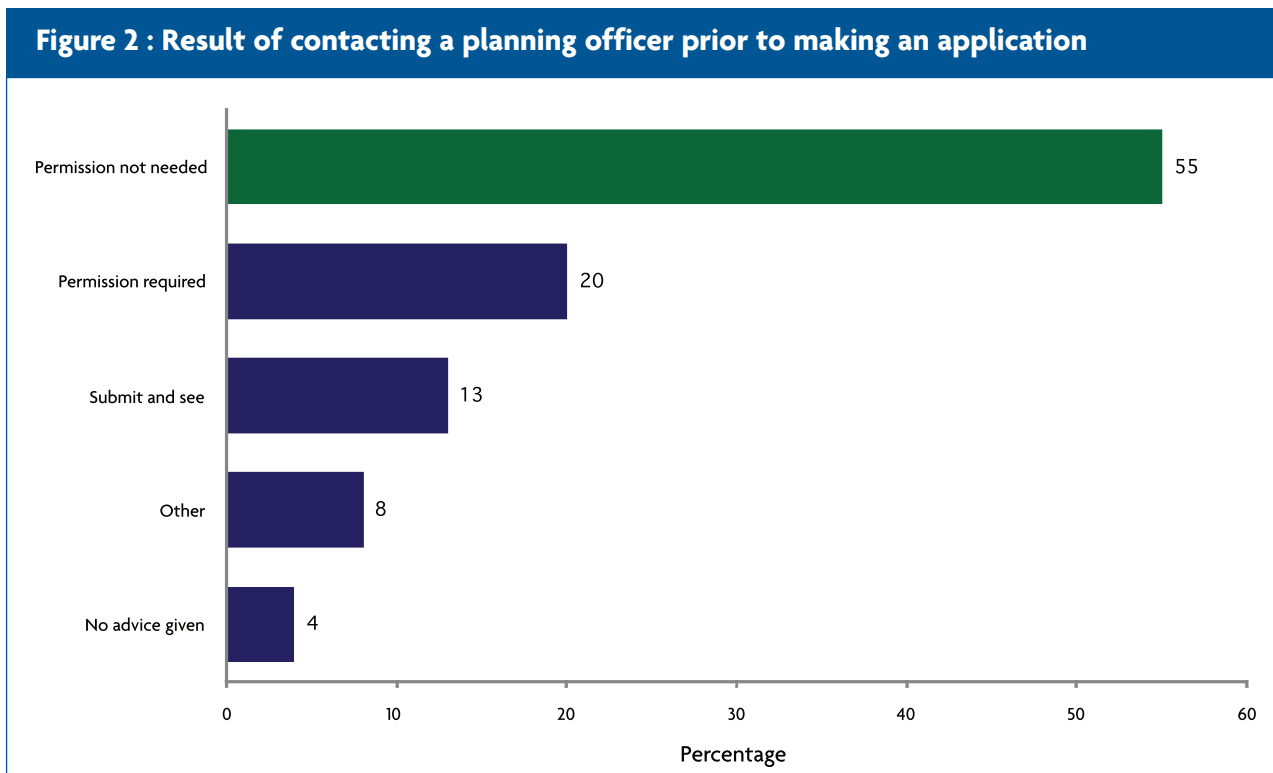
Although a five year cut off was used to define users of the planning system, the majority of respondents (72 per cent) had used the system within the last three years so memories of it should have been reasonably fresh.

For this report potential users have been defined as individuals who are likely to apply for planning permission in the next three years. When asked what they were most likely to apply for, the distribution between different types of development was similarly to that of users of the system. Among potential users 64 per cent stated that they intended to extend their home. Minor alternations such as pruning trees, erecting walls and installing satellite dishes were second on the agenda with 18 per cent stating this.

2.2 Talking to the planning department

The ability to be able to talk to a planning officer prior to making an application can often clarify whether or not planning permission is required, saving both the applicant and the planning authority time and money.

Just under one in 10 of the sample (nine per cent) had contacted a planning officer to discuss whether permission would be required. Over half of these were told that permission would not be required as the chart shows.



Base = 265

A further 13 per cent stated that they were told to submit an application and see what the result would be. The 'other' category refers to advice that people needed about things such as rural policy, conservation areas and the difference between planning permission and Building Regulations consent.

Those who had contacted a planning officer seemed to be reasonably positive about the experience with the planning officer being of help:

I had an informal consultation with the planning officer who even produced some sketches for us.

Attendees at the focus groups were also very positive about being able to speak to a planner before the application stage:

Initially there did not seem to be a lot of guidance about but having visited the local council offices found them extremely helpful and was provided with plenty of guidance both oral and written.

Often this discussion was used in conjunction with other forms of guidance, with the planning officer helping to clarify what could be thought of as confusing written guidance:

There is a lot of information out there. The main problem is collating the information and working out what you need to do. Having people to talk to certainly helped.

However, some business users complained that informal pre-application guidance was often not particularly useful:

You just get to talk to the kids fresh out of college and whatever they say gets overturned by their supervisor.

In similar vein a business user at the focus group stated:

I think they're fairly opaque with everyone. They're unlikely to give a yes or no answer in person without it disappearing for consideration for a while.

3 Using an architect, planning consultant or advisor

In this section, the use of agents, the reasons why they are used, and the extent to which agents are able to access guidance and advice is discussed.

3.1 Using an agent

Two thirds of users appointed an architect, agent or advisor during the planning process. This figure includes six per cent of respondents who used an in-house team connected with their business or work.

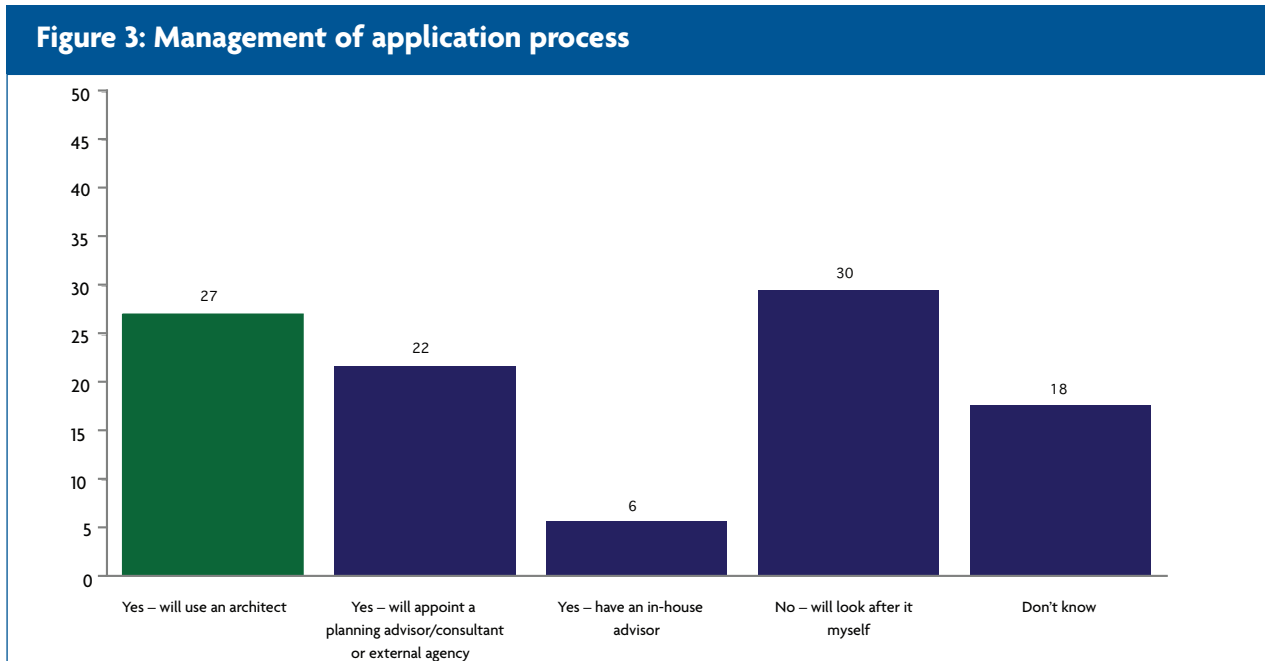
Agent used	Per cent
Architect	43
Planning advisor/consultant	21
In-house team	6
No agent used	33
Total (%)	100
Size of sample	623

Over half (53 per cent) of all applicants applying for permission for an extension used an architect as did 35 per cent of those requiring listed building or Conservation area consent. In relation to the use of advisors or consultants, one fifth of people seeking permission for an extension used a consultant and 30 per cent of those requiring listed building or Conservation area consent used one.

In-house teams were primarily used by business although there is some indication of householders informally using teams connected with their place of work.

Only one third of users navigated the planning system without appointing an architect or external advisor. Looking at the results for each category of permission shows that only 22 per cent of respondents who applied for an extension did so without using an agent. By comparison nearly six in 10 respondents applying for minor works or a change of use did so without the use of an agent.

When applying for planning permission, 30 per cent of potential users planned to look after the application themselves followed by 27 per cent who intended to use an architect.



Base: All likely to apply for planning permission in next three years (n=305)

Almost a fifth of potential users were still unsure as to who is best placed to look after the application. However, it is likely that many of the ‘don’t knows’ will appoint an agent if the figures for current users are any guide.

Opinions on how to look after applications best seem to differ among the genders as shown in the table below.

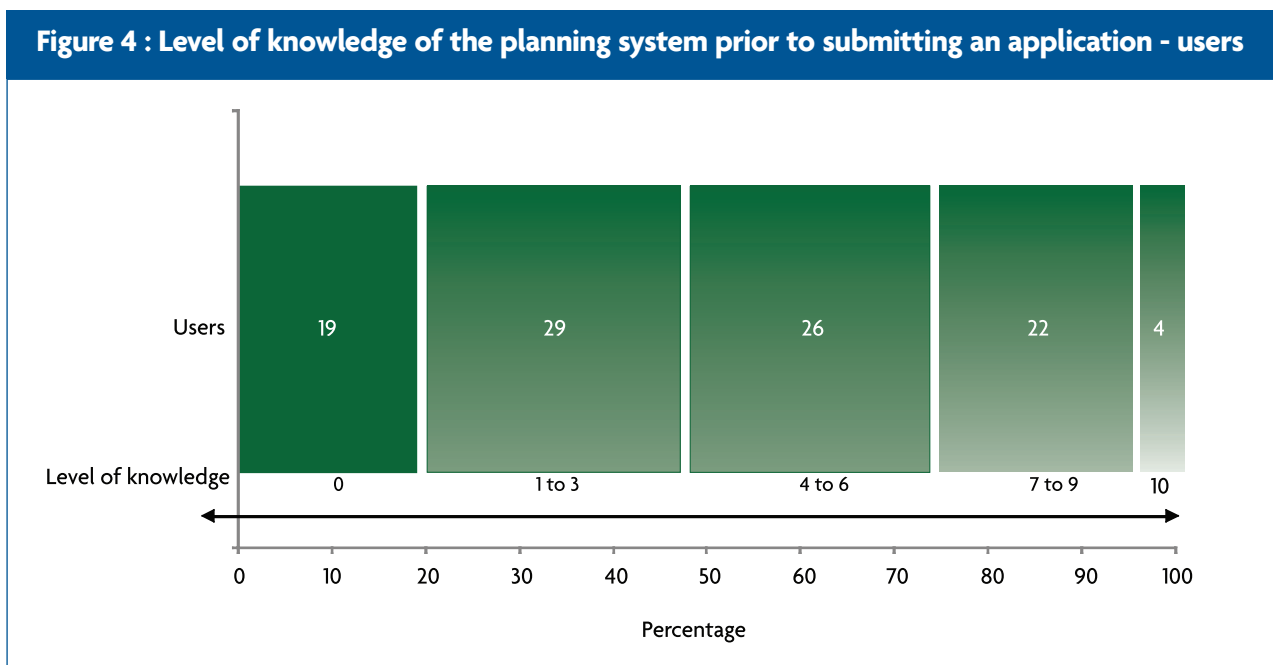
The results of this survey would appear to indicate that men are far more likely to appoint a planning advisor or external agency with 29 per cent stating this compared to only 14 per cent of women. On the other hand women are more likely to use an architect, while more men are happy to take control of the process themselves.

Table 2: Gender comparison on how best to manage the application process

	Men %	Women %
Yes – will use an architect	24	30
Yes – will appoint a planning advisor/consultant or external agency	29	14
Yes – have an in-house advisor	5	6
No – will look after it myself	32	28
Don't know	12	23
Base	152	154

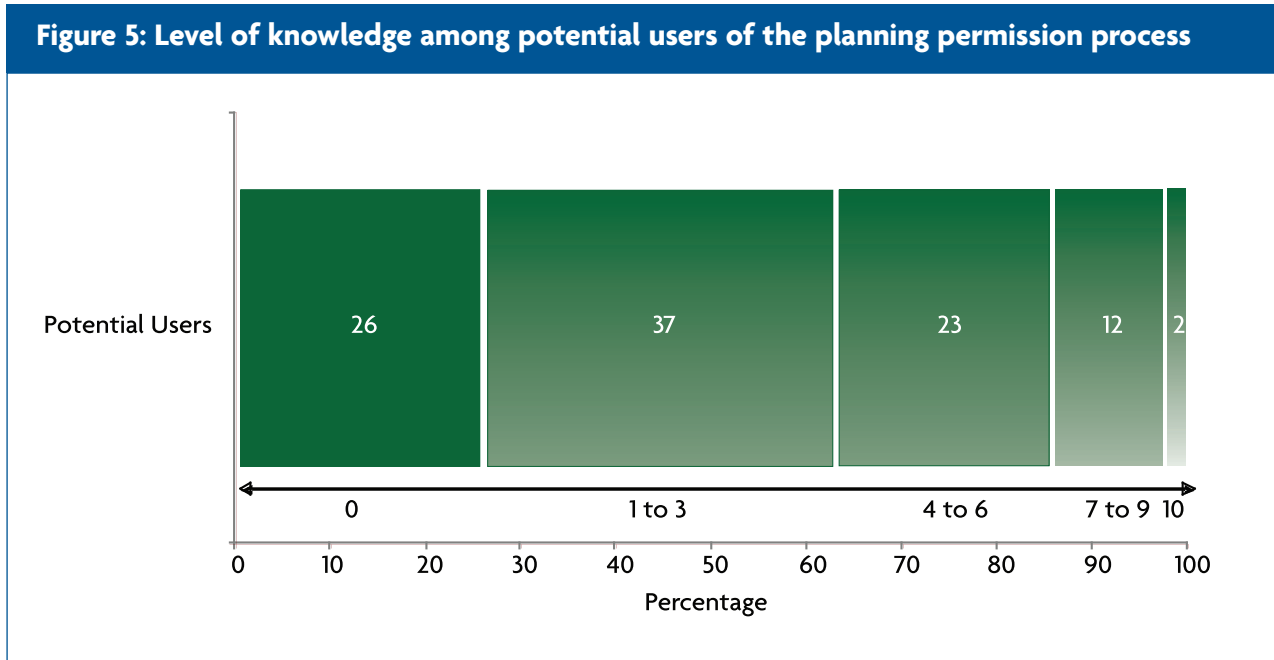
3.2 Knowledge of the planning system

Part of the reason for the use of agents is the low level of knowledge that respondents have of the planning system. Respondents were asked to rate their knowledge of the planning system prior to making an application on a scale of zero to 10. On this scale zero represents no knowledge at all and 10 represents a very good knowledge. One fifth of current users said that they had no knowledge at all of the process prior to submitting an application and, as the graphic shows, knowledge of the planning process is generally poor.



If a rating of seven or more can be considered as having at least a good knowledge of the process then it can be seen that about only about one quarter of respondents have such a knowledge.

Potential users do not have a great deal of knowledge about the planning permission process either. Using the same zero -10 scale the majority (63 per cent) gave a score between zero and three.



Just over one quarter of potential users have no knowledge of the planning system at all.

Current users were asked during the discussion group why potential users may find the task more daunting than it actually is and one participant said:

‘Think it’s the way the information is presented comes across as daunting’

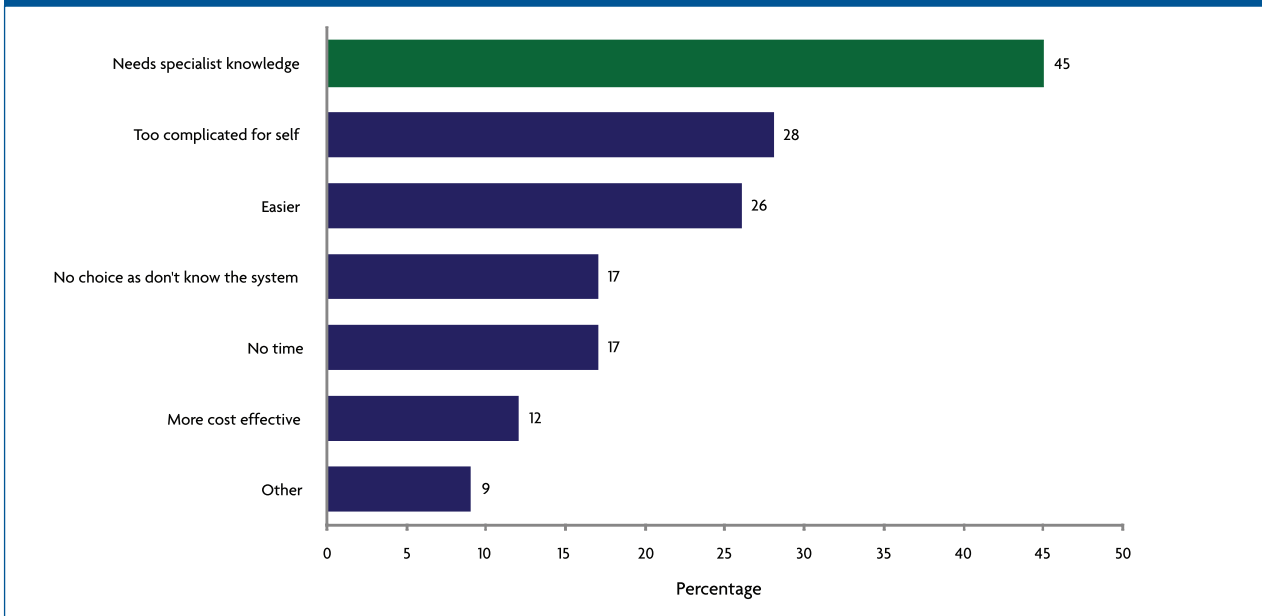
This might indicate that if information about the planning permission process is conveyed in a more accessible manner it will not only increase the level of knowledge but help potential users feel more comfortable about approaching the issue. Experience seems to be key as to why current users feel generally more knowledgeable about the process than potential users, as one participant said:

‘Experience makes everything easier’

3.3 Why agents are used

The lack of knowledge that respondents have in the planning system is evident in the reasons that they give for employing an agent. A feeling that the planning system requires specialist knowledge, is too complicated for the applicant to do on their own or it is somehow easier to let an agent do it were the three most common reasons.

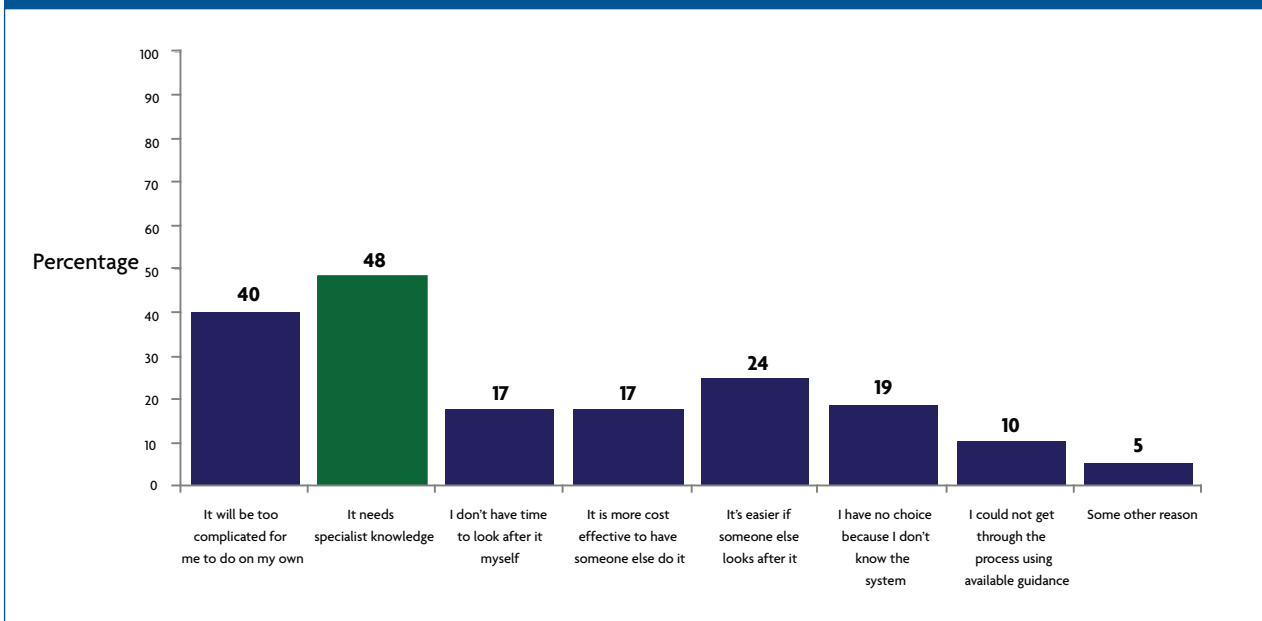
Figure 6: Reasons for using an agent - users



Note that percentages sum to more than 100% because respondents could choose more than one answer

Potential users who said they would appoint advisors were also asked for reasons behind their intention to do so and almost half (48 per cent) stated that the planning process required specialist knowledge. This was followed by the process being too complicated to be handled by oneself with 40 per cent stating this. This figure is significantly higher than that for current users.

Figure 7: Reasons for appointing an advisor – potential users



Base: All who are likely to appoint an advisor (n=161)

4 Obtaining guidance

In this section the need for guidance will be discussed. The section starts by discussing guidance in general and, if it was needed in the process, from which source respondents obtained it. The section then examines specific issues raised by users of the planning system on which they identified the need for guidance. This part of the section then examines the three most important issues for which users of the planning system believe guidance is needed.

4.1 The need for guidance – general overview

Both users and non users were given a list of areas for which guidance can be needed. They were then asked to say whether they thought enough guidance was available, whether some was available but more was required or whether there was no information available.

Current users have higher scores for 'enough guidance available' when compared to potential users. Having been through the process, current users are perhaps more aware of where to access the information. Nonetheless, the scores for some of the issues where respondents believe that either no information is available or that it is insufficient are considerably high.

Table 3: Amount of guidance on planning process issues

Issues	Potential Users (%)			Current Users (%)		
	Enough	Insufficient	None	Enough	Insufficient	None
Overall Planning process	12	45	8	26	49	8
Developments requiring planning permission	17	41	7	29	48	7
Length of planning process	14	38	9	27	42	12
Information needed for application	17	41	5	33	45	5
Costs	18	36	9	28	36	8
Process if an objection is received	14	39	7	23	42	11
Approval/ refusal of planning permission	23	35	6	30	40	11
How a decisions made	12	41	10	21	44	14
Granting permission with conditions means	14	37	9	24	43	10
Appealing a refusal	16	35	6	24	39	10
Planning permission & building regulations	20	37	8	31	44	8
Base			306			625

The table shows that for each issue only a small minority believe that no guidance exists. However, a significant proportion state that the guidance available is not sufficient and more should be made available. The issue here is not so much about the availability of guidance but about the quality and scope of guidance that already exists.

How decisions are made seems to be the most common issue among current users that requires guidance with 58 per cent stating this. For potential users however, guidance on the overall planning process seems to be top of their list with 53 per cent stating that there is either insufficient or no guidance available on this issue. This links back to the overall lack of knowledge among potential users and the pressing need for a simplistic guide on how the system works.

There is a distinct difference between domestic users and business users in relation to whether sufficient guidance is available. 71 per cent of business users stated that there was either insufficient guidance or no guidance on the overall planning process compared with 57 per cent of domestic users. Business users significantly outscored domestic users in relation to guidance being insufficient on the overall length of planning process (66 per cent as against 55 per cent) and what happens if an objection is received (65 per cent as against 53 per cent).

During the discussion group current users were asked how easy it was to find the initial information they needed and how useful the literature was. Some said it was very easy to find and that the literature available was very useful:

'Published information and info on the net can give you a very good idea of what you need to do'

However, one of the key issues is the need for something that the lay person can understand:

'There are so many technical terms used when reading through the planning literature. A non-practitioner needs some other point of reference or at least a glossary.'

4.2 The need for guidance – the experience of users of the planning system

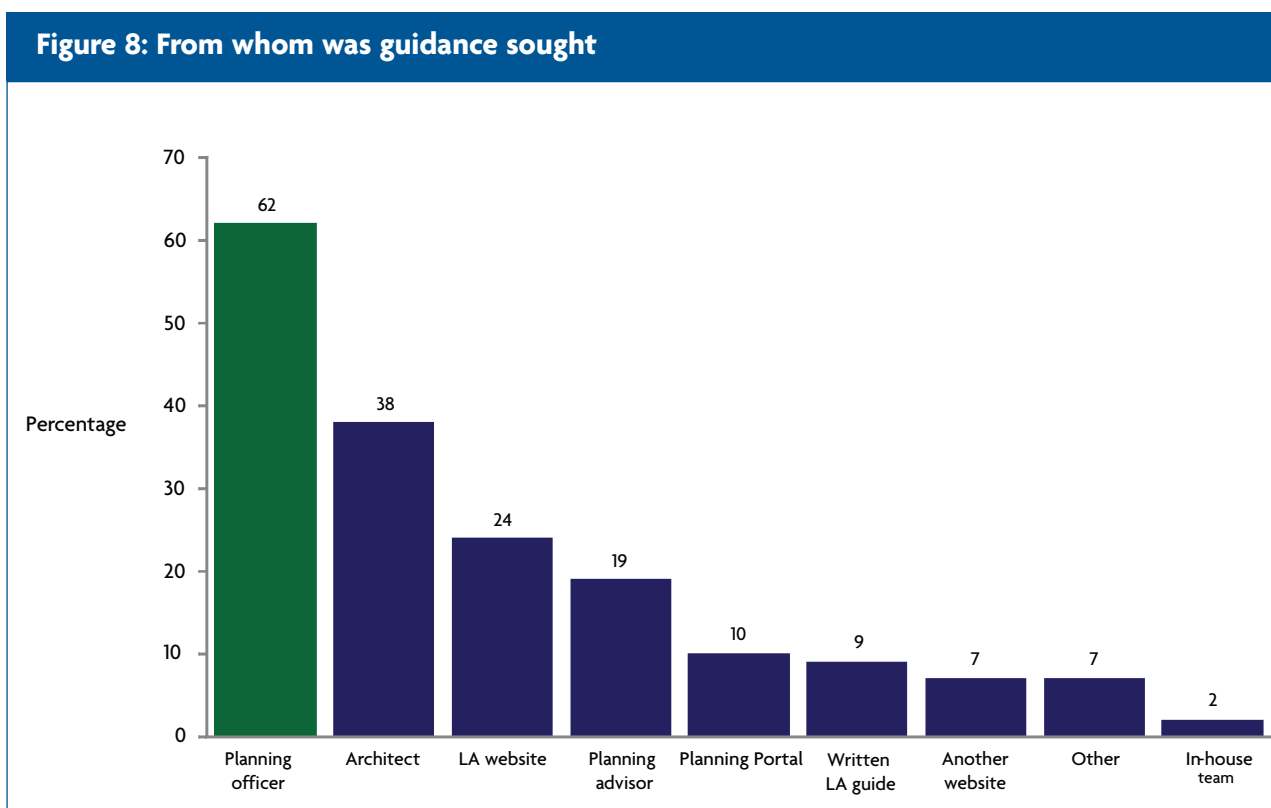
Just over one third (37 per cent) of current users had an issue arise for which they or their advisor needed guidance. Interestingly those respondents who had not appointed an agent were slightly less likely to have a need for guidance (33 per cent) compared with those who had appointed an agent (38 per cent).

One third of current users who needed guidance during the process stated that the issue related to the overall process rather than being a technical issue specific to their application. Over half (55 per cent) stated that it was a technical issue with one in ten stating it was both technical and procedural. Later in the section we discuss specific issues for which guidance was needed in more detail but in summary the issues raised included:

- Making changes to the application
- Clarification on materials
- Design
- Size and layout issues
- Windows

The survey shows that there was a difference between business users and ‘domestic’ users on the type of advice needed. For domestic users needing guidance 62 per cent stated that their need was for technical guidance on issues relating to their application. For business users, there was a much greater need for guidance on the procedure rather than on technicalities – 46 per cent of business users identified this.

Respondents were asked from whom they sought guidance. It should be noted that many respondents used a variety of different sources. For example they might check the local planning department website and then contact their architect or ring the planning officer.



Note that percentages sum to more than 100% because respondents could choose more than one answer.

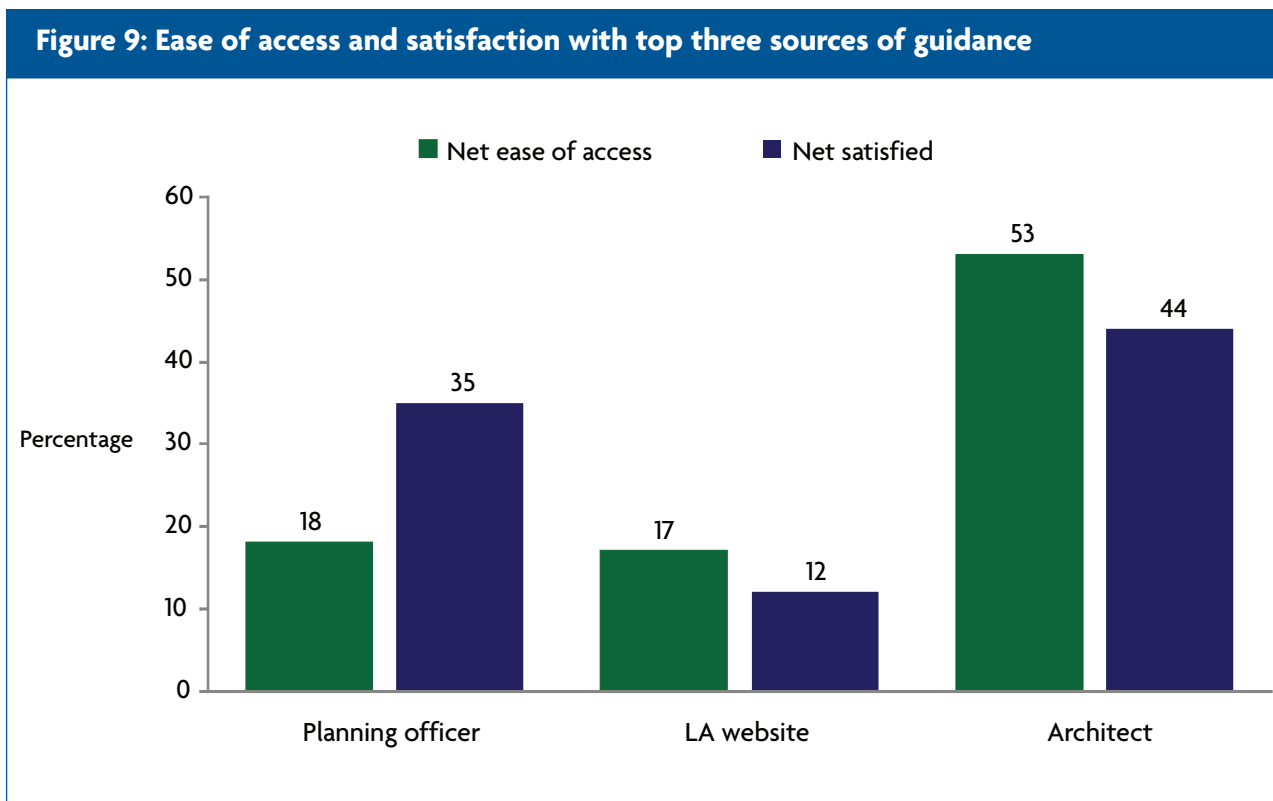
The chart shows that six in 10 respondents approached the planning officer for advice. As might be

expected applicants without an agent were more likely to approach a planning officer for advice but the difference between those without an agent and those with an agent was not so great to suggest that having an agent by-passes the need for the applicant to contact the planning officer. Of all those respondents with a need for guidance who had an agent, 59 per cent approached the planning officer. The corresponding figure for those with a guidance need who had not appointed an agent was 68 per cent. Interestingly, 30 per cent of respondents who had an architect did not approach the architect in relation to their need for guidance.

Only one in 10 went to the Planning Portal for guidance and even fewer consulted written local authority guidance although almost a quarter referred to the local authority website.

One of the key issues is the ease by which applicants are able to access a source of guidance and their satisfaction with its effectiveness. It is only possible to undertake this analysis for the top three sources of guidance or advice as the number of cases for the remaining sources are too few for a meaningful analysis.

The chart below, therefore, presents data for the planning officer, architect and local authority website. The chart shows net ease of access and net satisfaction. Net ease of access is defined as all respondents who said that accessing the guidance was very easy or easy minus those who said it was difficult or very difficult. Net satisfaction is defined in the same way. The net score is used because it is a more accurate assessment of the strength of opinion.



The chart shows that ease of access to an architect and satisfaction with the advice that they give score very highly with respondents using these sources for advice. The finding for planning officers is interesting. It shows a much lower net ease of access score (36 points lower than that of architects) but a satisfaction with advice score that was only nine points fewer. The point here is that planning officers are perceived as hard to access but when they are they tend to give advice that people are happy with. The satisfaction with advice score for planners is deflated by the high proportion of respondents (18 per cent) who said they were very dissatisfied with the advice given. It is not possible to tell from the findings whether this figure is a reflection of the quality of advice a respondent received or whether the advice they received was not what they wanted to hear.

Business users are more likely to want to access advice from planning officers and seem to have a better chance of accessing them. The net ease of access score given to planning officers from business users is 10 percentage points higher than that given by domestic users.

4.3 The need for guidance – specific issues

Users of the planning system were asked to identify their top three issues for which guidance and advice is needed. These issues were identified by respondents without prompting from a defined list. To analyse the information we have combined all the first, second and third choices and grouped them into a number of common themes. These are displayed in the table below.

The table shows that the top three issues for which publically available guidance is needed are those relating to what planning permission is required for, how to navigate the system and regulations into the size and location of developments. These three issues relate to achieving a basic understanding of the system. Issues such as how long it takes, what information needs to go with a planning application and those relating to design and layout are also identified as important.

Table 4 : Most important areas for which publically available guidance is needed

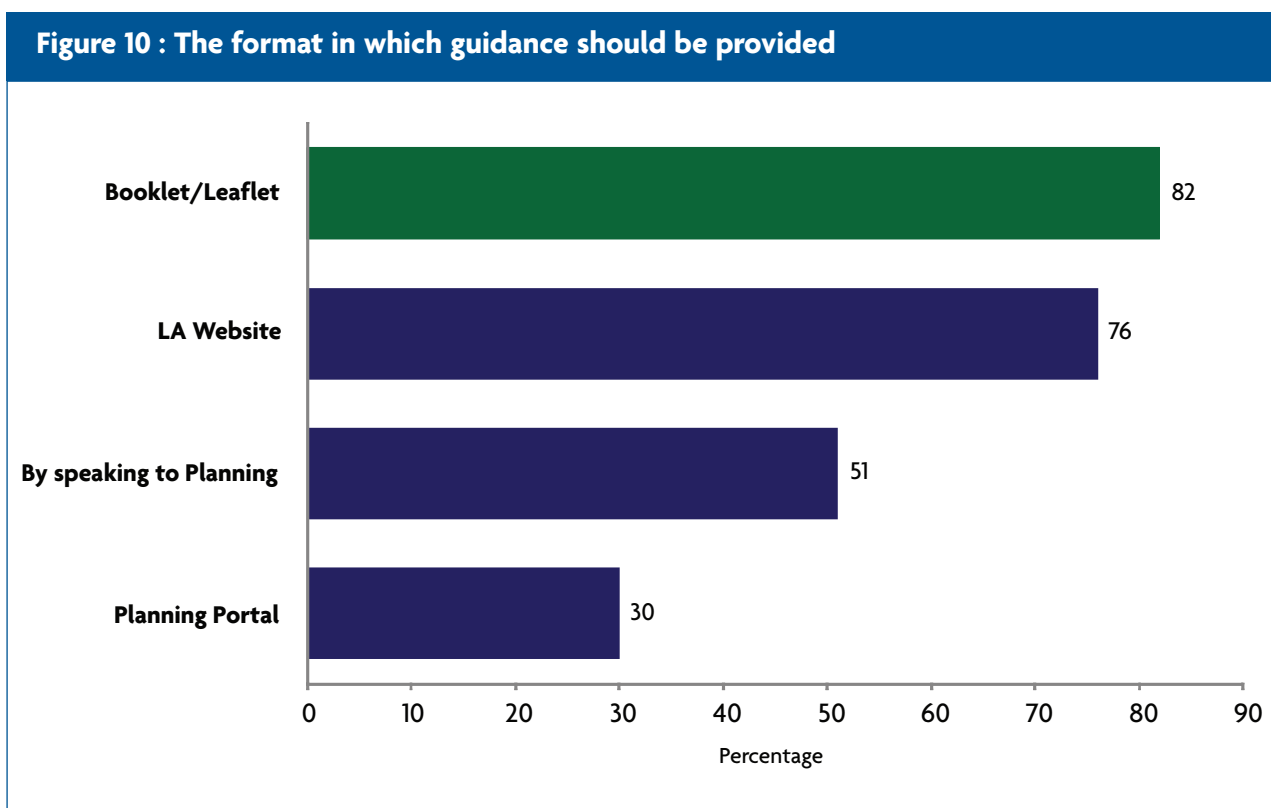
Issue	%
What is permitted development/when is planning permission required/not required.	13
A guide to the whole system/lay persons guide/how to navigate the system	11
Regulations in relation to size of development/location of development	10
Issues relating to specific developments – height/ emissions/ structure/ windows/ light/ space/density/ design	6
What information needs to be included with the application	5
How long the process takes	5
Talking to a planning officer before an application is submitted	4
Conservation area/listed building consent	4
What it costs	3
Talking to a planning officer after the application is submitted	3
Dealing with neighbours/consulting with other parties	3
Objections – how are these dealt with	3
Dealing with conflicting advice from the planners	3
Understanding local plans	3
How to apply for permission without needing an agent.	2
Materials that can be used	2
How to find an agent/architect/advisor	2
Where to go for independent advice	2
Loft conversations	1
Relationship with building regs/other standards	1
Other issues	7
Size of sample (total responses)	315

Respondents were asked whether they thought that enough publically available guidance existed on the issue they raised. Only about four in 10 respondents believed that there was sufficient guidance already available for the top three issues.

4.4 Who should provide guidance?

Both potential users and those who have had experience of the planning process were asked who they thought should be providing the guidance and what format it should take. The overwhelming view was that it should be the local authority that provided it (88 per cent).

In relation to the format that the guidance should take there were a variety of options mentioned.



Note that percentages sum to more than 100% because respondents could choose more than one answer

The chart shows that most respondents favour a booklet or leaflet made available through the local authority with information also available on the website. About half of all respondents thought that guidance should be available through talking with a planning officer. This is a comparatively low figure given that nearly eight in 10 applicants who spoke to a planning officer prior to submitting an application found it helpful to so do.

5 Conclusions

The planning system is regarded by many as complicated and requiring specialist knowledge. It can be no surprise that many decide to appoint an agent to help them navigate the system. Only one third go through the system without professional help. Clearly in many cases the agent is an architect who has responsibility for drawing up plans but even so there is evidence from the survey that the planning system is not something that most people feel can be navigated easily.

Part of the issue here is the perceived lack of guidance about when planning permission is required and what the overall process involves. As might be expected, many potential users do not know where to go for advice and guidance with fewer than one in five believing that there is sufficient guidance available to inform them about what applying for permission involves, how long it takes, how decisions are made and what it costs. Although people who have been through the system are more informed about what is available, on average less than one third of users believe that there is sufficient information available on the fundamentals of the planning system.

The planning officer is the first port of call for many users requiring guidance including those who have appointed an advisor. However, there is a perception that planning officers are difficult to access but the advice they give is usually well regarded. The survey suggests that business users have much better access to planners. Many domestic users of the system leave it to their architect to speak with the planners as they are likely to 'speak the same language'. The survey strongly suggests that being able to speak to a planning officer prior to submitting an application will prevent the need for a significant number of applications. This can only be of benefit for consumers and planning departments alike.

Local authority websites are not considered to be easy to access in relation to information and not particularly helpful. Given that 76 per cent of respondents stated that guidance should be made available on the local authority website, the survey suggests that there is a lot more that local authorities can do to make information accessible.

The issues upon which more guidance is needed relate to the system as a whole. Issues like how to navigate the system, what can and cannot be developed and information on the size and location of proposed developments were all raised by respondents based upon their own experience of the system. Interestingly there is a difference between the guidance needs of business users and those of domestic users with businesses more likely to want guidance on the overall procedure rather than on technical issues specific to their application.

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