

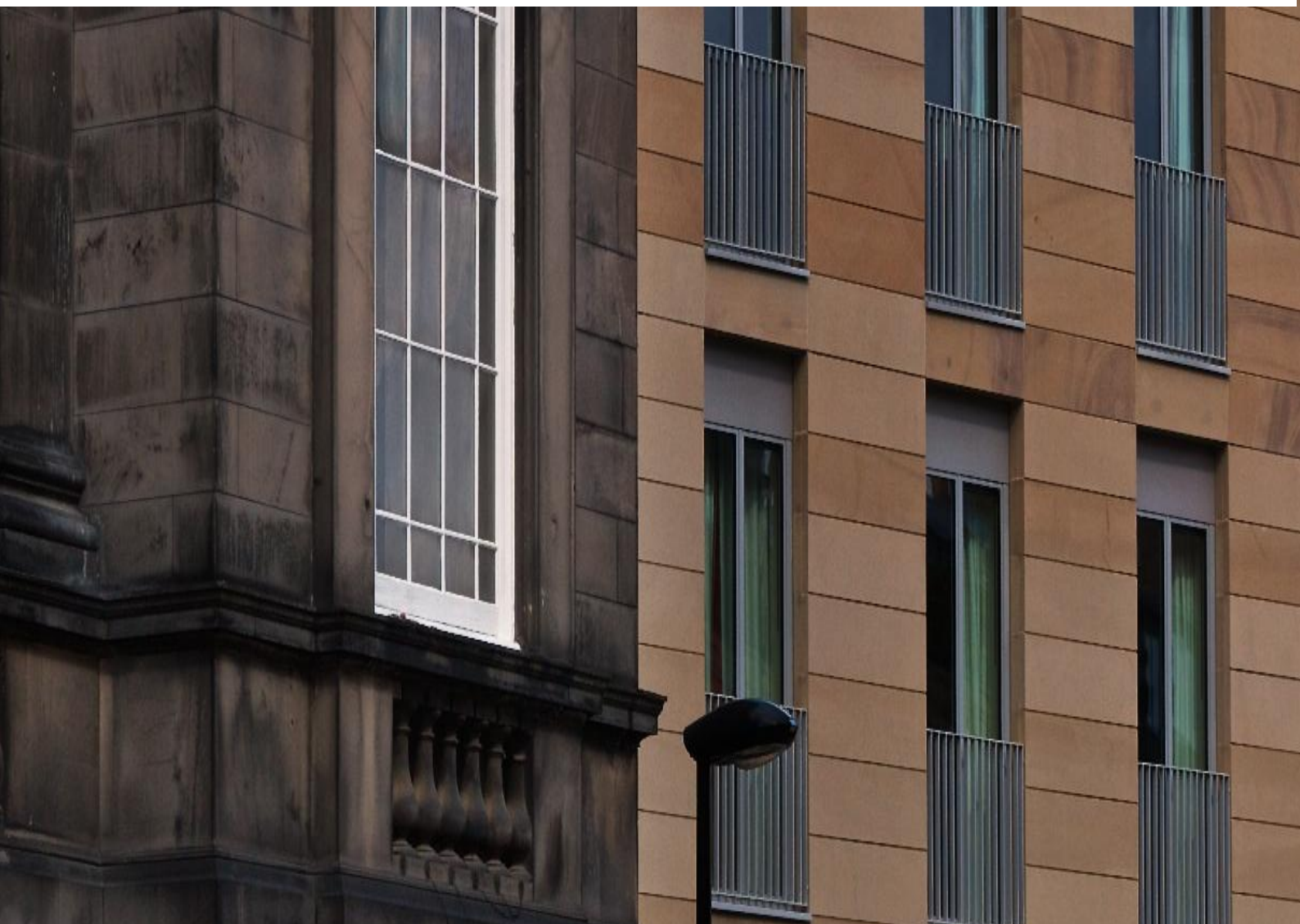
Ipsos MORI



Modernising the planning system - service users' views

Research report

September 2011



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Executive Summary

- Among recent applicants, awareness of changes for dealing with planning applications reflected likelihood of having made previous applications. The majority of recent agent and developer applicants were fully aware of the changes. The majority of recent householder applicants were not aware that the process had changed.
- Agents, businesses and developers were most likely to have been made aware of the changes through their own organisation. Among those aware, householders were most likely to have heard about the recent changes from the council's website.
- Despite different levels of experience of the planning process, the vast majority of all types of applicants said they were satisfied with the application process and understood the decision that was made.
- Most applicants agreed that the council dealt with queries within a reasonable timescale and kept them sufficiently well informed throughout the process. This is despite the follow-up depth interviews highlighting very different expectations across the groups.
- The majority of householder applicants agreed their application was dealt with in the expected timescale, compared to less than half of developers. Nevertheless, developers were more understanding of delays on large or sensitive applications.
- Meeting with planning officers and getting advice over the phone from a planning department were the services found most helpful by householder applicants. Where householders had experienced difficulties with their application, they felt that these could have been dealt with better through pre-application discussions with the council.
- Detailed pre-application discussion is standard practice for large-scale and sensitive applications. Most developers and their planning consultants will have met the council at least once prior to the application to discuss design, potential objections and necessary requirements of the application. As a result, potential difficulties are addressed before the application is submitted.
- The introduction of statutory requirements for pre-application consultation with communities has not had a significant impact on the process of large-scale applications. Most developers said statutory requirements fall below recognised best practice on large-scale or sensitive developments.

- On the whole, agent, business and developer applicants who had experience of submitting a planning application prior to April 2009 felt little had changed since then.
 - most agents and developers said little or no progress has been made towards ensuring the planning system pro-actively supports development, is more efficient and effective, and is more transparent
 - fewer than half of agents and business agree that engagement has improved between councils and applicants
 - a minority of all experienced applicants agree that applications are processed more quickly or that the length of time involved in submitting applications is shorter
- However, most agree the quality and availability of information has improved – particularly the information received by developers – and there is optimism that greater permitted development rights will improve efficiency and free greater capacity within planning departments.

1. Introduction

“Growth requires development, and the role of planning is to ensure that this development is encouraged and managed in a sustainable way”

– Scottish Government, *Modernising the Planning System*

The Planning, etc. (Scotland) Act 2006 was the culmination of extensive Scottish Government consultation to improve the planning system. It aims to make the process simpler and more efficient, improve accessibility to support development and growth, improve engagement with, and trust from, local communities, and offer greater transparency of planning decisions.

The Act itself, along with secondary legislation and subsequent Planning Advice Notices, outlines changes to both Development Planning and Development Management aspects of the planning system. The changes, which were implemented in 2009, include:

- categorising planning applications into a three-tier hierarchy ('National', 'Major' and 'Local' developments), each with its own procedures proportionate to that tier.
- appeal procedures differ depending on the category of development. Local applications may be decided on appeal to a body of local elected members (a Local Review Body), which replaces the previous process of appealing to Scottish Ministers
- as far as possible, planning has become 'frontloaded' with all stakeholders becoming involved at an early stage in the process
- proposals for Major and National developments must be subject to pre-application consultation with the local community
- responsibility for carrying out neighbour notification has transferred from developers to planning authorities.

In light of the recent changes, Audit Scotland, on behalf of the Accounts Commission and the Auditor General for Scotland, are conducting a performance audit to assess whether the reforms and modernisation of the planning system were making it more economic, efficient and effective. The main aims of this work were to evaluate:

- overall progress made in modernising the planning system; and
- the impact that modernisation is having on councils' performance in managing planning applications.

As part of this, Audit Scotland commissioned Ipsos MORI to undertake research to explore experiences of the changes from the perspective of users of the planning system.

This report presents the findings from that research, combining quantitative and qualitative evidence from those who have used the new planning system. The next section describes the methodology adopted for the research. Subsequent sections detail the main findings from the research.

2. Methodology

This research was designed to inform an understanding of the experiences of four groups who use the planning system:

- householders or domestic applicants
- businesses, ranging from small to large enterprises
- agents, chiefly architects, who submit a planning application on behalf of a domestic applicant or developer
- developers, including large scale private house developers, housing associations and supermarkets.

The study comprised a mixed method design, using both survey and qualitative methods:

- a telephone survey of a sample of householders, small businesses, agents and developers
- two focus groups with householder applicants
- telephone depths interviews with small businesses, agents and developers
- a module of questions on Ipsos MORI's general public survey, the Scottish Public Opinion Monitor.

Each element is outlined in more detail below.

Telephone survey

We carried out interviews in the five local authority areas in which Audit Scotland had carried out in-depth fieldwork in their wider performance audit: Eilean Siar; Dundee City; Falkirk; Renfrewshire; and Scottish Borders. Choosing these five local authorities offered a number benefits:

- it provided synergy between the research and Audit Scotland's wider audit findings
- it made the task of securing sample data from local authorities more manageable

- it built on Audit Scotland's existing relationship with these authorities to help secure data agreements and ensured sample data was passed to Ipsos MORI as early as possible.

We wrote to each local authority requesting access to a sample of all householders, businesses, agents and developers who had made an application since April 2009 (to coincide with when the changes to the planning system came into effect). In order to comply with the Data Protection Act, a data processing agreement was drawn up between Ipsos MORI and/or Audit Scotland and each local authority. The local authorities sent the sample to Ipsos MORI. Any duplicate entries (for example, agents who had made multiple applications over the course of the past two years) were removed from the sample so that each respondent appeared only once in the sample, ensuring that each had an equal chance of selection,

The sample of developers was supplemented by lists from the Scottish Housing Regulator and the Scottish Property Federation.

In total 414 interviews were conducted across the four groups. The table below shows the number of leads available and the number of interviews achieved with each user group. Businesses and Developers were interviewed nationally, not just in the five council areas.

	No. of leads	Achieved no. of interviews
Householders	714	150
Agents	1,412	175
Businesses	168	52
Developers	172	37
TOTAL	2,466	414

Fieldwork for the survey took place from 15th March to 30th March 2011. The interviews were conducted by Ipsos MORI Telephone, using Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI).

Questionnaire design

Four questionnaires (one for each of the four user groups) were designed in partnership between Ipsos MORI and Audit Scotland. In order to allow comparisons across user groups, many of the questions were the same in each questionnaire. However, where appropriate, specific questions were asked of a particular user group. To inform the objectives of the research the questionnaires covered a number of topics, including:

- overall perceptions of making a planning application
- experiences of different aspects of the planning system
- experiences of e-planning
- sources of information and guidance
- experience of making an appeal
- awareness of the recent changes to the planning system
- perceptions of the new system.

Qualitative research

Two focus groups were carried out with householder applicants and a total of 38 semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted out with agents, businesses and developers.

Focus groups with householder applicants

Two focus groups were conducted on the 13th April 2011 (in Renfrewshire) and 14th April 2011 (in Falkirk). These were designed to provide an in-depth understanding of householder applicants' experiences and perceptions of making an application to the planning system.

Participants were recruited from respondents to the telephone survey who had agreed to be re-contacted to take part in follow-up qualitative research. Ten participants were recruited for each group. In total, six participants attended each group. Each participant was paid £25 for attending the focus group.

Semi-structured telephone interviews with businesses, agents and developers

A total of 38 semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with businesses, agents and developers between 6 April 2011 and 20 April 2011:

- 9 with businesses
- 15 with agents
- 14 with developers.

As with householder applicants, participants were recruited from respondents to the telephone survey who had agreed to be re-contacted for the follow-up qualitative research.

Topic guides

Two topic guides (one for the focus groups and one for telephone interviews) were designed by Ipsos MORI with input from Audit Scotland. The main themes covered in the guides were:

- perceptions of each stage of the planning application process
- experience of and views on pre-application engagement and advice
- expectations on timescales for determination
- among businesses, agents and developers, experience of pre-application consultation
- experience of receiving assistance and advice from the council
- experiences of submitting an application
- among businesses, agents and developers, comparisons of the new and old systems
- potential improvements for the future.

Interpretation of qualitative findings

In contrast to the quantitative elements of the project, the aim of qualitative research is not to generalise about the wider population in terms of the prevalence of attitudes or behaviour, but to identify and explore the different issues and themes relating to the planning process. The assumption is that issues and themes affecting participants are a reflection of issues and themes in the wider population. Although the extent to which they apply to the wider population or specific sub-groups cannot

be quantified, the value of qualitative research is in identifying the range of different issues involved and the way in which they affect people.

Gaining a general public perspective

In addition to the survey and follow-up qualitative research among recent users of the planning system, the research design also included a survey of the general public in Scotland to gain an insight into broader perceptions of the planning system. With this in mind, a module of questions was placed on Ipsos MORI's Scottish Public Opinion Monitor¹.

The questions were designed by Audit Scotland in partnership with Ipsos MORI. They covered:

- experience of making, objecting to, or being consulted on a planning application
- the ease of making, objecting to, or being consulted on a planning application
- overall perceptions of the ease and fairness of the planning system.

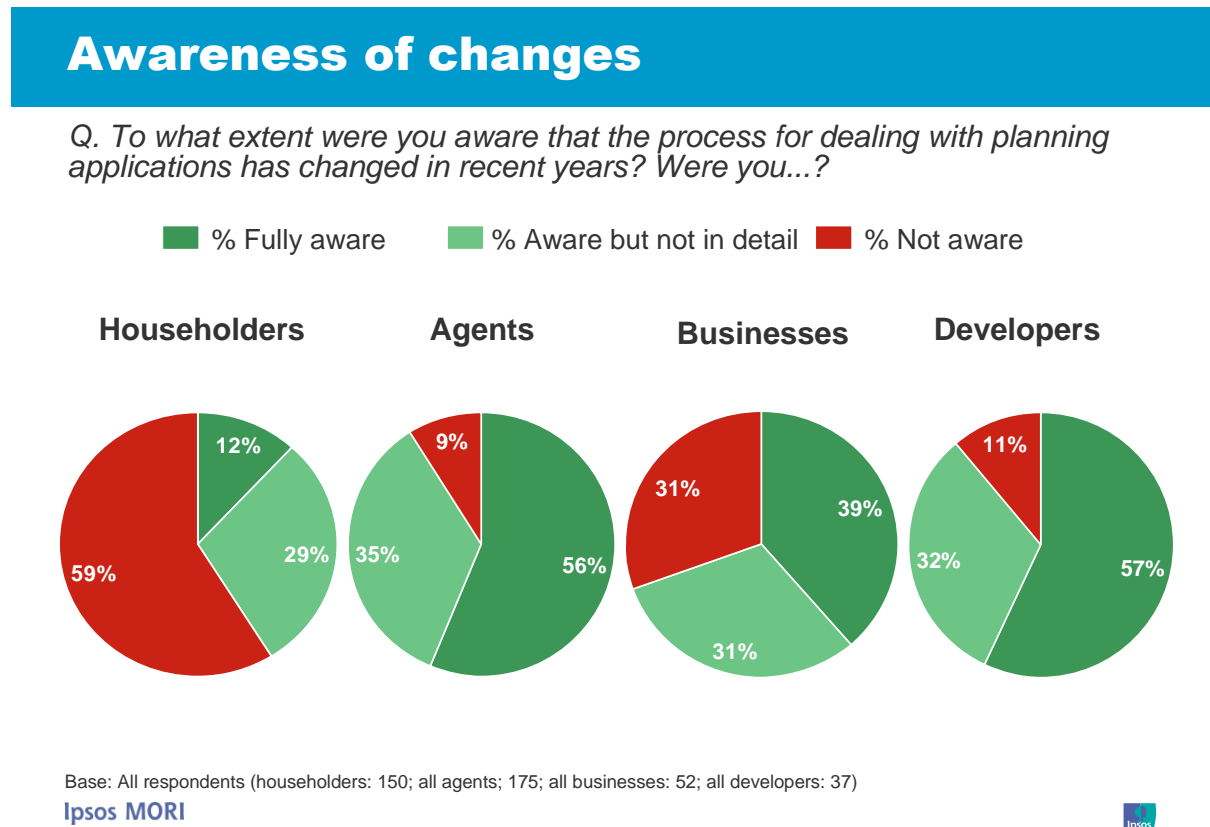
The next sections detail the main findings from the research. This includes analysis of the awareness of the recent changes to the planning system among all four users groups, before looking at their experiences of using each part of the process and their perceptions of how well the changes have worked.

¹ The Scottish Public Opinion Monitor is a multi-client survey carried out by telephone among a random sample of adults across Scotland every quarter. Respondents are selected using random digit dialling and, to ensure the achieved sample is broadly representative of the Scottish adult population (18+), sample quotas are set on age, sex and working status and region. All interviews are conducted using Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI). For this wave, a total of 1,002 respondents across Scotland were interviewed between 14th and 18th April 2011. The data were weighted to match the known profile of the Scottish population by age, sex and working status using census data, by tenure using 2007-2008 Scottish Household data and by public-private sector employment by Scottish Government Quarterly .

3. Awareness of the changes

The section covers awareness among householders, agents, businesses and developers of the changes that have been made to the planning process since April 2009.

Figure 1: Awareness of changes to the planning system



The majority of agents, businesses and developers said they were aware of the changes that have been made to the planning system in recent years. Most householders were not aware of the changes, as illustrated in figure 1 above.

Inevitably, awareness of changes to the planning process reflects the level of experience and frequency of making planning applications. Follow-up depth interviews with agents and developers highlighted that they are regular planning applicants. Despite the numbers of ‘major’ applications having fallen in the last couple of years, most agents continue to submit applications at least monthly and most developers will have submitted at least two or three applications in the last couple of years. Furthermore, 90% of agents interviewed and 70% of developers said

they had been responsible for making planning applications prior to April 2009. Therefore, perhaps unsurprisingly, a little over half of agents and developers said they were fully aware of the changes and most of the rest said they were aware of them if not in detail (see Figure 1). Agents and Developers were also most likely to be affected by the changes – particularly changes in relation to pre-application consultation, e-planning and processing agreements.

Householders and businesses were less likely to be aware of the changes and less likely to have had previous experience of the planning process than agents and developers. The focus groups suggested that, for most householders, their most recent application was their first and they had not investigated the planning process long before preparing their application.

The majority of those submitting an application on behalf of a business were aware of recent changes – although most not in detail. Those interviewed had not employed the advice of an agent and were less likely than agents and developers to have had pre-application discussions with the council. Nevertheless, most of those interviewed said they had been responsible for making a planning application prior to April 2009. These represented a wide variety of businesses, ranging from small businesses applying for changes to their premises to large organisations that make frequent and large planning applications, including major utilities and infrastructure maintenance companies.

A further influence on level of awareness is access to information (see Table 1 below). Most agents, businesses and developers were made aware of the changes through their own organisation and a significant proportion through a representative organisation. These sources are not available to householders. Even householders who were aware were most likely to have become aware of the changes through their council's website, via their agent or through the media. Unlike other audiences, householders were unlikely to have become aware of the changes through accessing the Scottish Government website.

Table 1: How did applicants become aware of the changes?

<i>Q. How did you become aware of the changes? Was it...?</i>				
	Householders	Agents	Businesses	Developers
	%	%	%	%
Base: all those aware of changes	(62)	(159)	(36)	(33)
Scottish Government website	13	42	50	58
Through own organisation	N/A	60	56	58
Council website	32	55	53	42
Through an agent	27	N/A	14	36
Through a representative body	N/A	39	36	39
Local or national media	26	18	28	30

4. Experience of the process

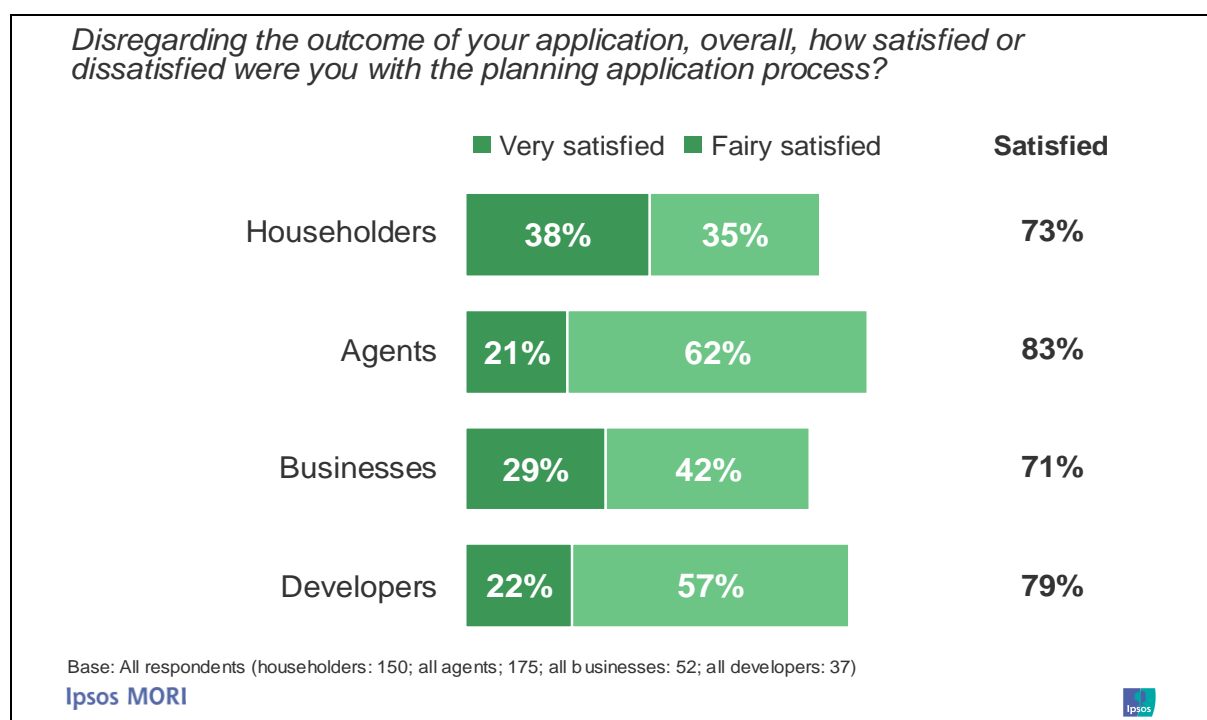
This section covers the experience of recent applicants. This includes overall satisfaction with the process, understanding of the decision, engagement with the council and the timescale of the application.

Overall satisfaction with the process

Despite significantly different levels of experience of the planning process, the majority of householders, agents, businesses and developers were satisfied with the planning process (see Figure 2 below).

Agents were most likely to say they were satisfied with the process, while applicants from businesses were least likely to say they were satisfied. Nevertheless, around a third of householders and businesses said they were 'very satisfied'.

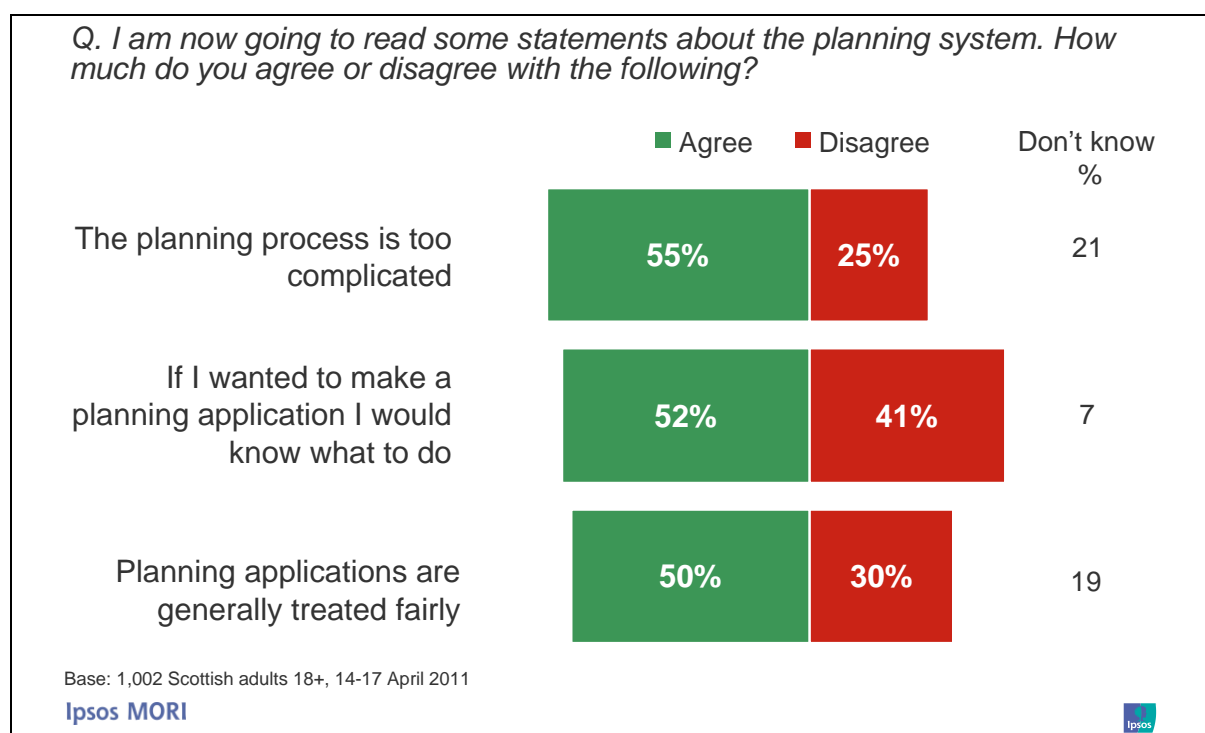
Figure 2: Overall satisfaction with the process



Follow-up discussions highlighted that satisfaction is driven by a mixture of expectations, experience and final outcome. Indeed, it was evident that experiences differed greatly between the four user groups. Levels of pre-application contact, support and advice from the council and process timescales varied depending on the type of applicant and the type of application. Nevertheless, satisfaction is consistent across all user groups

The general public survey results offer an insight into householder expectations. When asked about the planning process, members of the general public were far more likely to agree than disagree that the planning process is too complicated (see Figure 3 below). This may explain why householders were more likely than other applicants to have been ‘very satisfied’ with the process. Indeed, if most householders enter the process expecting it to be complicated, their expectations might be more easily exceeded when the process in fact turns out to be less complicated than they anticipated.

Figure 3: General public's perceptions of the planning system



When asked what their expectation had been of the process before they submitted their application, most recent householder applicants hoped that it would be straight-forward, that clear advice and feedback would be provided by the council, that the decision would be made quickly and fairly and, of course, all expected they would be granted planning consent.

For the most part, householders' experience met expectations. Most received consent (118 of the 150 interviewed) – this, in itself, may have a large bearing on high levels of satisfaction. In addition, most also said the process was reasonably straight-forward and that they were given a decision within 8-12 weeks. However, where experience did not meet expectations it was often because of perceived poor advice or understanding of the application by the case officer, lack of perceived action by the council and conflicting advice or miscommunication between council departments (e.g. planning and roads or environmental health).

Although not evident from the survey results, it was clear from follow-up discussions that there is greater 'emotional' attachment to applications made by householders. Perhaps because of the likely nature of their applications, householders were far more likely to take personally any objections to their application or any difficulties encountered during the application process. This emotional attachment leads

householders to have much higher expectations than other groups over the level of communication they received from council officers and the extent to which planning officers were responsive to their queries.

Understanding of the decision made on the application

Reflecting levels of satisfaction with the process, overall, the majority of recent applicants said they understood the reasons for the decision made on the application (see Table 2). However, understanding was clearly higher among those satisfied than those dissatisfied with the process.

Table 2: Did applicants understand the reasons for the decision made on their application?

<i>Q. Thinking about your most recent planning application, please state Yes or No for each of the following statements:</i>			
<i>You understand the reasons for the decision made on the application</i>			
YES	All	Those satisfied with the process	Those dissatisfied with the process
	%	%	%
Agents	90	94	76
Householders	83	95	49
Developers	78	83	57
Businesses	77	84	60

As with an applicant's satisfaction with the process, views on whether a decision has been fully understood may depend, at least in part, on whether an application is approved or rejected. We interviewed very few respondents whose applications had been rejected but there is some evidence from these responses and from the qualitative research that those whose applications were refused or returned appeared less likely to understand the reasons for the decision made on their application.

Communication and engagement with the council

A majority of recent applicants in all user groups felt their council dealt with queries within a reasonable timescale and that they were sufficiently well informed by the council throughout the process. However, around a third of each group did not and a number of participants in the focus groups and depth interviews felt they had

experienced very poor levels of communication from their council. It was evident from follow-up discussions that levels of communication and client focus vary dramatically, not only across different councils, but often within councils across different planning officers.

Table 3: Perceptions of communication

Q. Thinking about your most recent planning application, please state Yes or No for each of the following statements.				
YES	Householders	Agents	Businesses	Developers
	%	%	%	%
Base: all	(150)	(175)	(52)	(37)
The council dealt with your queries within a reasonable timescale	72	74	67	68
You were kept sufficiently well informed by the council throughout the process.	67	65	60	68

Despite consistent level of satisfaction, the amount and type of information each group requires differs.

Agents are generally very familiar with the planning process, understand necessary delays (such as waiting for feedback from statutory consultees), are more likely to have the opportunity for pre-application discussions to raise potential issues and, in many cases, have a good knowledge of the council's planning departments. Therefore, they do not feel as though they need to be frequently updated on the status of their application while it is being considered. Indeed, during in-depth discussions, it was clear that agents championed communication with the council at the pre-application stage in order to resolve any potential issues with the application. Communication at subsequent stages in the process was afforded far less importance.

As noted earlier, developers are often one removed from the planning process. Developers will have been involved in pre-application meetings with the council and their planning consultant or agent and will have prepared supporting reports or information. However, in most cases, the application will be handled by the agent. Therefore, developers are less likely to have raised queries directly and are more likely to be informed of progress by their agents than by the council.

By comparison, businesses (some of whom may have been through the process before) and in particular householders are likely to be less experienced. As a result, they are likely to expect the council to be much more responsive to their queries. In the focus groups, it was clear that householders’ frustrations were often as a result of lack of understanding of the requirements, reasons for delay or the detail of their decision and inability to get hold of their case officer. They were more demanding of the council than other applicants – they expect the process will keep moving, that they should be updated regularly and that someone should respond to their queries when they call. The difference in expectations notwithstanding, evidence from the group discussions, and a number of the depth interviews, also suggests that the approach taken by some planning officers when handling householder applications may not necessarily reflect the recent culture change to a more user-focused approach to delivering services within councils. Indeed, the qualitative evidence suggested that the actions of planning officers are very process-based, centred on the type of application, and, therefore, they are not always sensitive to the particular needs of householder applicants. Indeed, a number of participants spoke about their frustration at having to contact the council numerous times before being able to speak to their case officer.

Timescales

Householders were more likely than agents, businesses and developers to say the council dealt with their application within the expected time (see Table 4). Developers were least likely to say the application was dealt with in the expected timescale or that they were satisfied with the length of time taken to process the application.

Table 4: Experience and perceptions of determination timescales for more recent application

<i>Q. Thinking about your most recent planning application, please state Yes or No for each of the following statements.</i>				
% answering ‘Yes’	Householders	Agents	Businesses	Developers
	%	%	%	%
Base: all	(150)	(175)	(52)	(37)
The council dealt with your application within the expected timescale	71	64	62	49
You were satisfied with the length	Not asked	64	54	51

of time taken to process the application				
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Evidence from the focus groups suggested most householder applications were dealt with in the two to three months outlined by the council at the submission of their application. In contrast, relatively few developers said that applications are dealt with in the stated timescales, Nevertheless, most developers were understanding of delays.

5. Advice and guidance

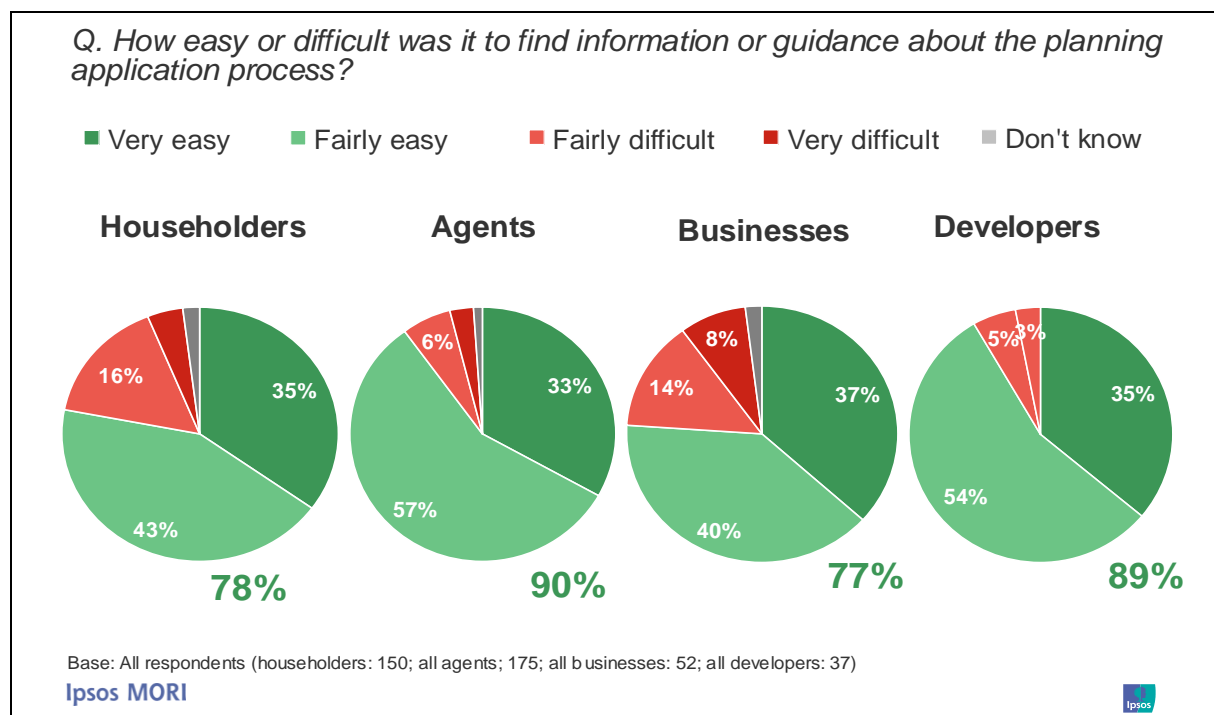
This section looks at the advice and support given to the different user groups to assist them in their planning applications.

Finding information

The vast majority of those who have made a planning application since April 2009 said it was easy to find information or guidance about the planning application process (see Figure 4). This includes three-quarters of householders and businesses.

Qualitative evidence suggests that, on the whole, any difficulties experienced by applicants was likely to be the result of poor understanding of the information or poor communication rather than the ease with which they could find it.

Figure 4: Ease of finding information or guidance



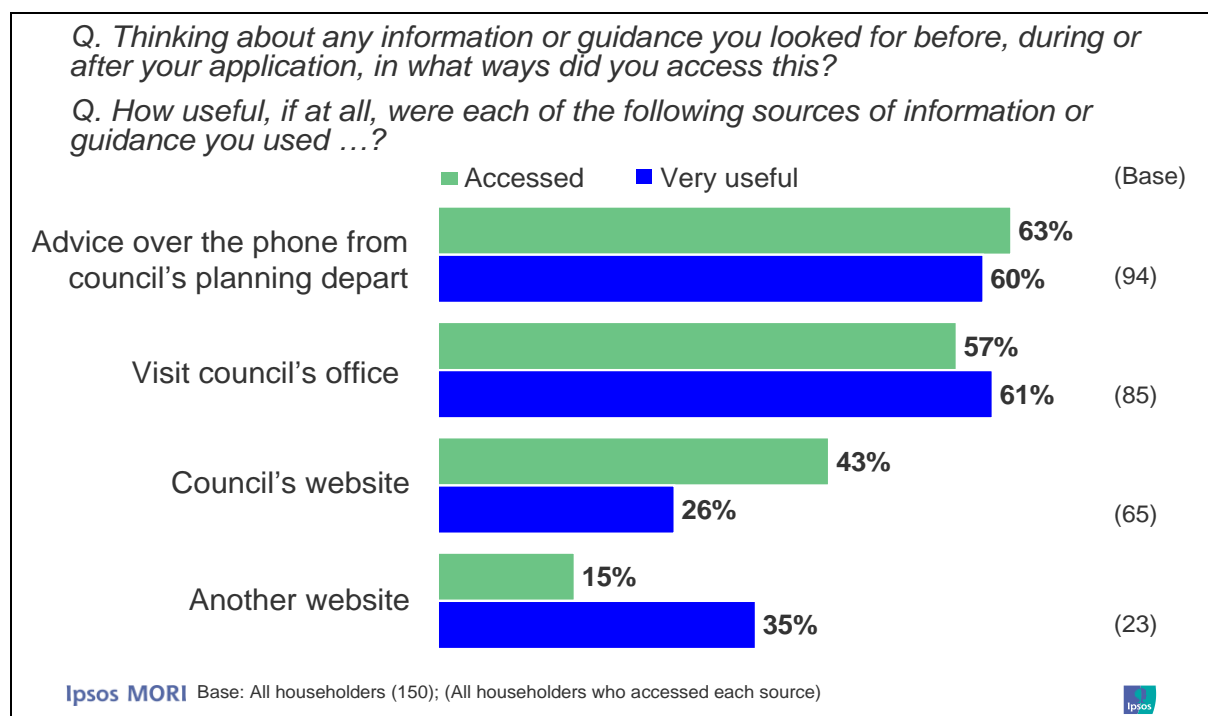
Householder information and guidance

Around 9 in 10 householders (89%) used all the information or guidance provided by the council when preparing their application. Over half visited the council's office and

spoke to the council's planning department over the phone. Around half of householders also looked for information or advice online.

As with users' experiences of many council services, direct communications were found to be most effective. Householders felt the most useful sources of information were direct contact with the council, either face to face or over the telephone.

Figure 5: Access and usefulness of information sources



This notwithstanding, follow-up focus groups with householders suggested advice provided by the council could still be improved. Although over half said they visited the council's office at some stage for advice or information, problems that they experienced could usually have been avoided if they had had better pre-application discussions with the council, which are commonplace for large-scale applications. These meetings focus on the specifics of the application and discuss the necessary requirements and any potential difficulties.. Householder applicants felt that it would be very helpful to have the opportunity to meet with a planning officer prior to submitting their application. Some discussed how this would provide reassurance prior to submission and prevent them from feeling like they are 'left hanging' when they are waiting on a decision on their application.

Advice and support to agents, businesses and developers

Reflecting the importance given by agents and developers to close engagement with the council at the pre-application stage, all applicants are more likely to need support and advice from the council before submitting their applications than at other stages in the process (see Table 5). Two-thirds of businesses and around half of agents and developers said they needed advice most at this stage.

Compared to agents and developers, pre-application discussions with the council are less likely to be the norm for business applications. Business applicants were more likely to require advice or support generally from the council than agents and developers, but typically will not have as detailed pre-application discussions. Like householders, many business applicants did not meet the council face-to-face prior to submitting their application. For those who did, pre-application advice is as much about the planning process and necessary requirements as it is about the details of the planning application. These discussions were generally face-to-face meetings with case officers, only occasionally involving other agencies and consultees and typically happened no more than once pre-application.

Table 5: Stage when applicants needed most advice and support

Q. At which stage of the process did you need most advice or support from the council?			
	Agents	Businesses	Developers
	%	%	%
Base: All	(175)	(52)	(37)
Before putting in your application	47	64	43
Developing the processing agreement	N/A	N/A	3
After submitting the application but before the decision was made	27	25	27
Post-decision	1	0	3
Didn't need any advice or support	22	12	22

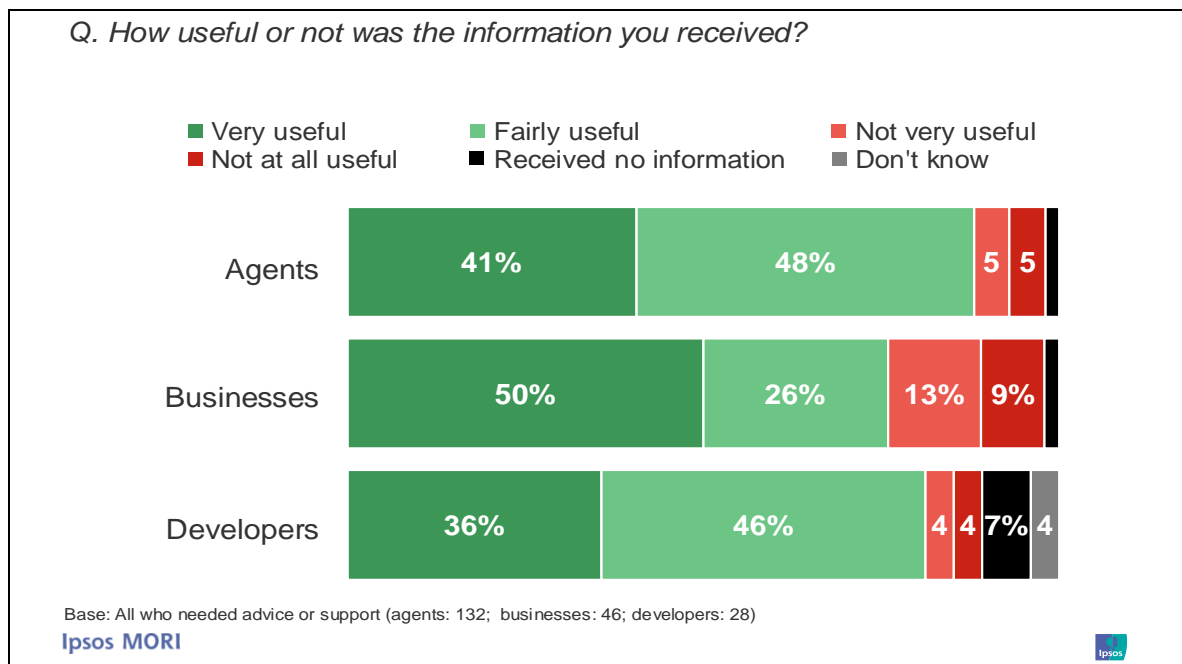
Around a quarter of applicants from all groups said they needed advice and support most from the council between submitting the application and the decision being made, while virtually none of those interviewed most needed advice or support post-decision. However, the follow-up depth interviews highlighted most large-scale applicants had on-going dialogue with the council post-submission over additional reports or assessments, e.g. subsequent environmental reports requested by statutory consultees, or iterative changes to the application to accommodate feedback and council requirements. In reality, the process between pre-application and final decision appears to be one of continuous discussion and revision,

particularly over large-scale applications, broken only when the submission is given to statutory consultees for feedback.

The survey highlights that very few developers have been involved in developing a processing agreement. Only one developer said they most needed support and advice from the council over a processing agreement. In fact, only a quarter of developers say they entered a processing agreement with the council as part of their most recent application. During follow-up interviews with agents and developers, a few participants discussed how they felt that councils were often reluctant to enter into processing agreements. Nevertheless, one agent said how he actively requests processing agreements in order to provide reassurance to his clients that the process is being formally managed and will be completed within a specified timescale.

Most recent applicants found the information they received from the council useful. Overall, business applicants were marginally less likely than agents and developers to have found the information they received useful, although there was a significant proportion who found it 'very useful'. This contradiction may be a result of relative inexperience and different expectations of the process. Business applicants were less likely to have made a previous application and therefore may have been pleasantly surprised by the advice and support available.

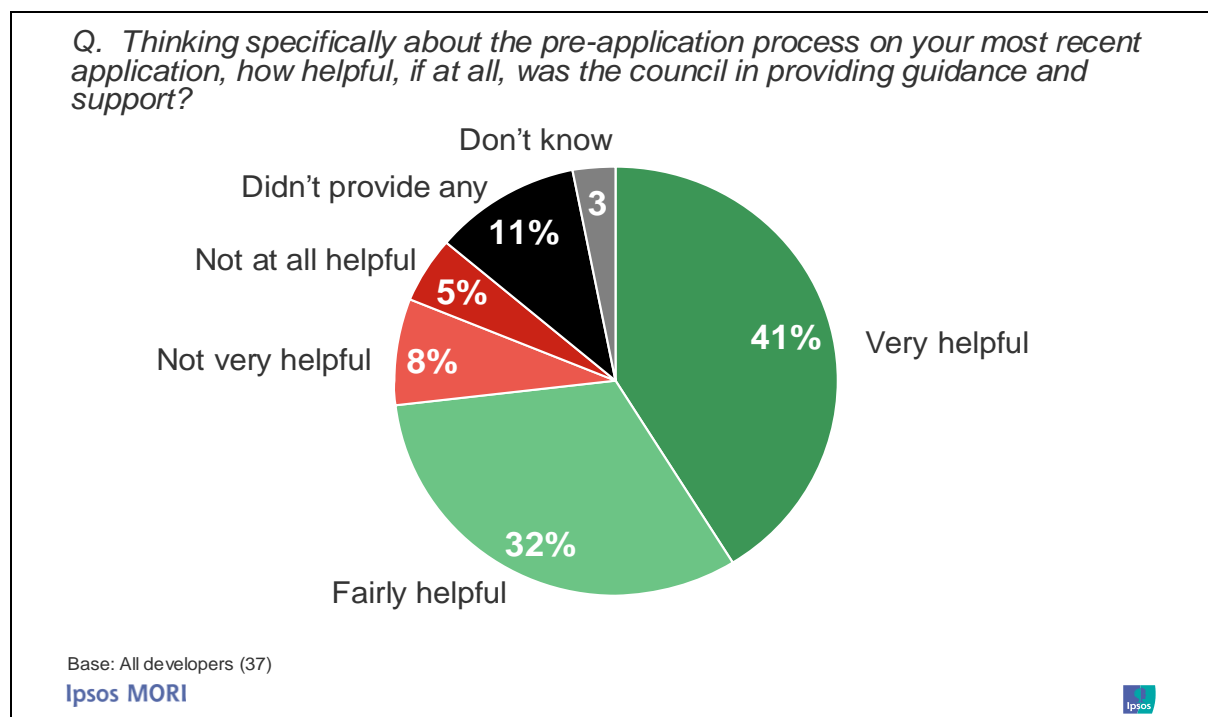
Figure 6: Usefulness of information received from the council



Pre-application guidance and support to developers

The vast majority of developers were supportive of the guidance and support they received from the council during the pre-application process on their most recent application (see Figure 7). Only one in ten recent applicants found the council unhelpful and only one in ten said they did not receive any guidance or support prior to their application.

Figure 7: Usefulness of pre-application guidance and support



As highlighted earlier, most developers will be involved in detailed and regular pre-application discussions with the council. Some developers will meet with the council before purchasing land to discuss the potential for development of the site. In addition, most developers and their planning consultant will meet at least once with a case officer (and head of planning on large or sensitive developments) to discuss detailed plans, potential objections and necessary requirements for the application. For most developers, these meetings are essential and serve to provide a steer on any aspects of the application which might be contentious. These aspects can subsequently be resolved before the application is submitted.

One of the most significant changes to the planning process has been the introduction of statutory requirements for pre-application consultation with the local community and relevant community councils on large-scale (specifically 'major') applications. However, during follow-up discussions it was evident that, in reality, most developers have always had significant engagement with the council pre-application.

6. Perceptions of changes

Agents are frequent users of the planning system, acting on behalf of householders, businesses and developers. They provide expertise to those unfamiliar or unable to submit a planning application. It is therefore unsurprising that the vast majority (90%) of agents who had submitted a planning application in the last couple of years said they had also made a planning application prior to April 2009.

In comparison, around two-thirds of businesses and developers responsible for recent applications said they had been responsible for making a planning application prior to April 2009.

Expectations of the changes

Agents, business and developers said they hoped recent changes to the planning system would simplify the process, speed up the process, increase consistency and predictability, and improve transparency.

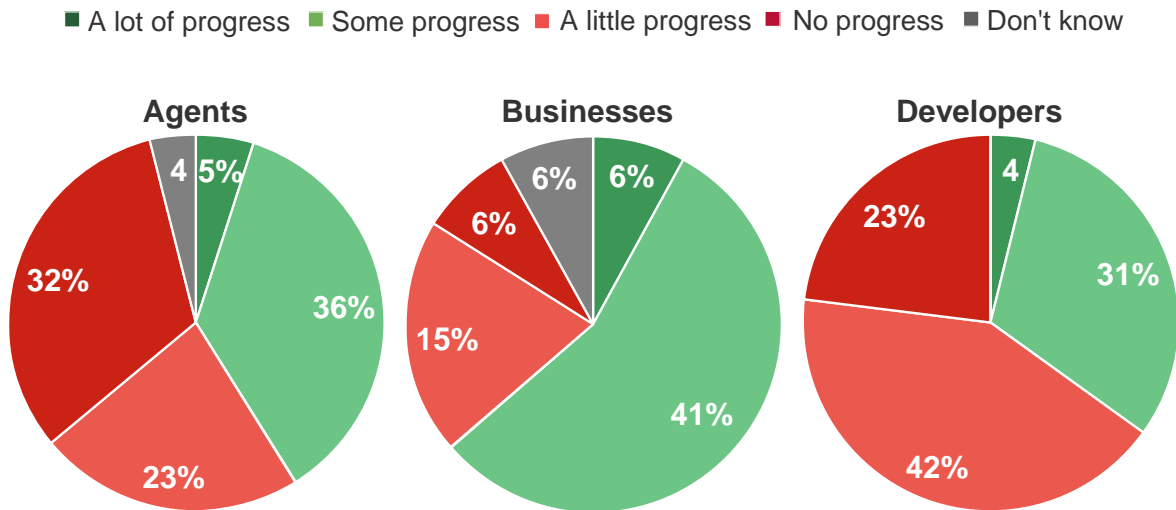
However, few said that these expectations were met during their most recent planning applications. Most felt little has changed – communications with planning officers were just as difficult, they appeared no more likely to show initiative and were felt by many to show continued lack of understanding of the context of their application. Applicants also felt decisions did not appear to have been made more quickly – and, in fact, modernisation had slowed down and made more expensive larger applications. A significant proportion also spontaneously raised concerns that diminishing resources within council departments had limited the potential of the modernisation process.

Do the changes ‘proactively support development’?

Views among those who made a planning application prior to April 2009 were mixed (see Figure 8). The majority of businesses say at least some progress has been made towards ensuring the system pro-actively supports development. However, the majority of agents and developers feel little or no progress has been made.

Figure 8: Do the changes ‘proactively support development’?

Q. How much progress, if any, has been made towards ensuring the new planning system pro-actively supports development?



Base: All who were responsible for making applications prior to April 2009 (agents: 157; businesses: 34; developers: 26)

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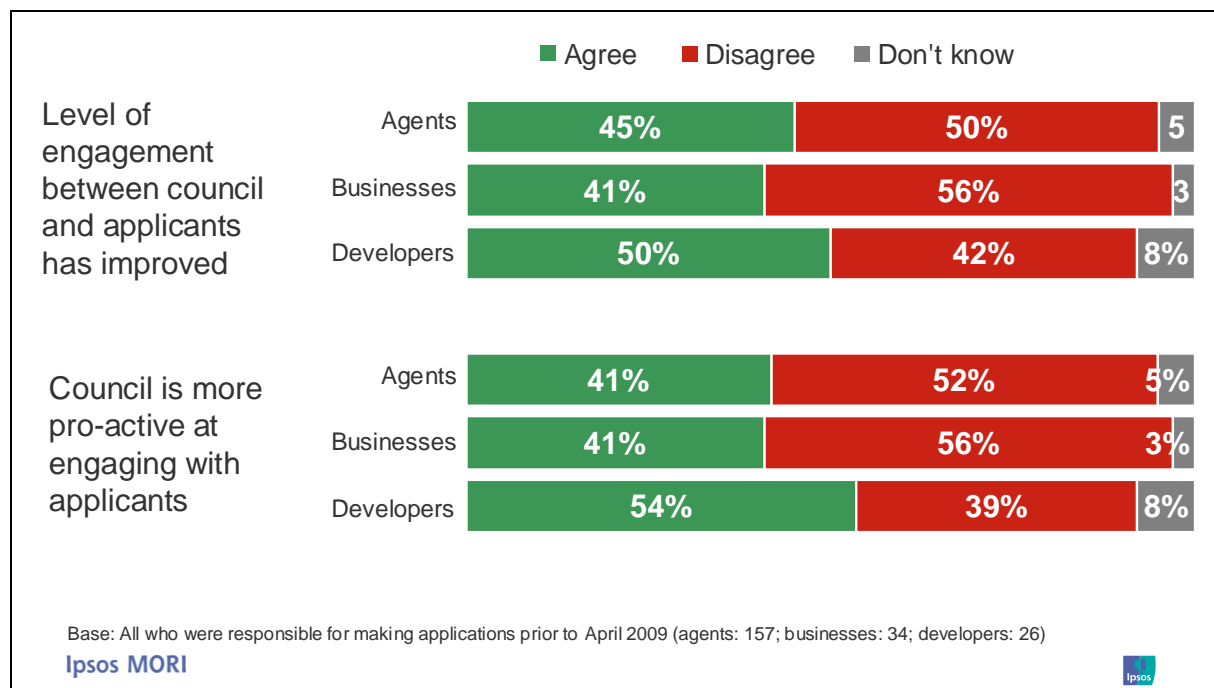


Possible explanations for this difference of opinion were provided by the follow-up depth interviews. Firstly, developers were frequently critical of planning officers’ understanding of commercial pressure – often feeling that procedure or precedent is given priority to development potential. Secondly, agents and developers felt the key changes introduced so far – in particular, the introduction of mandatory community consultation on ‘major’ developments and processing agreements – have done nothing to pro-actively support development. Indeed, there was a feeling among some agents that the increased levels of consultation may actually be an unnecessary barrier to development as it encourages ‘nimbyism’. They believed that even one or two strong objections from community members may be viewed seriously by councils, even if these views do not reflect the views of the wider community, and therefore slow down the process significantly. Thirdly, agents and developers felt there was a need for planning officers to be afforded greater delegated powers. There was some scepticism as to what extent more junior level planning officers will be able to or be willing to make quick decisions, without consulting senior staff. This is exacerbated by a perception that many experienced planning officers are currently leaving local authorities.

Views were also divided as to whether engagement has improved between councils and applicants. Developers were marginally more likely to feel engagement has

improved and that councils are more pro-active at engaging with applicants. Some developers recognised greater support from councils in neighbourhood notification and provision of useful information for pre-application consultation with the local community. However, they were sceptical as to whether greater support being provided by councils may be due to significantly fewer planning applications in the last couple of years. Of course, these results were also indicative of the general feeling among agents and developers that the amount and quality of council engagement differs dramatically across and within councils.

Figure 9: Perception of council engagement with applicants



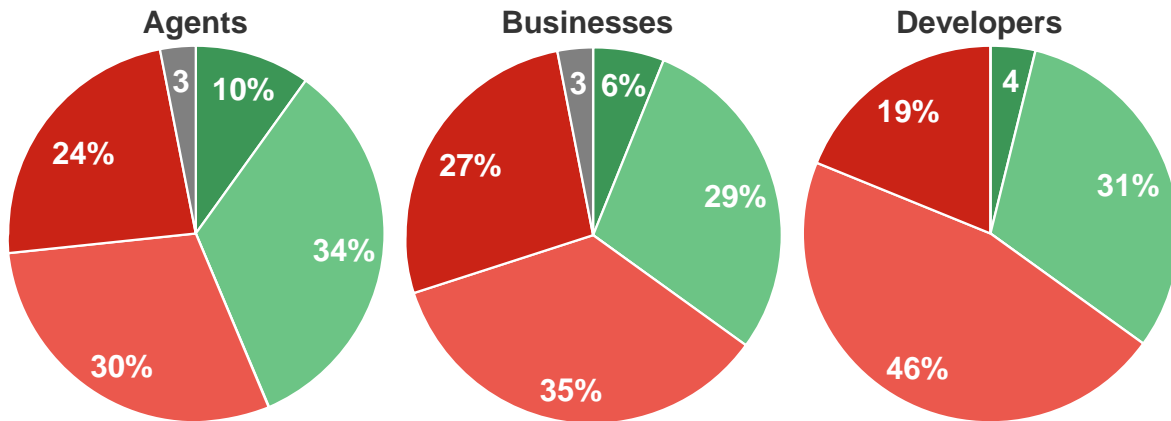
Have the changes made the system 'more efficient and effective'?

The majority of agents, businesses and developers feel little or no progress has been made towards ensuring the planning system is more efficient and effective (see Figure 10).

Figure 10: Have changes made the system more 'efficient and effective'?

Q. How much progress, if any, has been made towards ensuring the new planning system is more efficient and effective?

■ A lot of progress ■ Some progress ■ A little progress ■ No progress ■ Don't know



Base: All who were responsible for making applications prior to April 2009 (agents: 157; businesses: 34; developers: 26)

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As Table 6 below shows, relatively few thought planning applications are now processed more quickly or that the length of time involved in submitting an application is shorter. Developers and agents acting on behalf of developers were particularly critical of the amount of information and resources required to support a major application. Many felt supporting reports (such as environmental impact assessments, for example) were requested routinely without proper consideration or understanding of the application - often at great expense to the applicant. The introduction of a notification period for pre-application consultation has also increased the timeframe for major applications.

Nevertheless, most agree there is greater availability of information and that the quality of information has improved.

The follow-up interviews also highlighted hope among agents, businesses and developers that permitted development rights (yet to be fully introduced) will improve efficiently. Many hope smaller applications will be dealt with more quickly and, subsequently, freeing greater resource to assess larger applications.

Table 6: Experiences of preparing an application using the new system

Q. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning system?			
% who agree	Agents	Businesses	Developers
	%	%	%
Base: All who were responsible for making applications prior to April 2009	(157)	(34)	(26)
There is greater availability of information related to the planning application process	71	53	89
The quality of the information available relating to the planning application process has improved	64	50	81
The amount of time and resources input required by the applicant has increased	52	62	81
The planning application is more straightforward	55	53	58
Applications are processed more quickly than previously	32	29	39
The length of time involved in submitting an application is shorter	45	41	35

Have the changes made the system ‘more transparent’?

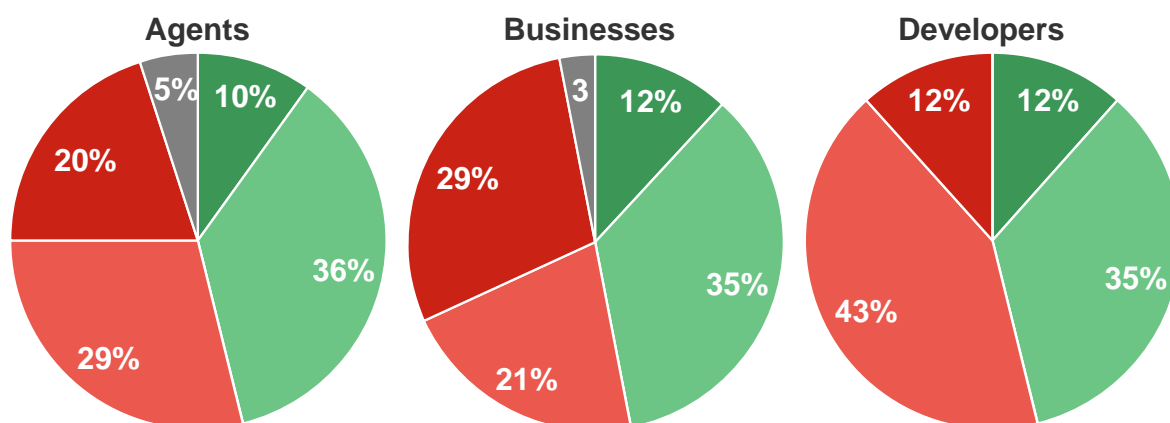
Around half of experienced recent applicants feel at least some progress has been made towards ensuring the planning system is more transparent (see Figure 11).

Follow-up interviews suggest that little progress has been made in providing feedback to applicants. Most agents, businesses and developers said they are not routinely updated on the progress of their application – particularly, during the period of statutory consultation. Agents would welcome systematic feedback that they could provide to their clients and some suggested that regular fortnightly feedback on applications becomes part of the formal process. Developers typically do not press the council for information – preferring to leave it to planning agents and wishing to avoid antagonising planning officials.

Figure 11: Have the changes made the system ‘more transparent’?

Q. How much progress, if any, has been made towards ensuring the new planning system is more transparent?

■ A lot of progress ■ Some progress ■ A little progress ■ No progress ■ Don't know



Base: All who were responsible for making applications prior to April 2009 (agents: 157; businesses: 34; developers: 26)

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e-planning

One of the major changes to the planning system in recent years has been the roll-out of e-planning across local authorities in Scotland. The key aim of the system was to improve the efficiency and transparency of the process, by reducing the number of paper applications and allowing users to view, track and comment on pending planning applications.

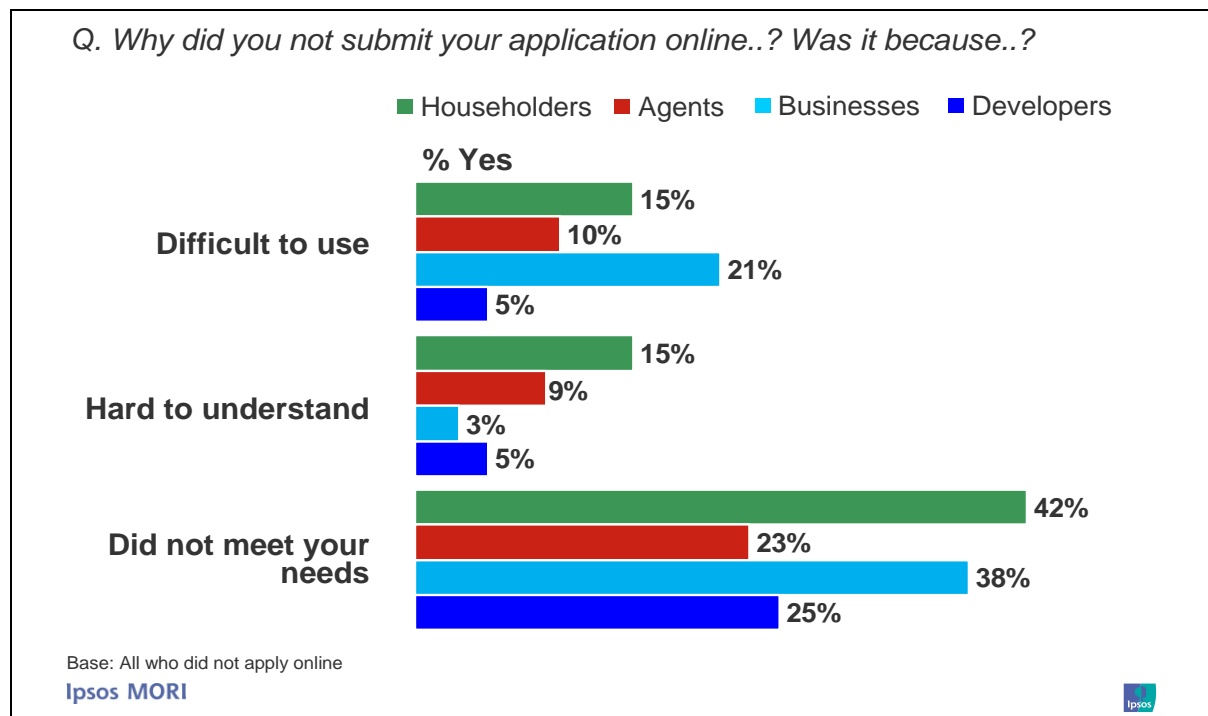
Only a minority of each user group had made their most recent application online, with the majority having made their application by paper. Frequent users (agents and developers) were most likely to have made an online application (37% and 27% respectively). By comparison, businesses and, in particular, householder applicants were far less likely (17% and 5% respectively).

Non-users of the e-planning system

Most of those who submitted a paper application were aware that they could have made an application online if they had wished to do so – householders (74%); businesses (74%); developers (79%); and agents (93%).

As Figure 12 shows the main reason why users did not make an application online was because the online system did not 'meet their needs'.

Figure 12: Reasons for not making their application online



This might be explained by evidence from the qualitative research, which suggested that there are a number of perceived or actual barriers to users making applications online. Firstly, there was reluctance among frequent users, namely agents and developers, to change the way they have 'always done it' (i.e. submitting paper applications). Secondly, there was some reluctance among householder applicants, for most of whom this was their first application, to risk submitting their application online, in fear that it would be lost. They felt much more reassured that their application would be received by the council if it was submitted 'in person'. Thirdly, the setup of the system itself prevented many users from making applications online. The system limits the size of attachments that can be submitted and thus precludes certain applications from being submitted online – for example, many applications are accompanied by high resolution images, maps and drawings, many of which are too large for the system.

Users of the e-planning system

Applicants who had made their most recent application online were very positive about the experience of using the online system – most felt that the online process

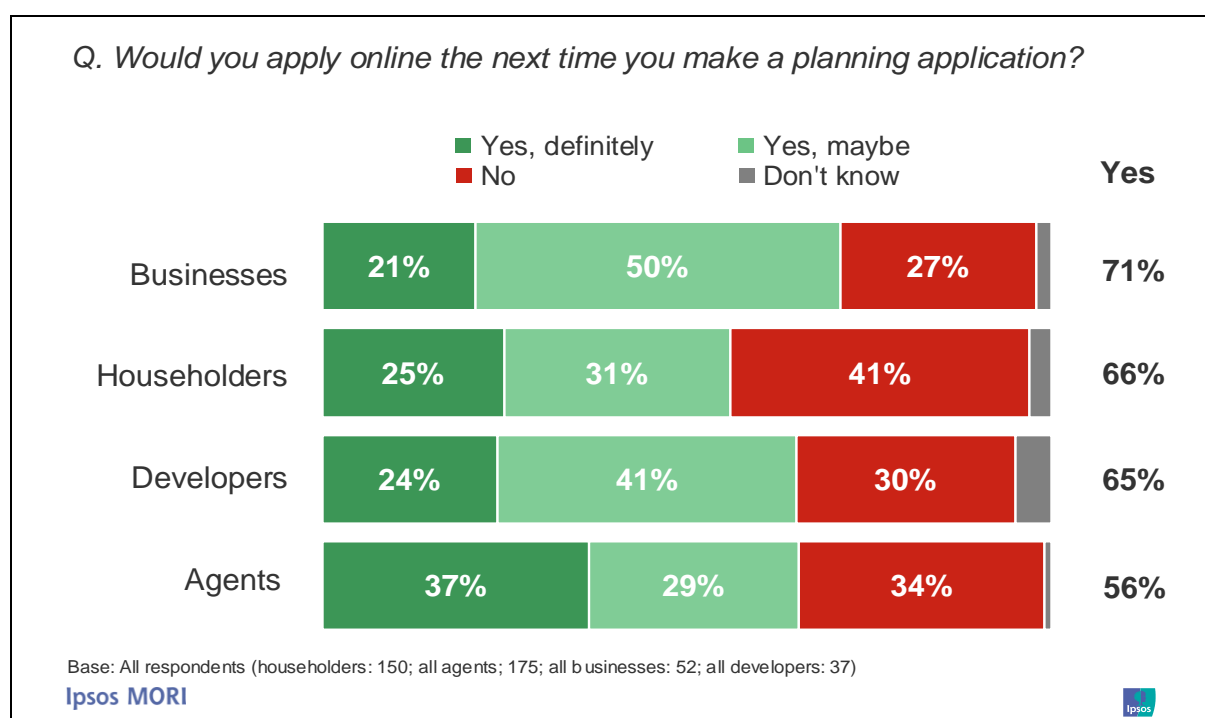
was easy to understand, easy to use and met their needs – although these results should be interpreted with caution given the very small numbers of applicants who had made their application online. This suggests that the online system may help overcome many of the weaknesses highlighted in relation to keeping people informed and updated about the status of applications.

This positive view is reinforced by qualitative evidence. Applicants who had used the online system were very positive about the ability to track applications online as it removed the need to contact the council for regular updates. A number of agents mentioned how the online system allowed them to provide timely and useful updates to their client. Indeed, this is contrasted by the experience of some other agents (who did not use the online system) who expressed frustration at not being able to provide their client with an update when asked due to difficulties in being able to speak to a planning officer about their application.

Using e-planning in the future

Despite low numbers of users making their most recent application online, the majority of all user groups said they would consider making their *next* application online (see Figure 13). Over a fifth of each group said they would *definitely* make their next application online.

Figure 13: Would applicants use the e-planning system in the future?



Appeals

Another recent change to the planning system has been the requirement to classify all applications for planning permission in Scotland into one of three categories: National; Major; and Local. Under the new system, many appeals for local applications are now reviewed by a Local Review Body, made up of elected members, rather than to the Scottish Ministers, as they would have been in the previous system.

Seven in ten (71%) householder applicants were aware of the procedure for appealing against the decision made on their application. That said, awareness of the Local Review Body was low: over half (59%) of householders had not heard of it. Around a quarter (23%) had heard of it but did not know what it does, while 17% had heard of it and understood what it does.

While business applicants, agents and developers were not asked about the appeals process in the survey, their views on it were explored in the depth interviews. It should be noted that few participants to the qualitative research had experienced having a planning application rejected. As noted previously, agents and developers discussed how recent changes to the system have made the process more front loaded and much more iterative with increased engagement with councils at the pre-application stage. As a consequence, many issues that would have resulted in the application being rejected were, according to agents and developers, resolved before the application was submitted.

As a result, very few had appealed a decision. Among developers there was a clear reluctance to 'rock the boat' and they accepted the decision to reject their decision. Further, agents and developers were reluctant to appeal the process due to the potential financial costs to their client or their organisation.