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Planning Matters— labour shortages and skills gaps

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Communities and Local Government Committee

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Summary

England's planning system underpins the country's economic growth and development, but there is a significant risk that that major Government targets for housebuilding and regeneration will be missed because the system is unable to manage the volume or variety of tasks required between now and 2020.

Wider economic well-being and delivery of the Government's environmental priorities could well be hindered simply because the system cannot cope.

Two linked and chronic problems need to be urgently addressed to prevent this. There is a drastic shortage of planning officers, estimated to affect 46 per cent of local authority posts by 2012. There is also a significant and growing skills gap among those planners who remain within the system.

These problems have been recognised for more than a decade, but in spite of continued pressure for change, planning departments remain short of staff and likely to be so for the foreseeable future. The Government needs both to raise the general status of planning within local government structures and to provide means by which planners can widen and improve their skills to obtain the greatest benefit from developments for the localities they serve.

The Government has established several bodies to try to reverse the trend, but their influence has been limited and patchy to date, raising some confusion over precisely who is responsible for raising planning numbers and skills levels. Efforts to raise the number of students taking planning-related university courses have been more successful, but will take time to bring able and experienced planning officers into the system.

1 Planning matters

To be honest, the planning department cannot afford to pay salaries that I would pay to [skilled planners], and I cannot find them.—Mr Brian Mark, Director, Fulcrum Consulting¹

1. England’s planning system oils the engine of economic growth. Decisions made by planners and local planning authorities shape and underpin the construction of new houses, roads, rail links, supermarkets, schools and every other structure in the built environment. What is built—and where, when, how and by whom—may depend primarily on need and demand matching financial viability and willingness to supply, but the on-the-ground delivery of projects, and of high-quality projects, relies substantially on the ability of planners in the public and private sectors to facilitate their design and implementation. The remark quoted above, made by the director of an engineering consultancy during our recent inquiry into Existing Housing and Climate Change, pinpointed two significant difficulties—too few planners and inadequate skills among those who remain—that impede the capacity of the planning system to meet the demands placed upon it. These shortages prompted us to investigate how well placed the system is to cope with even greater challenges in the coming decade.

Labour shortage

2. Local authorities in England process more than 650,000 applications every year, ranging from small-scale plans for household extensions and advertising consents to large-scale mixed-use developments, and major projects such as waste incinerators and power stations.² This number has risen by around a quarter since 1999–2000, when about 526,000 applications were made.³

3. This expansion in demand for planning services has not been matched by the supply of new planners. Partly as a result of economic downturn in the late 1980s and early 1990s and a lack of investment in planning at that time, and partly because a number of planning schools consequently reduced intakes and closed courses, significant recruitment and retention problems have arisen for most local authorities, particularly the non-emergence of a ‘missing generation’ of mid-level planners aged in their 30s and 40s, ready to fill the senior roles from which their senior colleagues will increasingly retire.

Skills gap

4. The shortage of planners has also coincided, since 2004, with a significant shift away from development control-led planning towards ‘spatial’ planning, which requires a range of new managerial and other ‘generic’ skills and which has also altered the technical skills range required by planning professionals. This has led two Government-funded bodies,

1 Communities and Local Government Committee, *Existing Housing and Climate Change*, Seventh Report of Session 2007–08, HC 432-I, Para 93.

2 Kate Barker, *Review of Land Use Planning: final report and recommendations*, December 2006, p. 113.

3 *Ibid*, p. 113.

charged with meeting the demand for a sustainable communities workforce and promoting high-quality development, to outline the risk to future programmes, particularly the substantial house-building targets the Government has set itself as it develops the Housing and Regeneration Bill, the Planning Bill and the Climate Change Bill. The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) notes that

one of the biggest challenges for the planning system is how to cope with the big increase in the number of residential applications that are coming forward to meet the commitment to build 3 million new homes by 2020. Managing proposals to ensure that what gets built makes a positive contribution to the local area, in accordance with national policies, requires a big increase in the skills capacity of planning departments.⁴

The Academy for Sustainable Communities (ASC), estimating that there will be a 46 per cent labour gap in local government planning by 2012 on the current trajectory, concludes that delivery of the Government's ambitious targets will be hampered if action is not taken to build skills and capacity across the sector.⁵

5. Private sector developers are equally concerned that staff and skills shortages within the planning system will exacerbate the pressures already being felt by builders and developers, particularly in a declining housing market. Liz Peace, Chief Executive of the British Property Federation (BPF), told us:

If you get more and more delays in the system then you are going to see developers who are less and less willing to undertake big and high risk schemes and that is going to become even more relevant given the current climate for development and the current attitude to risk [...] planning oils the development system, and if planning is not working well, the development system is going to be severely impacted.⁶

6. There is a significant risk that major Government targets for development and regeneration will be missed because our planning system is unable to manage either the volume or the variety of tasks it will be asked to perform between now and 2020. This includes, perhaps most notably, the intention to build 3 million new homes. Wider economic well-being and delivery of the Government's environmental priorities could well be hindered simply because the system cannot cope. Two linked and chronic problems need to be urgently addressed to prevent this—a drastic shortage of planning officers, estimated to affect 46 per cent of local authority posts by 2012, and a significant and growing skills gap among those planners who remain within the system.

The scope of our inquiry

7. As noted above, the genesis of this inquiry was the identification during our previous inquiry into Existing Housing and Climate Change of a planning skills gap, a topic we considered worthy of further investigation. We took as our starting point Sir John Egan's 2004 review *Skills for Sustainable Communities*, commissioned by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) to identify means of improving skills across the 100-plus

4 Ev 147

5 Ev 134

6 Q 70

professions engaged in sustainable communities work. We appreciate that, as Sir John argued, the wider needs of sustainable communities will not be met by upskilling just one set of professionals in isolation.⁷ The Chief Economic Development Officers Society and County Surveyors Society also told us:

Planning skills are clearly vital but whilst town and country planning is a broad profession, a wide range of others are equally vital including architects, surveyors, highway engineers, transport planners, economic development, community safety and other professionals.⁸

We agree that the problems discussed in this Report apply equally to many other professions within the confederation that makes up the sustainable communities workforce, estimated at around 750,000 people—3 per cent of all England’s workforce.⁹ We chose to concentrate on planning, however, in order to draw lessons from a profession of particular importance to future economic development and regeneration, and to pinpoint actions that the Department responsible for the planning system, Communities and Local Government (CLG), can take to remedy the deficiencies being experienced in both staffing numbers and skills. **Many of the conclusions we draw and recommendations we make on how to raise both the numbers of planners and the skills they possess offer lessons for other sectors of the sustainable communities workforce.**

8. We are grateful to the 50 organisations that contributed evidence to our inquiry, and to those who gave evidence at four public sessions. We are particularly grateful to our two specialist advisers for the inquiry: Kelvin MacDonald is an independent policy consultant and affiliated lecturer at the Department of Land Economy, Cambridge, and was previously chief policy adviser to the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI); and Dr Helen Walker is an independent policy consultant who was previously National Advisor: Sustainable Communities at the Improvement and Development Agency for Local Government (IDeA), a member of the Egan Review Secretariat and Chair of the Department of Urban Development and Regeneration at the University of Westminster.

Review-itis

9. We are conscious that in reporting on planning skills we join a long line of bodies which have sought to raise the status and skill levels of the profession. The Egan review of 2004, already referred to, is one of what Sheffield Hallam University terms a “plethora” of publications that have entered the field in the past decade; the RTPI rightly notes that there has been “inevitably some duplication of effort; and some reinventing of wheels”.¹⁰ Lord Rogers’ Urban Task Force (1998), the Planning Green papers of the late 1990s, the Barker review of Housing Supply (2004), the Leitch Review of Skills (2005), the Barker review of Land Use Planning (2006), the ASC’s *Mind the Skills Gap* report (2007) and the Calcutt Review of Housebuilding (2007) are, perhaps, the major inquiries to touch on the subject, but further investigations have been made by, among others, the Audit Commission and

7 Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, *The Egan Review: Skills for Sustainable Communities*, April 2004, p. 33.

8 Ev 51

9 Academy for Sustainable Communities, *Mind the Skills Gap*, 2007, p. 22.

10 Ev 105

London Councils.¹¹ As the Minister for Housing, the rt Hon. Caroline Flint MP, told us, “we can end up into a bit of review-itis situation, where no sooner do we do one thing, we have another review”.¹²

10. Yet, even if the constant and repeated focus on skills and labour shortages in planning and beyond has resulted in review upon review, report upon report, it has not brought about the change in trajectory required both in the numbers of people entering, and staying in, the planning profession or in the levels and range of skills they require to do the job. **The Minister for Housing and the Department for Communities and Local Government seem likely to continue to suffer from ‘review-itis’ until the repeated concerns expressed and recommendations made over the past 10 years are translated into actions that raise both the number of people who want to be planners and the range and level of skills they possess.**

Following up on Egan

11. The Egan review contained 24 recommendations, most of which were subsequently implemented by the ODPM, the predecessor of CLG. The most significant result was the creation in 2005 of the Academy for Sustainable Communities. Sir John himself was clearly concerned that progress on the outcomes of his recommendations had not been systematically monitored, saying: “If somebody has written a report like this, I would have thought it axiomatic that I should have had some contact with it over time, yes. That seems not to have been the case.”¹³ The Minister for Housing agreed that it would be right to ask what the impact has been of the Egan review’s 24 recommendations and said that she would provide as much detail as possible on that. **We welcome the assurance given by the Minister for Housing that the impact of the Egan review’s implementation will be measured, but we recommend that in future the Department for Communities and Local Government ensure as a matter of routine that proper mechanisms are in place to follow up the accepted recommendations of reviews carried out by it and by its predecessor, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.**

11 Ev 61-63 and Ev 150-153

12 Q 225

13 Q 24

2 The labour gap

*Respondents to our public consultation cited low salary, poor public image, low status and lack of awareness in schools as the main reasons for shortages in the supply of planners.—the Egan Review, 2004.*¹⁴

12. Around 17,000 people work as planners in the public sector in England and Wales, and when private sector planners, such as those working for planning or design consultancies, are added, the total workforce is around 30,000.¹⁵ In 2005, local authorities in England and Wales posted 2,201 vacancies for planning and building control posts.¹⁶ The ASC has estimated that public sector planning departments face a 46 per cent labour shortage by 2012, although the ASC has also told us that Government targets developed since that estimate was made, including the building of 3 million homes by 2020, may widen the gap even further and perhaps to as much as 80 per cent.¹⁷ The situation in the private sector is less severe, but the ASC estimates a 15 to 20 per cent labour shortage there, too, by 2012.¹⁸

13. The number of people entering the profession has been rising; qualified planners in the workforce rose from 14,000 in 2001 to 21,000 in 2007.¹⁹ The Audit Commission believes that that rate of increase is not enough to keep up with rising demand for planning services. The Government accepts that there “are supply and retention problems across the planning industry with high turnovers in many posts and many vacant posts.”²⁰

14. The Environment Agency, for example, which as a statutory planning consultee, employs 250 planners to scrutinise about 50,000 applications a year, is “currently experiencing a high turnover of planning staff (18.5% over the past year) and 13.5% of our planning posts are currently vacant.”²¹ And the problem is worsening: in 2003, some 66 per cent of London’s boroughs reported difficulties recruiting planning staff; by 2005, that figure had risen to 93 per cent.²² Nationally, some 66 per cent of local authorities reported similar difficulties in 2005, a seven percentage point rise on the 2004 figure.²³ According to the ASC, at September 2006 planning authorities had an average of 29 posts in development control of which four were vacant, and many more filled by temporary staff.²⁴

15. The Government points out that this “shortage of planning capacity is historically rooted and stems from the under investment during the 1980s and early 1990s by both

14 ODPM, *The Egan Review*, April 2004, note to p. 65.

15 Academy for Sustainable Communities, *Mind the Skills Gap*, 2007, p. 43.

16 Communities and Local Government, *Planning for a Sustainable Future: A White Paper*, May 2007, Cm 7120, p. 214.

17 Academy for Sustainable Communities, *Mind the Skills Gap*, 2007, p. 46.

18 *Ibid*, p. 34.

19 Ev 62

20 Ev 96

21 Ev 133

22 Ev 150

23 Ev 156

24 Academy for Sustainable Communities, *Mind the Skills Gap*, 2007, p. 44.

central and local government.”²⁵ **The shortage of planners was identified as long ago as the late 1990s but has been allowed to continue to worsen to its present condition.**

Data

16. The Government has no comprehensive data on the extent of labour shortages within planning and the wider sustainable communities workforce, making it impossible to judge precisely what the shortages are. There is a need for specific data on recruitment patterns both in local government and the private sector, and on the movement of staff between the two sectors. It is regrettable that since the Manpower Services Commission stopped collecting such data no Government agency has been made responsible for doing so. The 46 per cent gap by 2012 estimated by the ASC gives some indication of the overall scale of the problem, but the ASC is itself re-conducting the research on which that figure was based to take full account of changes likely to result from the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review settlement and the Government’s latest house-building targets. It also believes that early indications are that these factors are more likely to widen than narrow the gap.²⁶

17. The Government announced an intention to “measure vacancy rates for professional planners in local government capacity” on the basis of work done by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA). However, when CIPFA ceased to measure the rates, the Government chose not to set up a new survey “which would have been a new burden on local authorities”.²⁷ **We recommend that Communities and Local Government produce long-term annual assessments and analyses of the numbers of people employed in planning and other key sustainable communities professions and the labour shortages currently being suffered and likely to arise. The Homes and Communities Agency should be responsible for these surveys.**

Demand side factors

Pay and conditions

18. The Egan review noted that pay was often cited as one reason why it was difficult to fill posts in core sustainable communities professions, particularly in local authority planning and regeneration departments.²⁸ Professor Peter Roberts OBE, chair of the ASC, also believed that public sector salaries were a significant recruitment issue.²⁹ Tim Edmundson, head of the University of Westminster’s Urban Development and Regeneration Department, and a specialist on planning in London, notes that a number of local authorities have introduced pay supplements and “golden handshakes or handcuffs” to attract and retain staff.³⁰ The local government workforce strategy survey for 2006 reported

25 Ev 94

26 Ev 136

27 Communities and Local Government, *Community, Opportunity, Prosperity: Annual Report 2008*, Cm 7394, p. 96.

28 ODPM, *The Egan Review*, p. 60.

29 Q 189

30 Ev 82

that a quarter of authorities offer “market supplements” on wages for planners.³¹ The Planning Advisory Service (PAS) and IDeA suggest that changes in the general status of planning, including re-evaluation of job grades with consequent downward impacts on pay, have led planners to leave the public sector. They also note that the latest local government pay and workforce survey “indicates that local authorities continue to experience recruitment and retention problems with planners.”³²

19. Sir John Egan and Professor Roberts each also point out, however, that salary levels alone rarely determine career choices.³³ “Perceptions about corporate culture, employment prospects and working conditions also influence choices,” noted the Egan review.³⁴ Among the factors affecting recruitment and retention to local authority planning departments are where they are, what they do, and who does what. The ASC’s *Mind the Skills Gap* report raised the irony that the very bodies charged with ‘place shaping’—creating sustainable communities where people want to live—are often themselves unattractive to new graduates. Three broad reasons are given for this. First, councils are quite simply constrained by their geographical location: “Local authorities are particularly susceptible to being tied to a particular location, some of which are not attractive to high quality staff.”³⁵ Secondly, local authority planning is not always seen as interesting:

Some organisations, particularly the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and local authorities, face difficulties due to the nature of their organisations and locations. Information collected through [...] case studies suggest that regeneration-focused organisations have less trouble recruiting as the work is seen by professionals as ‘topical’, ‘green’ and ‘sexy’ compared with the more traditional professions.³⁶

Thirdly, the ‘missing generation’ identified above is a problem not just for planning departments but for local government in general: “the age profile of staff in the public sector is markedly older than the private sector.”³⁷

20. The absence of officers in their 30s and 40s, with the ability to fill the most senior posts in the near future is one side of that coin; the less obvious side is that new graduates in their 20s find themselves working for ‘old’ organisations, exacerbating retention problems already raised by pay, promotion prospects and location. **We recommend that Communities and Local Government seek to raise the general status of the planning profession through, for example, working with professional bodies on a co-ordinated approach to the promotion in schools of careers in planning, consideration of a national advertising campaign such as those conducted to fill labour gaps in teaching, and commissioning a study of salary levels for planners in local government, with a view to ensuring that pay reflects skills and demand levels.**

31 Academy for Sustainable Communities, *Mind the Skills Gap*, 2007, p. 43.

32 Ev 85

33 Q 189

34 ODPM, *The Egan Review*, p. 66.

35 Academy for Sustainable Communities, *Mind the Skills Gap*, 2007, p. 35.

36 *Ibid*, p. 31.

37 *Ibid*, p. 35.

Targets, speed and quality

21. The past decade or so has seen what many regard as a general diminution in the status of planning and its officers. The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 was intended to shift the focus of planning from fairly mechanistic development control to a more proactive place-shaping ‘spatial’ system. The Government expected the change to raise the general status of planning:

Until recently there had been a tendency to regard the planning system largely as a regulatory tool, comprising a set of detailed policies aimed at controlling development. Viewed in this way it is easy to understand why planning might be regarded as peripheral to the broader strategic role and work of a local authority.³⁸

David Morris, Deputy Director for Planning, Performance and Delivery at CLG, told us the 2004 Act was intended to move planning away from being purely regulatory and to get “away from development control, which is this tick box, yes/no procedure.”³⁹

22. The Local Development Framework (LDF) introduced simultaneously, along with fixed targets for councils dealing with planning applications, has, however, led to disquiet within the profession about an increased ‘tick-box’ approach that some believe favours speedy process over the quality of applications made.⁴⁰ At present, for example, local authorities are expected to deal with 65 per cent of major applications within 13 weeks, and with 70 per cent of minor and 80 per cent of other applications within eight weeks.⁴¹ Councils that achieve the targets are rewarded with planning delivery grant (PDG)—in 2004–05, the average council received £320,000, with 24 councils gaining more than £700,000 each. The Audit Commission is among those who have raised concern about this:

We identified a high degree of consensus that by linking planning delivery grant to speed of service, the government has placed too much emphasis on the need for councils to reach planning decisions quickly. This has reduced the level of service provided by some councils.⁴²

23. Planning officers pinpoint the evidence-gathering required by the LDF as a significant extra burden on their departments and question whether the process is either cost-effective or necessary. The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) suggests council budgets are being overstretched by the demands of the LDF.⁴³ The Planning Officers Society (POS) cites a “substantial cost and workload for both planning authorities and other key players in the planning system”, and suggests the Government conduct case studies on how useful in practice is the evidence that must be gathered.⁴⁴ Lindsay Frost, Director of Planning and Environmental Services at Lewes District Council, gave the most

38 Communities and Local Government, *Planning for a Sustainable Future*, White Paper, May 2007, Cm 7120, p.122.

39 Q 217

40 Q 27

41 Communities and Local Government, *Planning for a Sustainable Future*, White Paper, May 2007, Cm 7120, p. 132.

42 Audit Commission, *The Planning System: Matching expectations and capacity*, February 2006, p. 22.

43 Ev 44-45

44 Ev 58

robust view from behind a planner's desk: "the added value of such additional work is sometimes questionable but is required to fulfil the 'tick-box', process-driven approach adopted in LDF legislation."⁴⁵ Sue Willcox, Head of Town Planning at Sainsbury's, told us how that translates into frustration that encourages senior planners to leave local government: "There is much more about tick box planning, fulfilling criteria and meeting the development control targets and, therefore, more processing going on for senior planners which has been less attractive to them."⁴⁶

24. It is clear that the intended shift from development control-led planning to a more spatial approach has not yet fully resulted in the anticipated change of culture that would raise the general status of planning within local authorities. PAS/IDeA believe that the culture is shifting towards making planning more of a "key tool for delivery [...] at the heart of achieving change in localities and communities", but agree that the focus on speedy decision making has developed a "short term target culture at the expense of the creative and integrative role of plan making."⁴⁷ The Advisory Team for Large Applications (ATLAS) also noted that planning within local government was often "given low priority, buried deep in the corporate structure". Along with the difficulties already raised by wage levels, location, structure and remit outlined above, the general diminution of the status of planning allied with the introduction of the LDF appears to have exacerbated the problems of local authorities already finding it hard to recruit and retain high-quality staff. Robert Upton, Secretary General of the RTPI, sums up:

When the 2004 Act came in the Government said—and we agreed with it—that a change in culture was as important as a change in the regime [...] it has not happened yet. It is severely undercut by the target regime which applies at present which puts all the emphasis on being able to tick boxes to say that X per cent of applications have been dealt with in Y time. There is no reference to quality whatsoever [...] as that regime has actually got tighter it has had a pernicious effect.⁴⁸

The view from the other side of the planner's desk

25. The use of time-related targets for the processing of applications has, however, resulted in a significant speeding-up of decision making in most areas. The Government notes that four out of five local authorities now meet the 13-week target for major planning applications; in 2002, only one in five acted so quickly. Substantially faster turnaround has also been achieved across the board:

the target for major applications is that 65 per cent will have a decision within 13 weeks—the current achievement (year-ending December 06) is 70 per cent compared to 43 per cent in the year-ending December 02; the target for minor applications is that 70 per cent will have a decision within eight weeks—the current achievement (year-ending December 06) is 76 per cent compared to 54 per cent in the year-ending December 02; and the target for other applications is that 80 per cent will have a

45 Ev 65

46 Q 71

47 Ev 84

48 Q 126

decision within eight weeks. The current achievement (year-ending December 06) is 87 per cent compared to 72 per cent in the year-ending December 02.⁴⁹

While planning officers and agencies rightly highlight the burden this achievement has placed on them at a time when departments are understaffed, it none the less means that those whom the planning system serves—both developers and the public at large—have largely received considerably quicker decisions on their applications. Arguments continue over whether quicker decision making equates to acceptance of lower-quality development. **It is clear that the planning process remains in a state of post-2004 flux as the culture shifts to encompass a greater role in spatial planning which takes into account the centrally set targets for making progress with applications. An adequate balance needs to be struck to achieve a process that delivers on target but retains the commitment to quality of skilled and dedicated planners while also achieving a primary purpose of the planning system, which is clear, quick and responsive service to the public whom local government exists to serve.**

Raising status: Chief Planning Officers

26. One fruitful and immediate means of raising the status of planning might be to raise the status of the Chief Planning Officer. Kate Barker, in her 2006 review of land use planning, recommended that the Government “should raise the status of the Chief Planner within local authorities, potentially on a statutory basis, to reinforce the status of the profession for all parties, including members.”⁵⁰ Several other officers within local authorities have such statutory backing: chief officers for education and social services, for example.⁵¹

27. The Government responded to Barker by supporting her recommendation and saying it expected local authorities to make planning a prime responsibility of one of their corporate directors. It fell short, however, of giving the recommendation legislative force: “we do not, however, consider this should be a statutory matter as we do not view the role of the Chief Planning Officer to be commensurate with those statutory positions in the local authority and consider it is for each local authority to decide how best to organise its departmental structure.”⁵² The Minister for Housing told us that Chief Planning Officers should enjoy a status that reflected the importance of their function, but that whether local authorities “want a chief planning officer, that might be for them to decide.”⁵³

28. What local authorities have decided to do in many cases is to subsume the role of a chief planner into a wider range of responsibilities: Stuart Hylton of the POS told us that the “free-standing planning department with a chief planning officer holding sway over it is in many cases a thing of the past.”⁵⁴ Kevin Murray, an ASC board member, told us, however, that one of the answers to how planning could be made more attractive as a

49 Communities and Local Government, *Planning for a Sustainable Future*, White Paper, May 2007, Cm 7120, p. 132.

50 Kate Barker, *Review of Land Use Planning*, p. 129.

51 Ev 91

52 Communities and Local Government, *Planning for a Sustainable Future*, White Paper, Cm 7120, p. 214.

53 Q 206

54 Q 47

career was to “have a distinctive role and head and function.”⁵⁵ ATLAS believes planning needs “high level corporate support”.⁵⁶ The Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) also supports creation of a statutory chief planner:

It will [...] raise the profile of planning and strengthen its legitimacy as an accountable decision-making function within local government [...] The role of a planning officer includes the creation and removal of millions of pounds of land value by the stroke of a pen, and the awesome responsibility for delivery of sustainable development.⁵⁷

29. In light of the importance of local government planning to the achievement of house-building and wider regeneration, **we urge the Government to reconsider its rejection of Kate Barker’s recommendation to raise the status of planning within local government by making the Chief Planning Officer a statutorily protected senior local government official.**

Supply side factors

Plugging the gaps

30. Local authorities have adopted several strategies for filling empty desks. Lynda Addison, representing the POS, told us that planning authorities were bringing in and training unqualified staff, were seeking to join forces with neighbouring authorities to share skills, and were extensively using trained planners from Australia, whose system is sufficiently close to our own to make staff easily transferable.⁵⁸ Councillor Ruth Cadbury, told us that her authority—Hounslow, in west London—had used significant numbers of Antipodean and South African staff, but pointed out both the short-term value and long-term flaw in the practice, saying: “A lot of them are very capable but they are not around long enough to progress beyond being development control.”⁵⁹ Tim Edmundson, while noting that temporary staff may often be of high quality, also noted the difficulty for permanent planning staff of relying on temporary and short-term staff, whether home-grown or found from abroad: it leads, he said, to “polarised workforces, with inadequate numbers of experienced officers having to supervise disproportionate numbers of inexperienced staff.”⁶⁰

31. In other words, in some areas at least, already hard-pressed senior officers and middle managers need to devote considerable time to monitoring and developing short-term staff rather than being able to concentrate on their core roles. Two further problems also attach to the use of short-term and temporary staff: they can cost about 20 per cent more to employ than paying direct staff wages, and some employers, believing they are likely not to

55 Q 194

56 Ev 114

57 Ev 91

58 Q 45

59 Q 107

60 Ev 76

stay long in an organisation, are unwilling to invest in training that might encourage some to continue there.⁶¹

32. There are, of course, risks in splitting high-level and routine functions and in employing unqualified or temporary staff to do the latter. Efficient administration of planning applications is perhaps the most obvious. Another is a potential ‘de-skilling’ of the role of the junior planners: arguably, this might lead in turn to even fewer highly qualified graduates wanting to enter the profession in the first place, although it is equally likely that able junior planners will welcome the chance to move more quickly into posts that deal with the more major applications.

33. Dividing labour within the planning department so that highly paid, fully qualified officers deal with the largest applications while the routine extension passes through the in-tray of a junior planning technician may make perfect administrative sense—as Stuart Hylton, head of planning for a joint unit of Berkshire’s local authorities and a representative of the POS, told us, this is the way Henry Ford solved the problem of building cars by breaking the process down into simple tasks.⁶²

34. But any authority shifting towards differentiating between high-level and more routine work must be flexible enough to reward junior talent and far-seeing enough to develop its technicians as its future higher-level planners. As the Home Builders Federation points out, restricting new planners to the lower levels alone may be a recipe for preventing them from ever entering local government:

new entrants joining local authorities from university planning courses are all too often asked to work on small householder planning applications and similar scale tasks. Understandably, such assignments are de-motivating for young professionals whose higher education courses will have focused on the rationale and ability for spatial planning to change things for the better.⁶³

35. Such difficulties can be overcome if planning departments are flexible in recognising the development needs and skills of their junior planners. Sir John Egan, too, warned against simply allocating lower-level work to junior technicians: “Planning technicians should of course have the option of converting to more strategic roles should they wish to do so, including support to become fully qualified planners as part of a career development strategy.”⁶⁴ In short, while the use of technicians can make authorities more efficient, authorities need to be aware of the dangers of equating ability with experience and experience simply with age or length of service within a local authority or within planning itself. As the POS, among others, has told us, simply channelling junior staff into lower-level work reduces their job satisfaction, which makes it harder to attract and retain them.⁶⁵ And, as the ASC notes, good junior staff find themselves extremely marketable after only a year or two of regeneration experience and will move on if not recognised and rewarded

61 Ev 80

62 Q 31

63 Ev 154

64 ODPM, *The Egan Review*, p. 46.

65 Ev 54-61

adequately.⁶⁶ **We urge local planning authorities, supported by the Local Government Association, to devise and implement schemes under which graduates entering planning departments are given a structured and mentored period of experience in all aspects of spatial planning within the relevant authority.**

36. Part of the culture change required is a recognition that local government needs to tap the abilities of its most talented and able recruits, wherever they come from, whatever their age, whatever their past experience. Underlying the idea of the ‘missing generation’, for example, is an implicit assumption that only those in their 30s and 40s with a decade or two’s experience behind them can fill senior roles. This may most often be the case, but it is not a given. **A more flexible attitude towards ages—and wages—is required within local authorities if local government is to recruit and retain the planners it needs.** As we shall see shortly, the private sector fares considerably better in both respects.

Economies of scale

37. Another way in which local authorities may cover for labour shortages is to work more closely together. We heard that, among others, authorities in Hampshire, Norfolk, London, Berkshire, West Sussex, the Black Country and Surrey have, to some degree, pooled resources to meet staffing shortages and share skills. Lynda Addison of the POS told us such sharing was good in principle, although it does not of course solve the long-term shortage problem.⁶⁷ Joint working between authorities has also been promoted in other fields in recent years, perhaps most notably through the statutory introduction of joint working arrangements on waste collection through the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007.⁶⁸ The Audit Commission notes, however, that few authorities have yet embarked on joint working for planning matters “because councils perceive there to be key obstacles [...] risk aversion, lack of trust and incompatibility of IT systems.”⁶⁹ Kate Barker, in her 2006 review of land use planning, said that local authorities too small to achieve economies of scale themselves could none the less do so by pooling resources with others, but noted that this was “currently not a widespread practice among local planning departments.”⁷⁰ **CLG must encourage increased joint working across local governmental boundaries to meet the needs of the planning system. It is not reasonable to expect every local authority to be able to respond to every new development in the skills required for 21st century planning, nor is it cost-effective to attempt to do so. The sharing of best practice between authorities is a responsibility of the Academy for Sustainable Communities, and CLG should set specific targets for such information sharing, for more joint approaches to developments that affect contiguous areas and for overcoming inward-looking institutional ‘turf wars’ between authorities which should be focused on serving their communities.**

66 Academy for Sustainable Communities, *Mind the Skills Gap*, 2007 p. 36.

67 Q 32

68 Communities and Local Government Committee, *Refuse Collection*, Fifth Report of 2006-07, HC 536-I, chapter 6.

69 Audit Commission, *The Planning System: Matching expectations and capacity*, February 2006, p. 53.

70 Kate Barker, *Review of Land Use Planning*, p. 127.

More effective use of skills

38. In her 2006 review of land-use planning, Kate Barker recommended that local authorities use their current available skills more effectively:

A number of studies have concluded that non-planners can do more of the basic work. Simple householder applications, for example, could be dealt with by relatively unqualified staff, freeing up resource for use elsewhere.⁷¹

Sir John Egan had previously suggested that 98 per cent of relatively minor applications could be treated differently from the few substantial housing, business or retail applications.⁷²

We see no point in using more experienced people with strategic skills to undertake tasks that could be completed primarily by planning technicians who may be given the requisite skills through practical on the job training.⁷³

Liz Peace, Chief Executive of the BPF, also argued for a flexible approach within planning departments to large and routine applications:

Part of the problem when you look at the planning system is it has to deal with everything from the garage extension right through to a Kings Cross [...] we would rather see fewer highly qualified planners who are paid more and take some of the lower level stuff, which at the moment qualified planners are dealing with, out of the expert planner's system and give that to what we call para-planners in the way you have para-legals, technique people or clerks.⁷⁴

And the Minister for Housing agrees that “certain aspects of the planning function [...] could be better done by technicians and admin staff within the teams and departments.”⁷⁵ Finally, this also offers potential benefits for the status of planners. As Sir John Egan noted,

We see this change as one way for local authorities to free up resources so they can pay those who possess high-level generic and technical skills a salary that better reflects the importance of their contribution to creating and maintaining sustainable communities in their area.⁷⁶

39. Some local authorities have in fact begun to make this distinction, reserving the most substantial projects for their most experienced officers.⁷⁷ Others remain to be convinced that the system is sufficiently flexible to allow this split, keeping high-level officers involved at all levels and stages of the application process:

71 Kate Barker, *Review of Land Use Planning*, p. 127.

72 ODPM, *The Egan Review*, p. 44.

73 *Ibid*, p. 46.

74 Qq 95 and 74

75 Q 215

76 ODPM, *The Egan Review*, p. 66.

77 Ev 63

In our experience, many planning managers are too wedded to the idea that there are certain pieces of work which must be undertaken by qualified planners. We have long argued that many of the front-end and back-end processes concerned with planning application can be undertaken with suitably trained support staff, leaving the planning officers free to concentrate on considering proposals and formulating recommendations.⁷⁸

We agree that those who possess the highest skills should be charged with delivering the most significant development projects and that they should be rewarded adequately for doing so. We urge the Government to work with the Royal Town Planning Institute, as the professional body for planners, to develop clearer job roles within the profession for those who may deal with routine, functional planning applications and those who fill higher-level roles that require a broader mix of generic skills on top of the highly developed technical skills already possessed.

Use of consultants

40. A further means by which local authorities have sought to raise their capacity is an increasing use of private planning consultancy. The Audit Commission reports that only one invitation to private consultants to tender was issued in 1986–87, that the figure had risen to only nine by 1993–95, but that it had then risen sharply to 125 for the most recent year. “Whereas in the 1980s very few pieces of work were outsourced, this is now commonplace.”⁷⁹

41. Consultancy retains a comparatively minor role in the public sector, none the less. Lindsay Frost told us that Lewes District Council, which has an annual planning budget of around £1 million, spent £170,000 over three years on external consultancy.⁸⁰ The Audit Commission estimates that only £8.3 million (6 per cent) of the £120 million PDG paid to councils in 2004–05 went on consultancy.⁸¹ And consultancy is not always paid for from councils’ own budgets: Liz Peace, Chief Executive of the BPF, cited Birmingham as one council which obtained a developer contribution under Section 106 procedures to purchase outside expert help.⁸²

42. Consultancy can also provide specialised advice which it would not be economic for local authorities to maintain in house. For example, retail planning development has emerged as one field in which several specialist consultancies operate. The Musgrave Retail Partnership, which provides sales, marketing and IT for 2,000 food retailers such as Budgens and Londis, says that such consultancies have recruited extensively from local government but can provide back to local government a level of skills developed from training that local government finds it hard to afford.⁸³ The Audit Commission also reports that other European countries have a strong tradition of using consultants to supply skills

78 Ev 125

79 Audit Commission, *The Planning System: Matching expectations and capacity*, February 2006, p. 35.

80 Q 51

81 Audit Commission, *The Planning System*, p. 37.

82 Q 79

83 Ev 156

small authorities cannot economically maintain: for example, “Using the private sector to support the plan-making process is well established in the Netherlands, where many municipalities are very small and find it difficult to find permanent staff.”⁸⁴

43. The use of consultants cannot, however, solve all local government’s problems. Lynda Addison, representing the POS, said consultants often suffered precisely the same shortages as those found in the public sector.⁸⁵ The RICS believes that the general labour shortage is causing private sector salaries to rise at an unsustainable rate of around 15 to 20 per cent a year.⁸⁶ The Institution of Economic Development notes that local government cannot rely on consultants’ availability: “expecting external expertise to be available on permanent stand-by is unrealistic; not only might the private sector be unable to recruit people with suitable skills, but they also might find a sector that is more lucrative than local government in which to work.”⁸⁷ As the Audit Commission has noted, the use of private sector consultants clearly does not add to the overall pool of qualified planners. None the less, use of private sector consultancy can provide some additional capacity for councils which are struggling to meet demands both for routine work and in exceptional circumstances such as the need to prepare for appeals. **The increasing use of external consultants, managed at arms length, highlights very clearly the need for increased ‘generic’ commissioning and management skills among senior public sector planners, particularly the need to negotiate value-for-money contract rates, monitor and manage performance, and ensure that agreed goals are achieved.**

The private sector

44. The growing amount of work offered to the private sector has been matched, unsurprisingly, by a growth in provision. There were, by 2006, some 442 separate firms offering planning services in England.⁸⁸ Tim Edmundson reports that in 1997 the largest private firm in the sector employed only 40 planners: today, there are 16 firms employing that number of people, and four that employ more than 100.⁸⁹ Inevitably, this has placed some strain on the ability of local government to attract candidates for jobs and to hold on to skilled staff.

45. Sir John Egan warned in his 2004 review of the importance of not allowing all those with the best-developed skills to be “enticed from the public into the private sector”.⁹⁰ As RICS notes, a primary enticement is higher salaries.⁹¹ Lindsay Frost of Lewes District Council says that planners with “five years plus experience are highly marketable and are particularly attractive to the expanding planning consultancy sector.”⁹² But, once again,

84 Audit Commission, *The Planning System*, p. 43.

85 Q 42

86 Ev 44

87 Ev 49

88 Audit Commission, *The Planning System*, p. 42.

89 Ev 75

90 ODPM, *The Egan Review*, p. 66.

91 Ev 44

92 Ev 66

wages are not the only spur. BPF Chief Executive Liz Peace, conceding that many planners go from local authorities into the private sector, pinpointed status as a driving factor: “you really need to do something to raise the status of a planning officer’s lot in the public sector so that once you have them in there they are not all stampeding for the door at the earliest opportunity.”⁹³

46. There is general agreement that the private sector is more proactive and more effective in recruiting the brightest and best graduates. Robert Upton, General Secretary of the RTPI, told us that

private sector recruiters are much smarter on their feet than the public sector. I guarantee you that in the best planning schools the private sector will have been around them all dealing with those postgraduate students this year and will have made job offers. They just cream the stock. Local government cannot do that.⁹⁴

The world’s oldest planning school, the 100-year-old Department of Civic Design at Liverpool University, confirms this:

more of our best graduating students are being attracted to private work in the private sector, often attracted by more dynamic marketing, better career prospects and a perception of a more interesting and varied workload.⁹⁵

Only 25 universities offer RTPI-accredited qualifications in planning. We recommend that CLG fund a public sector recruitment drive targeted at those universities to attract more of the highest-achieving graduates and postgraduates into local government planning.

Universities and planning qualifications

47. One encouraging point for the future supply of planners is that the students the private sector is apparently ‘creaming off’ are more plentiful and of a higher calibre than in recent years. As has been said, the number of planning schools fell during the 1980s and 1990s. Since 2000–01, however, the number of students entering planning schools has risen again, partly to meet increasing demand for planners and partly because the RTPI and the Government and its agencies have sought to encourage a range of new courses and wider access to them.⁹⁶ Not only are there more courses; Lynda Addison of the POS told us that current courses are often full.⁹⁷ Sheffield Hallam University, Anglia Ruskin and the University of the West of England (UWE) are among those reporting that the number of students enrolled on courses has increased, particularly at postgraduate level.⁹⁸ The Minister for Housing told us that around 1,500 students were entering courses, compared with 800–900 “a few years back”.⁹⁹ The Department of Civic Design at Liverpool University

93 Q 74

94 Q 123

95 Ev 128

96 Audit Commission, *The Planning System*, p. 32.

97 Q 61

98 Ev 92 and Ev 46-49

99 Q 205

reports that “the calibre of new students entering our programmes, their level of engagement and performance and subsequently the calibre of new entrants to the profession is rising.”¹⁰⁰ Three UK universities—Glasgow, Kingston and Strathclyde—have newly embarked on planning provision.¹⁰¹ Some 25 schools currently enjoy RTPI accreditation for 111 different courses ranging from undergraduate level through to a PhD.¹⁰² The ASC also launched a new Foundation Degree in Sustainable Communities in January.¹⁰³

48. A number of new courses have been stimulated by Government action as CLG has launched several programmes aimed at increasing the number of planners in the system. For example, three universities in regions where higher-than-average development is occurring have received £110,000 to fund new places for students, and a distance-learning MA course in spatial planning has been set up at UWE; CLG, which provided £250,000 for the project, reports that 151 practitioners from local government planning departments have accessed that MA to date, but the university, while confirming that figure, describes it as “less than we might have hoped by this time”.¹⁰⁴

49. Since 2004–05, CLG has funded bursaries for a one-year postgraduate qualification in planning through 15 universities in England. Some 513 students have benefited, and the scheme has cost £4.8 million to date. Students awarded the bursary receive more than £3,000 to cover tuition fees and a maintenance grant of £6,000. Exit surveys from the first two years showed that 99 per cent of students completed their courses, but that on graduating only 36 per cent entered local government employment, with 34 per cent going to private planning consultancies, and the remainder going into the third sector, public sector planning jobs outside local government (like those in the National Health Service or the Environment Agency) and academia. Given that only a quarter of all planning graduates enter the private sector, the fact that a third of those who received public funding of around £9,000 to complete their studies have done so seems to support the evidence that the private sector is “smarter on its feet” when it comes to recruiting the brightest students.¹⁰⁵

50. The fact that around half those funded through bursaries entered the private sector resulted in some criticism for CLG, which has now stipulated that students who receive a bursary should spend at least three of their first five years of employment after graduation in the public sector.¹⁰⁶ Kate Barker, in December 2006, recommended that bursaries should be tied to a number of years of public service “so that a return is provided for the public purse.”¹⁰⁷ The Government initially argued against Barker’s recommendation, saying that the scheme delivered “a public good by increasing the pool of qualified planners, wherever

100 Ev 127

101 Ev 101

102 Ev 107

103 Ev 135

104 Ev 98 and Ev 48

105 Audit Commission, *The Planning System*, p. 32.

106 Communities and Local Government, *Planning for a Sustainable Future*, White Paper, Cm 7120.

107 Kate Barker, *Review of Land Use Planning*, p. 129.

they work.”¹⁰⁸ David Morris, Deputy Director of Planning, Delivery and Performance at CLG, told us no public service was stipulated initially in order to “attract as many people as possible into the profession.”¹⁰⁹ **We are glad that the Government has finally accepted the need to guarantee a return on the substantial sums being spent on its postgraduate bursary scheme following its initial resistance to requiring students to work in the public sector. The fact that nearly half the students whose courses have been publicly funded have gone straight into the private sector with no requirement to provide a public return on their learning represents a missed opportunity to expand the range and talent available to local government planning departments.**

Growing your own

51. Local authorities and other public sector planners have begun to pursue a policy of ‘growing their own’ staff through offering in-service training. The RTPI has long required its members to undergo a process of continuous professional development (CPD) if they are to remain qualified for membership, but in-house provision of training, or funds for training, appears to be growing, with the aim of bringing more people into the profession and by a wider variety of routes. RTPI General Secretary Robert Upton accepted that the profession reached the point at which there were too few ways to enter it “unless as a young person you make possibly a rather fortuitous choice”.¹¹⁰ The RICS has called for the establishment of means of making it “easier for professionals from other sectors to move sideways into the sector”.¹¹¹ UWE says that local authorities, having recognised that they cannot recruit, are paying for more part-time and distance courses and suggests that the model adopted to attract more people into teaching from other professions and at various times of life could be useful for spurring growth in the number of planners.¹¹² Oxford Brookes University identifies growth in demand for courses in, among other topics, Environmental Impact Assessment, Planning Law, Enforcement Issues for Planning Officers and Development Control.¹¹³ **We recommend that CLG explore, through the Academy for Sustainable Communities, the potential for a conversion course for mid-life professionals who may wish to switch careers to planning, on the model used in teaching and the legal profession.**

52. There are, of course, risks attached to the ‘grow your own’ strategy, most obviously the possible lack of return on investment for those organisations that fund internal training, even if the wider planning sector benefits. PAS/IDeA report “much anecdotal evidence about the significant number of planners who move from local government to the private sector when training has been completed”.¹¹⁴ There is also the question of how good the training is: Tim Edmundson suggests the massive growth in recent provision has had a limited impact on staff shortages or skills levels, and that the training market is geared

108 Communities and Local Government, *Planning for a Sustainable Future*, White Paper, May 2007, Cm 7120, p. 214.

109 Q 213

110 Q 121

111 Ev 45

112 Ev 47-48

113 Ev 71-73

114 Ev 88

towards the provision of one-off events that impart information, such as conferences and seminars, and less towards more systematic learning that embeds knowledge.¹¹⁵ The time and financial pressures on local authorities which have to fund the course and spare their staff to take them may well explain a bias in this direction.

The language barrier

53. Finally, while the image of the planning profession can be improved by raising pay, raising status, providing training and raising job satisfaction levels, it can also be improved through clearer communication. Poor public image and lack of awareness in schools are among reasons why planning lacks appeal. The POS and Sheffield Hallam University suggest that young people are also put off careers in planning by simple lack of understanding of the jargon used to describe it. To take just one example, CLG's list of missing skills is headed by 'inclusive visioning', which appears to mean working out what an area needs.¹¹⁶ Sheffield Hallam, as it developed a new degree, found that:

There was concern over the terminology of 'sustainable communities'. Would people know what it means? Would young people be attracted to careers in this field? The career branding of Sustainable Communities remains potentially confused and fragmented.¹¹⁷

The POS is even blunter:

Straightforward things like the simplification of processes and the removal of confusing jargon could do much to de-mystify and facilitate participation in the system.¹¹⁸

New graduates and postgraduates and those who might consider changing course might find a career in planning more appealing if they understood what it meant. Communities and Local Government and, in particular, the Academy for Sustainable Communities should work rigorously to eliminate the kind of jargon that acts as a barrier to understanding, particularly in materials aimed at schools.

115 Ev 76

116 Ev 96

117 Ev 93

118 Ev 59

3 The skills gap

Improvement is needed in both technical and generic skills such as development appraisal skills so as to negotiate S106 agreements, climate change mitigation and how to use evidence-based approaches to inform forward planning as well as financial and project management skills, decision-making, analytical evaluation skills.—Communities and Local Government.¹¹⁹

54. The ASC last year reported that 10 per cent of organisations it had surveyed believed they required improvements in technical skills. Among individuals surveyed, however, half thought their specialist skills needed improvement, and many planners felt they would be more confident in using their generic skills—in negotiating Section 106 agreements, for example—if their underlying technical skills were better.¹²⁰ The ASC was created in 2005 as a result of the key recommendations in the Egan Review, which had identified a shortage of ‘generic’ skills—things like governance, negotiation and partnership working rather than technical knowledge of planning law or land use—as the central problem facing the entire sustainable communities workforce, of which planning is a small but vital part. Discussion about whether it is technical or generic skills that are most lacking continues, but is to some extent a side issue—local authorities contain professionals other than planners who may most appropriately and effectively conduct, for example, negotiations on the level of section 106 payments. The point is that both technical and generic skills are in short supply in certain areas of planning and in need of continuous improvement across the board.

55. The Egan Review recognised that existing specialist skills required for professions including planning were vital, but argued that a wider engagement with the work of creating sustainable communities relied on planners also attaining new ‘generic’ skills. “For some local authority staff this will require new skills and ways of working that emphasise team effort, shared values and delivery of common goals.”¹²¹ The Audit Commission has amplified the point, noting the need for planners to interact increasingly with other professionals as councils move away from narrow land use planning towards the more ‘spatial’, ‘place-shaping’ approach ushered in since 2004: “it is softer skills, such as the ability to negotiate and communicate, not technical skills, that are at a premium. There is a general lack of people with the appropriate skills to fill this role.”¹²²

56. Of course, generic skills cannot be entirely divorced from the technical subject matter that is the business of planning: the Planning Inspectorate, for example, has identified five specific areas in which skills are short in both respects—site assembly and finance; environmental impact assessment regulations; renewable energy and climate change targets; Design and Access statements; and the new LDF.¹²³ The ASC has further highlighted targets for new homes, regeneration in growth areas and eco-towns as areas in

119 Ev 96

120 Academy for Sustainable Communities, *Mind the Skills Gap*, p. 45.

121 ODPM, *The Egan Review*, p. 34.

122 Audit Commission, *The Planning System*, p. 34.

123 Ev 120-22

which “people with the right skills, knowledge and leadership capability will be in high demand.”¹²⁴ And Asset Skills, in effect the sector skills council for planners, also stresses leadership, while adding negotiation, brokerage and management to the package of skills required of the 21st century planner. **The point is that planners well versed in the techniques of their trade need wider leadership, management and negotiation skills if they are to shape their areas fully, using their strategic skills to drive local regeneration. These skills need in turn to be built on a new confidence among planners themselves in their own power to design and follow through on a vision for their localities following the 2004 shift towards spatial planning.**

The cross-cutting, inter-disciplinary approach

57. Sir John Egan pressed for the “establishment of integrated cross-cutting teams within local authorities to oversee implementation of major projects” as one means of widening the generic skill sets of planners and other sustainable communities professionals, a suggestion most recently backed by John Calcutt in his 2007 review of house-building delivery.¹²⁵

58. There are difficulties in this approach, however—the previous chapter’s points about the reduction in status of the Chief Planning Officer are predicated substantially on the maintenance of difference for that post rather than its integration into a wider role encompassing economic regeneration, environmental services, transport, investment and more. The ASC has noted that such integration would imply changes in the way planners and others are educated and trained and a considerable culture change.¹²⁶ It is also possible, however, that a stronger Chief Planning Officer would mean that the place of the planning function within such a wider role is clearer.

The culture shift since 2004

59. The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 caused much technical planning work to be done at the routine level—house extensions and the like—but has created new pressures on officers at the level of the large application. The Audit Commission notes that a major development is likely to involve co-ordination of the input of the following parties:

the developer who wants to build (the applicant), council planners; councillors (the planning authority); neighbours (third parties); local and national pressure groups (third parties); council departments, for example, housing, leisure and social services (internal consultees); external agencies, for example the Environment Agency, Highways Agency and English Heritage (statutory consultees); the council’s solicitors; and the developer’s solicitors.¹²⁷

On the ground, this has faced senior planners with increasing challenges, to which they have begun to rise. As Lindsay Frost, head of planning at Lewes District Council, told us:

124 Ev 136

125 ODPM, *The Egan Review*, p. 40; *the Calcutt Review of Housebuilding Delivery*, November 2007, p. 82.

126 Ev 157-58

127 Audit Commission, *The Planning System*, p24.

I think there has been some progress since [Egan's] report in 2004, for example on project management through the local development scheme system... We are also getting a clearer idea in the profession on some financial management, financial appraisal issues, which particularly crop up in big, complex, mixed-use developments.¹²⁸

60. That said, significant gaps in skills remain to be addressed if planning officers are to gain the confidence to provide the proactive vision and leadership required to shape their communities. The POS identifies the planning of infrastructure as a key new field, consequent on the wider view that 'spatial' planning of an entire area requires.¹²⁹ This requirement will take centre stage as the proposals in the 2007 *Review of Sub-National Economic Development and Regeneration* are implemented. The RTPPI's south-east branch and the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) both highlight design skills, the latter pointing out that fewer than half of local authorities have a qualified urban designer in their planning departments while 86 per cent of local planning authorities state that they need further design skills.¹³⁰ The Environment Agency stresses a shortage of climate change-related skills.¹³¹

61. PAS/IDeA see a need for planners to identify with the 'intelligent client':

To be able to specify, commission and complete the client side of a contractual relationship requires a combination of the skills that are already evidently in short supply—project management, performance management—combined with a clear view of what is required.¹³²

This finds an echo on the development side of the fence, where there is greater concern about finance-related skills. The BPF notes:

Two general areas where the private sector's view is that local planning authorities do not fully understand the perspective of a commercial developer are the financial costs of delay to a scheme and the level of profit that is required to make a scheme financially viable.¹³³

62. PAS/IDeA also identify project and performance management as significant gaps, a point of particular importance given increasing reliance on external consultants for both routine and more specialised work.¹³⁴ The POS, too, accepts that the employment of private consultancy firms exposes significant gaps in public sector management skills:

The public sector is not good at using consultants. They are not skilled at drawing up specifications, performance managing them, ensuring they are delivered to cost time

128 Q 27

129 Ev 54 passim

130 Ev 63-64 and Ev 67

131 Ev 131

132 Ev 86

133 Ev 69

134 Ev 86

and making sure they get effective use of the money and judging what the amount of money is to do the piece of work they are asking for.¹³⁵

Lindsay Frost concurs, recognising that employment of consultants is a senior managerial responsibility in “an area of work that comes to us now which did not come in the past”.

63. Mr Frost adds, however, that the key to doing that work well lies in asking and having answered the right sets of questions.¹³⁶ Indeed, that ability to ask the right question underlies a great deal of the skills gap that planners fear they suffer—on infrastructure planning, on development economics, on climate change and on virtually every sustainable communities issue that now crosses desks within the local authority planning department. As Miranda Pearce, Renaissance Manager of the South-East of England Development Agency (SEEDA), told us, this comes down to officers having the wider confidence to back their technical knowledge:

What [developers] need is a council to challenge them to consistently produce good schemes. It is often the confidence in that language and the questions to ask to be able to challenge poor quality.¹³⁷

Community Infrastructure Levy

64. The Planning Bill, currently passing through Parliament, proposes the introduction of a Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), posing new challenges for planning departments. Local authorities could apply the CIL to new developments in their areas with the intention of funding some, if not all, the infrastructure the development would require. This will, at the simplest, require the identification of such infrastructure, the cost of installing or upgrading it and the negotiating skills to obtain a suitable contribution from the developer. The POS, noting that application of the CIL may open up the planning system to participation by new players from, for example, the health service or the emergency services, raises the concern that the necessary skills may be “in short supply within the planning profession and beyond”.¹³⁸ The BPF has raised similar concerns from the development side, and pointed to significant variation in performance on the negotiation of Section 106 agreements, which may result in infrastructure funding being lost.

Local Development Frameworks

65. A further challenge to local authority planning departments has been the need to produce LDFs under the changes ushered in since 2004. These replaced the previous single local plan with a high-level core strategy for the local area, supported where necessary by lower-level development plan documents intended to deliver it. The switch to LDF has caused some anger among planners themselves: Lindsay Frost of Lewes District Council told us they had written off much experience built up over the previous three decades.¹³⁹

135 Q 42

136 Q 52

137 Q 151

138 Ev 60

139 Ev 65

CLG reports that around a fifth of the LDFs have been or are likely to be submitted behind schedule while a quarter of those submitted have been found “unsound” by the Planning Inspectorate or withdrawn.¹⁴⁰ CLG puts these failures down to “an underestimate (by ourselves and local government) of the cultural change required for local planning authorities and key stakeholders to deliver”.¹⁴¹ The Planning Inspectorate suggests some authorities have produced ‘unsound’ plans because they produced their documents in an “illogical sequence”, which itself resulted from their “still coming to terms with spatial planning and LDFs”.¹⁴² The introduction of LDFs and the planning development documents required for them marked a significant culture shift in local planning departments for which they have proven ill-equipped. **CLG needs to provide support to those authorities that have struggled to produce their Local Development Frameworks on time or to the standard required by the Planning Inspectorate and to ensure in future that any such wide-ranging shift is backed by the resources necessary to train officers adequately in what is being required of them.**

Planning Delivery Grant and training

66. The Government has supplied local authorities with substantial funding in the form of PDG, which is tied to the achievement of time-related targets. Since 2003–04, some £605 million has been allocated to local authorities, and the grant will transform into the Housing and PDG in future with £510 million allocated over the next Comprehensive Spending Review Period, 2008–09 to 2010–11.¹⁴³ Interestingly, comparatively little of this substantial funding has been spent by local authorities on training their staff: in 2005–06, for example, just £1.6 million of PDG money—about 1 per cent of that year’s total—went that way.¹⁴⁴ While the fact that the grant is tied to performance may suggest that the authorities who receive the most require the least in training support, there may be scope for requiring more of the grant to support improvement in skills. **The Government has put significant funding into Planning Delivery Grant to local authorities. Given the skills shortages across the planning sector, there may be a case for tying some of that funding to raising skills levels by requiring increased training and development opportunities among those authorities who receive it.**

Skills training

67. The RTPI, which accredits university and other courses for planners, believes that the “development of skills absolutely rests on a bedrock of education”.¹⁴⁵ The previous chapter of this Report considered the role of university courses for undergraduates and postgraduate students. This section will consider on-the-job training, or continuing professional development.

140 Communities and Local Government, *Community, Opportunity, Prosperity: Annual Report 2008*, May 2008, Cm 7394, para 6.71.

141 *Ibid*, para 6.72.

142 Ev 121

143 Ev 99

144 Ev 99 and Ev 81

145 Q 116

68. Local authority reluctance to spend PDG on training for its staff appears to be matched by a lack of investment of other resources in CPD. RTPI General Secretary Robert Upton told us that there was no shortage of courses available for in-work planners seeking to improve their skills, but “a pitifully small amount” of money available in some authorities to pay for them.¹⁴⁶ Tim Edmundson of the University of Westminster points out that the average London Borough has a training budget of about £650 per officer while a single seminar or conference will cost between £400 and £700.¹⁴⁷ The RTPI represents a general view in saying: “Local Government is either not a sufficiently willing or a sufficiently able customer for continuing professional or other skills development.”¹⁴⁸

69. Quite apart from local authority resourcing, the UWE believes that there is little professional incentive for planners themselves to invest their time in gaining additional qualifications since little financial reward or direct promotion results from their attainment.¹⁴⁹ Officers are often promoted on qualifying for membership of the RTPI, their professional body, but this generally happens early and is not a direct result of educational attainment.

70. The BPF, which represents private sector developers, is particularly keen on the idea of cross-secondments between the private and public sectors: the former gain knowledge of how the planning process works on the local government side while the latter gain experience in, for example, the economics of development.¹⁵⁰

146 Q 123

147 Ev 79

148 Ev 107

149 Ev 48

150 Ev 69

4 Agents for delivery

I think some alignment is worth looking at to make sure that we are not just creating organisations for the sake of it, and just ending up with lots of different voices all on the same issue.—rt Hon. Caroline Flint MP, Minister for Housing.¹⁵¹

71. The Minister for Housing’s remark above reflects the fact that very many agencies, governmental and non-governmental, public and private, feed into the provision both of planners and the skills they possess. During the course of our inquiry we identified the following list of players at work in this field:

- the Department for Communities and Local Government;
- the Homes and Communities Agency;
- the Academy of Sustainable Communities;
- the Advisory Team for Large Applications;
- the Planning Advisory Service;
- the Improvement & Development Agency for Local Government;
- the Planning Officers Society;
- the Asset Skills Council;
- the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment;
- the Local Government Association;
- the Planning Summer School;
- Regional Centres of Excellence;
- Regional Development Agencies;
- the Urban Design Alliance;
- various planning schools and private sector bodies; and
- professional organisations such as the Royal Town Planning Institute.

The RTPI, among others, suggests that there may simply be too many bodies operating within the field, stating that “there is inevitably some duplication of effort [...] not least because some of these bodies perceive themselves to be in competition rather than

alliance”.¹⁵² This chapter considers the roles and activities of the principal agencies created following the Egan Review and co-ordinated by CLG.

Academy for Sustainable Communities

72. The main outcome of the 2004 Egan review was the establishment in 2005 of the Academy for Sustainable Communities as a national centre for skills across the sustainable communities sphere. Egan recommended, among other things, that the centre:

- provide a high-profile national focus for sustainable community skills development and research, and
- act as a resource and communications hub for individuals, organisations and communities working in the sustainable communities agenda (Recommendation 22).

The ASC describes its activities as follows:

- We raise awareness of sustainable communities;
- We help build capacity by giving existing professionals new skills, and by encouraging others to take up relevant careers;
- We set standards and improve professional performance by highlighting and sharing examples of good practice;
- We influence policy;
- We work with organisations critical to the success of future communities.¹⁵³

CLG, as the Academy’s parent Department, has also set it priorities for 2007–08:

to become a recognised ‘kitemarking’ body for skills and knowledge related to place-making and sustainable communities; establishing programmes for professionals; improving the understanding between the private and public sectors; continuing to influence positively the work of other bodies; providing active, practical learning through national action projects and regional learning laboratories.¹⁵⁴

73. The ASC appears to have got off to a slow start in its efforts to spread knowledge on sustainable communities. Its memorandum to our inquiry states:

From a standing start in 2006 with a budget of £12.739m over our first two years of operation, ASC has influenced the learning of 10,000 professionals. This amounts to 1.3% of the sustainable communities workforce.¹⁵⁵

152 Ev 105

153 ASC website

154 Ev 97

155 Ev 134

ASC chairman Professor Peter Roberts OBE when he appeared before the Committee updated those figures to 24,000 people, representing about 3 per cent of the target workforce.¹⁵⁶ He repeated, too, that the ASC had been in action for two years: “the Academy started in *full* operation in May 2006”. [*emphasis added*].¹⁵⁷ A supplementary memorandum supplied after Professor Roberts gave evidence uses a similar formulation: “Since becoming fully operational in spring 2006”.¹⁵⁸ In fact, the ASC was created in mid-2005, as is confirmed by CLG’s memorandum to our inquiry.¹⁵⁹ It did not have a “standing start” in 2006 and it should not claim that it did.

74. The fact that the Academy for Sustainable Communities—the national centre responsible for skills in the field—has, at a time of substantial labour and skills shortages, reached only 3 per cent of the sustainable communities workforce in three years’ work at a cost of more than £13 million does not appear to match the objective set by the Egan Review of achieving a “high-profile national focus for sustainable community skills development and research”. We recommend that CLG undertake and publish an impact assessment of the ASC’s first three years’ work programme.

75. The ASC has produced some significant work since 2006, notably its *Mind the Skills Gap* report, which has been referred to frequently in this Report, a new Foundation Degree in Sustainable Communities available from January this year, and curriculum support materials for schools, which it says more than 74,000 young people and 3,000 teachers have had access to.¹⁶⁰ It is currently re-conducting the research on which *Mind the Skills Gap* was based to take account of Comprehensive Spending Review changes and new Government targets, notably for house-building, and the data it provides will be vital in identifying areas where the gaps are greatest and where most action is required. **The Academy has been more successful in fulfilling its role as an identifier of skills gaps across the Sustainable Communities workforce. We urge CLG to use the Academy’s forthcoming revision of its data on the skills gap among planners and other sustainable communities professions to establish a detailed action plan to fill those gaps.**

76. Professor Roberts told us that the ASC’s tasks included “establishing meaningful and productive partnerships with all the other agencies and organisations involved in delivery of professionals and other people working on sustainable communities”:¹⁶¹

We have worked with people like Constructing Excellence, we have worked with people like Encams, we have worked with people like the Landscape Institute, the Landscape Architects, the Institution of Economic Development, the Chartered Institute of Housing and so on, and these people have signed commitments. We have developed and delivered.¹⁶²

156 Qq 166 and 176

157 Q 165

158 Ev 157

159 Ev 97

160 Ev 157-59

161 Q 165

162 Q 183

The ASC has also clearly worked with organisations such as Sheffield Hallam University to start up the Foundation Degree already referred to, and it rightly points out that developing such programmes takes time if they are to be effective and credible with, for example, professional bodies such as the RTPI.¹⁶³

77. Even so, the ASC has not clearly established among all interested parties a clear picture of what it is for and what it does. From the private development sector, Liz Peace, the BPF chief executive, was “doubtful that the Academy for Sustainable Communities has so far made a real difference”. Nor have the ASC’s public sector regional partners been entirely convinced as yet: Dominic Murphy, Executive Director of the Sustainable Communities Excellence Network, which represents England’s regional centres of excellence, said its establishment had created a real opportunity to provide a national focus: “It is all very well operating regionally and being close to the practitioners, but things do come up where you need somebody who has access to the corridors of power.”¹⁶⁴ But his colleague, Miranda Pearce, Renaissance Manager at SEEDA, was uncertain that this had translated into real national influence:

Perhaps where it has been less clear what they have been doing—although I imagine that they have been doing something—is at the national level where they have perhaps been influencing some of the strategic players.¹⁶⁵

78. Several regional bodies have suggested that problems with strategic leadership and co-ordination and collaboration between agencies operating at the national level has necessitated innovative regional and sub-regional level joint approaches. The Regional Centres of Excellence outline several such model initiatives in their memorandum to our inquiry. SEEDA/SE Excellence refer to the ‘Making Places Programme’ which brings together CLG-sponsored agencies—ATLAS, CABE, IDeA and PAS—to ensure a collaborative, integrated and timely approach from these agencies to local authorities in the south-east.¹⁶⁶ SEEDA also refers to the roll-out of IDeA’s programme for ‘Effective democracy for elected members in Growth Areas.’¹⁶⁷

ASC and the Homes and Communities Agency

79. The ASC will soon be absorbed into the Government’s planned new housing and regeneration delivery arm, the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA). The new body was announced in January 2007 after a review of the Department’s housing and regeneration delivery identified significant overlap between the work of English Partnerships (EP) and the Housing Corporation (HC).¹⁶⁸ The new body will be large—total expenditure by EP and the HC in 2005–06 amounted to £2.2 billion, and total net assets were £1.6 billion. The new agency will be responsible for, among other things, Decent Homes, Housing Market Renewal and urban regeneration programmes.

163 Ev 157-59

164 Q 158

165 Q 161

166 Ev 117-20

167 Ev 117-20

168 CM 7094, p. 80.

80. The ASC, with its 20 staff and £5.5 million a year budget, will be a small part of the HCA’s empire, but the move is intended to increase its influence.¹⁶⁹ Negotiations continue about precisely how the relationship will work: the ASC hopes to retain its ‘identity and brand’, and David Morris, Deputy Director of Planning, Delivery and Performance at CLG, said the Government hoped the greater weight of the new parent body will “give the ASC more input ... into the work on the ground and possibly greater focus on what it does as part of that process”.¹⁷⁰ Giving evidence to us in February after he was appointed to head the HCA, Sir Bob Kerslake said that he wanted to see whether the ASC could be more strongly focused and to ask whether it could assist “more directly in places where there are particular issues, either about the absolute number of people with the right skills or with the ability to work collaboratively across different professional disciplines.”¹⁷¹

81. We take the comments of Mr Morris and Sir Bob Kerslake to mean that the ASC’s shift into the HCA is likely to mean some refocusing of its priorities. Currently, it concentrates on promotion of skills; greater attention is required to the problem of raising the number of planners. Sir Bob also told us in February that the ASC “can and should be” assessing whether skills shortages are “proving a barrier to progress”.¹⁷² **We agree with what appears to be a clear implication from CLG and the new head of the Homes and Communities Agency that the Academy for Sustainable Communities should focus its attention more clearly on what can be done to address shortages of personnel as well as on improving skills. We recommend that such a shift of emphasis be confirmed in the terms under which the ASC becomes part of the HCA in the near future.**

Planning Advisory Service

82. PAS was launched by ODPM (CLG’s predecessor Department) in December 2004 with the specific goal of helping local government planning departments improve their service. Unlike the ASC, it has regular impact assessments conducted on its work to date, with fairly positive results. Some 90 per cent of authorities are aware of its work and positive satisfaction with the information and service it provides is at 91 per cent. More significantly, two thirds of those who receive advice or support from PAS report that they have changed their service as a result.¹⁷³

Advisory Team for Large Applications

83. ATLAS was also created by ODPM in 2004 to provide local authorities and the private sector with advice on the planning process for major projects, such as those involving more than 500 homes. It, too, has earned credit for its work to date, but that work has been restricted only to southern England and has involved it with only a quarter of the planning authorities even there.¹⁷⁴ CLG has provided £6.5 million for its work.¹⁷⁵

169 Q 196

170 Qq 196 and 227

171 Oral evidence 18 Feb 2008, HC 349-i, Q 64.

172 Oral evidence 18 Feb 2008, HC 349-i, Q 66.

173 Ev 87

174 See Ev 112-117

Improved co-ordination

84. Both bodies have provided valuable aid to both local planners and developers. Neither is directly charged with increasing either the number of planners or their skills, although the collateral effect of the work they do is likely to do both. The question is whether they, in addition to the ASC, should operate as separate bodies under diverse leads in related but different parts of the planning delivery field. ATLAS itself recognised “the need for central government and other public sector bodies to practice what they preach in providing a service that is joined-up, collaborative and comprehensive.”¹⁷⁶ PAS also noted “confusion amongst planners and councillors as to who is providing what support, what is available and who can access it”.¹⁷⁷ And the Minister for Housing thought that “some alignment is worth looking at to make sure that we are not just creating organisations for the sake of it, and just ending up with lots of different voices all on the same issue.”¹⁷⁸ The ASC, too, calls for “greater national co-ordination and coherence in the approach adopted to developing the workforce of the future.”¹⁷⁹ **We believe that greater co-ordination is required of the various agencies created in the wake of the Egan Review to improve the performance of local planning authorities. The ASC, PAS and ATLAS currently perform different but overlapping roles, leading to some confusion about who, precisely, is responsible for skills in the sector. We recommend that the Homes and Communities Agency—itsself being created to co-ordinate the different but overlapping roles of English Partnerships and the Housing Corporation—be charged with co-ordinating this work and establishing a single agency—in effect a sector skills council for planning—tasked with delivering the required number of planners with the required skills.**

175 Ev 97

176 Ev 116

177 Ev 87

178 Q 219

179 Ev 140

5 Councillors

The system rests on the basis that the technical specialist can be challenged by a non-specialist, so that there are checks and balances and that the decisions being made reflect the needs and desires of the wider community—Trevor Roberts Associates.¹⁸⁰

85. Planning officers are not, of course, the only group of people whose skills are essential if the local authority planning system is to perform efficiently and effectively. The role of councillors within the system has been canvassed extensively among submissions to our inquiry, with a strong focus on whether councillors require more and better training to enable them to cope with a changing planning landscape. In particular, many of the witnesses from whom we have received submissions or heard have argued that councillors need some form of mandatory training if they are to fulfil their function as democratically elected lay representatives of their local communities.

Mandatory training for councillors?

86. Sir John Egan faced calls for compulsory councillor training when he conducted his 2004 review of sustainable communities skills. His review came down against compulsory training, preferring instead to encourage elected members to take part in training in order to be better to fulfil their elected role.¹⁸¹ Kate Barker came to the opposite conclusion in her 2006 review of land use planning, but provided little discussion of the reasoning behind her recommendation that training for councillors be mandatory.¹⁸² The Government did not directly address the question of compulsory training in its response.¹⁸³

87. Most of the evidence taken by our inquiry favours some form of compulsory or mandatory training provision for councillors, particularly for councillors who are local cabinet members in charge of planning policy or who serve on planning committees. For the, example, Lynda Addison of the POS believes that

There is a real difference in terms of planning and licensing or other areas of activity that members get involved in. Both planning and licensing are quasi legal and therefore there is a need to understand the system in a totally different way than there is in other aspects of work within the local authority [...] members need to understand what they can and cannot say and what the current law is in order to talk to the community effectively.¹⁸⁴

88. The private development sector reached the same conclusion. Liz Peace, Chief Executive of the BPF, which represents many of the country's largest developers, said:

180 Ev 124

181 ODP, *The Egan Review*, April 2004, p. 74.

182 Kate Barker, *Review of Land Use Planning*, recommendation 21.

183 Communities and Local Government, *Planning for a Sustainable Future: White Paper*, May 2007, Cm 7120, p. 214.

184 Q 64

It is imperative that planning committee and development control committee members do have some form of training [...] that is for their benefit and not just about us wanting to move the system more quickly... it seems to me extraordinary that someone could turn up one week having done nothing in this field and be asked to opine on something that is extremely detailed.¹⁸⁵

89. Those who provide training and accredit university courses were, perhaps unsurprisingly, also in favour of compulsory training for councillors. RTPI General Secretary Robert Upton said:

it is very easy these days for local authority members to get themselves into significant trouble if they are not well advised and do not have a real understanding of issues around probity and what they can and cannot do. What we are not trying to do is to turn them into junior professionals; that is not the object of the exercise at all, they have the professionals there to advise them. They need to know enough about the environment and the circumstances and the conditions in which they are working so that they do not get themselves into trouble or get the authority into trouble.¹⁸⁶

90. Among others, the RICS, the TCPA and the RTPI also support the idea. Some, including the POS, suggest that training might be mandatory only or principally for those most directly involved with planning—cabinet members or members of planning committees.¹⁸⁷

91. Even among elected members themselves there is a view, albeit a more cautious one, that some level of mandatory training may be desirable. Councillor Ruth Cadbury of the London Borough of Hounslow told us there should be compulsory training for basic regulatory elements, the core roles of development control, and matters relating to conduct, bias, pre-disposition and pre-determination of decisions.¹⁸⁸ She also thought chairs of planning committees needed enhanced training. But both she and Councillor Norman Dingemans of Arun District Council thought any mandatory requirement on councillors should not go so far as requiring ‘qualified’ councillors: “We are elected and our competence to make decisions is based on our electoral mandate,” said Councillor Cadbury.¹⁸⁹

Current practice

92. The question of compulsory training for councillors may be something of a red herring. Most councils provide training for elected members; and most elected members take it. Councillor Dingemans told us, for example, that Arun provides two days training for councillors before their first development control meeting after an election. New members of the committee are expected to take the training within six months of being appointed to it.¹⁹⁰ Lindsay Frost, head of planning at Lewes District Council, told us it expects planning

185 Qq 81 and 88

186 Q 143

187 Ev 61

188 Q 99

189 Qq 100 and 102

190 Q 102

councillors to take at least 10 hours training each year involving basic training and a regular programme of events on planning issues.¹⁹¹

93. But not all councillors take all the recommended training, and those who argue for more systematic and mandatory training identify a range of areas in which they believe greater knowledge among councillors would be desirable. The POS, for example, suggests “members either do not attend [voluntary] training or fail to take on board what is offered”, adding:

The change in the nature of planning has left many members behind; they do not understand, nor necessarily want to, the new agenda... Without members improving their knowledge and skills the planning process is likely to be unable to deliver the substantial agenda it has been set notwithstanding any officer training/skills development programme.¹⁹²

94. There have also been suggestions that councillors might be involved in significant planning applications at an early, even pre-application stage, in order that they might be better informed about what is proposed. There is understandable reluctance about this within councils themselves. The Audit Commission says, for example, that “local authorities are understandably anxious about engaging councillors at early stages as they feel this may compromise them once a planning application goes to committee for decision.”¹⁹³ Councillor Cadbury told us that she and her fellow members would meet developers only when officers were also present to reduce any risk of perception of pre-determination of decision.¹⁹⁴ Councillor Dingemans, too, stressed the difficulty for a councillor of being perceived as showing bias: “it is quite difficult for a councillor who is trying to represent an electorate when they see him or her sitting firmly on the fence unprepared to say I support or do not support this.”¹⁹⁵

95. Councillors have even less spare time than officers and the points made above about the costs to local authorities apply equally. That said, local authorities do have a responsibility to ensure that their members have every opportunity to be adequately trained to take the decisions they face. The PAS notes that the training offered to members by authorities currently varies substantially, and says there is

anecdotal evidence that councillors can find it difficult to access good training within their authorities. There is a wide variation in the development needs of councillors and there is no formally agreed core curriculum for member training.¹⁹⁶

The principle of democratic accountability

96. Planning has a quasi-legal role. Planning rests on a complex series of laws, rules, codes of conduct and policy guidance. All those things are true; and all of them mean that the

191 Ev 66

192 Ev 61

193 Audit Commission, *The Planning System*, February 2006, p. 65.

194 Q 105

195 Q 108

196 Ev 87

vast majority of elected members take their responsibilities seriously. But the councillor has a unique role that falls to no one else in the planning process. The councillor represents the people who live in the area where development will happen—all the people, whether or not they voted for him or her, whether or not the development impinges directly or indirectly on them. The Minister for Housing resisted the idea of compulsory training:

the role that an elected person brings to that function ... is not to be the professional [...] you need good advice from within your local authority from good staff, and then you have to make a judgment, just as Ministers have to make a judgment.¹⁹⁷

97. The Minister is entirely correct. Trevor Roberts Associates, itself the provider of training courses, best grasped the essential importance of the principle of democratic accountability:

The role of the planning officer is to provide an objective analysis of the issues in a clear and succinct way, so that the decision maker can make an informed decision [...] The councillor needs to be able to have an appreciation of what is proposed but also be able to ask difficult questions in order to test the robustness of the recommendation [...] The system rests on the basis that the technical specialist can be challenged by a non-specialist, so that there are checks and balances and that the decisions being made reflect the needs and desires of the wider community.¹⁹⁸

We agree with the principle that councillors should be as well informed as they can be in order to perform their tasks freely, fairly and properly. We profoundly disagree, however, with the idea that compulsory training for councillors is either essential or necessary.

197 Qq 231-32

198 Ev 124

6 Conclusion

98. We began this inquiry to consider skills shortages in modern planning departments. We quickly discovered that skills shortages were only part of the problem, and that a greater underlying problem was a shortage of planners themselves. This shortage will come as a surprise to no one connected with planning. **Perhaps the most surprising, and frustrating, point to arise repeatedly from this inquiry is the fact that labour and skills shortages in planning are so unsurprising. They have been evident for well over a decade but review after review, report after report, recommendation after recommendation have not resulted in their reduction. This must change. Without this capacity, our towns, our cities and our economy will be threatened either by paralysis or chaotic and under-regulated growth.**

Conclusions and recommendations

Planning matters

1. There is a significant risk that major Government targets for development and regeneration will be missed because our planning system is unable to manage either the volume or the variety of tasks it will be asked to perform between now and 2020. This includes, perhaps most notably, the intention to build 3 million new homes. Wider economic well-being and delivery of the Government's environmental priorities could well be hindered simply because the system cannot cope. Two linked and chronic problems need to be urgently addressed to prevent this—a drastic shortage of planning officers, estimated to affect 46 per cent of local authority posts by 2012, and a significant and growing skills gap among those planners who remain within the system. (Paragraph 6)
2. Many of the conclusions we draw and recommendations we make on how to raise both the numbers of planners and the skills they possess offer lessons for other sectors of the sustainable communities workforce (Paragraph 7)
3. The Minister for Housing and the Department for Communities and Local Government seem likely to continue to suffer from 'review-itis' until the repeated concerns expressed and recommendations made over the past 10 years are translated into actions that raise both the number of people who want to be planners and the range and level of skills they possess. (Paragraph 10)
4. We welcome the assurance given by the Minister for Housing that the impact of the Egan review's implementation will be measured, but we recommend that in future the Department for Communities and Local Government ensure as a matter of routine that proper mechanisms are in place to follow up the accepted recommendations of reviews carried out by it and by its predecessor, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. (Paragraph 11)

The labour gap

5. The shortage of planners was identified as long ago as the late 1990s but has been allowed to continue to worsen to its present condition (Paragraph 15)
6. We recommend that Communities and Local Government produce long-term annual assessments and analyses of the numbers of people employed in planning and other key sustainable communities professions and the labour shortages currently being suffered and likely to arise. The Homes and Communities Agency should be responsible for these surveys. (Paragraph 17)
7. We recommend that Communities and Local Government seek to raise the general status of the planning profession through, for example, working with professional bodies on a co-ordinated approach to the promotion in schools of careers in planning, consideration of a national advertising campaign such as those conducted to fill labour gaps in teaching, and commissioning a study of salary levels for

planners in local government, with a view to ensuring that pay reflects skills and demand levels. (Paragraph 20)

8. It is clear that the planning process remains in a state of post-2004 flux as the culture shifts to encompass a greater role in spatial planning which takes into account the centrally set targets for making progress with applications. An adequate balance needs to be struck to achieve a process that delivers on target but retains the commitment to quality of skilled and dedicated planners while also achieving a primary purpose of the planning system, which is clear, quick and responsive service to the public whom local government exists to serve. (Paragraph 25)
9. We urge the Government to reconsider its rejection of Kate Barker's recommendation to raise the status of planning within local government by making the Chief Planning Officer a statutorily protected senior local government official. (Paragraph 29)
10. We urge local planning authorities, supported by the Local Government Association, to devise and implement schemes under which graduates entering planning departments are given a structured and mentored period of experience in all aspects of spatial planning within the relevant authority. (Paragraph 35)
11. A more flexible attitude towards ages—and wages—is required within local authorities if local government is to recruit and retain the planners it needs. (Paragraph 36)
12. CLG must encourage increased joint working across local governmental boundaries to meet the needs of the planning system. It is not reasonable to expect every local authority to be able to respond to every new development in the skills required for 21st century planning, nor is it cost-effective to attempt to do so. The sharing of best practice between authorities is a responsibility of the Academy for Sustainable Communities, and CLG should set specific targets for such information sharing, for more joint approaches to developments that affect contiguous areas and for overcoming inward-looking institutional 'turf wars' between authorities which should be focused on serving their communities. (Paragraph 37)
13. We agree that those who possess the highest skills should be charged with delivering the most significant development projects and that they should be rewarded adequately for doing so. We urge the Government to work with the Royal Town Planning Institute, as the professional body for planners, to develop clearer job roles within the profession for those who may deal with routine, functional planning applications and those who fill higher-level roles that require a broader mix of generic skills on top of the highly developed technical skills already possessed. (Paragraph 39)
14. The increasing use of external consultants, managed at arms length, highlights very clearly the need for increased 'generic' commissioning and management skills among senior public sector planners, particularly the need to negotiate value-for-money contract rates, monitor and manage performance, and ensure that agreed goals are achieved. (Paragraph 43)

15. Only 25 universities offer RTPI-accredited qualifications in planning. We recommend that CLG fund a public sector recruitment drive targeted at those universities to attract more of the highest-achieving graduates and postgraduates into local government planning. (Paragraph 46)
16. We are glad that the Government has finally accepted the need to guarantee a return on the substantial sums being spent on its postgraduate bursary scheme following its initial resistance to requiring students to work in the public sector. The fact that nearly half the students whose courses have been publicly funded have gone straight into the private sector with no requirement to provide a public return on their learning represents a missed opportunity to expand the range and talent available to local government planning departments. (Paragraph 50)
17. We recommend that CLG explore, through the Academy for Sustainable Communities, the potential for a conversion course for mid-life professionals who may wish to switch careers to planning, on the model used in teaching and the legal profession. (Paragraph 51)
18. New graduates and postgraduates and those who might consider changing course might find a career in planning more appealing if they understood what it meant. Communities and Local Government and, in particular, the Academy for Sustainable Communities should work rigorously to eliminate the kind of jargon that acts as a barrier to understanding, particularly in materials aimed at schools. (Paragraph 53)

The skills gap

19. The point is that planners well versed in the techniques of their trade need wider leadership, management and negotiation skills if they are to shape their areas fully, using their strategic skills to drive local regeneration. These skills need in turn to be built on a new confidence among planners themselves in their own power to design and follow through on a vision for their localities following the 2004 shift towards spatial planning. (Paragraph 56)
20. CLG needs to provide support to those authorities that have struggled to produce their Local Development Frameworks on time or to the standard required by the Planning Inspectorate and to ensure in future that any such wide-ranging shift is backed by the resources necessary to train officers adequately in what is being required of them. (Paragraph 65)
21. The Government has put significant funding into Planning Delivery Grant to local authorities. Given the skills shortages across the planning sector, there may be a case for tying some of that funding to raising skills levels by requiring increased training and development opportunities among those authorities who receive it. (Paragraph 66)

Agents for delivery

22. The fact that the Academy for Sustainable Communities—the national centre responsible for skills in the field—has, at a time of substantial labour and skills shortages, reached only 3 per cent of the sustainable communities workforce in three years' work at a cost of more than £13 million does not appear to match the objective set by the Egan Review of achieving a “high-profile national focus for sustainable community skills development and research”. We recommend that CLG undertake and publish an impact assessment of the ASC's first three years' work programme. (Paragraph 74)
23. The Academy has been more successful in fulfilling its role as an identifier of skills gaps across the Sustainable Communities workforce. We urge CLG to use the Academy's forthcoming revision of its data on the skills gap among planners and other sustainable communities professions to establish a detailed action plan to fill those gaps. (Paragraph 75)
24. Professor Roberts told us that the ASC's tasks included “establishing meaningful and productive partnerships with all the other agencies and organisations involved in delivery of professionals and other people working on sustainable communities”: (Paragraph 76)
25. We agree with what appears to be a clear implication from CLG and the new head of the Homes and Communities Agency that the Academy for Sustainable Communities should focus its attention more clearly on what can be done to address shortages of personnel as well as on improving skills. We recommend that such a shift of emphasis be confirmed in the terms under which the ASC becomes part of the HCA in the near future. (Paragraph 81)
26. We believe that greater co-ordination is required of the various agencies created in the wake of the Egan Review to improve the performance of local planning authorities. The ASC, PAS and ATLAS currently perform different but overlapping roles, leading to some confusion about who, precisely, is responsible for skills in the sector. We recommend that the Homes and Communities Agency—itself being created to co-ordinate the different but overlapping roles of English Partnerships and the Housing Corporation—be charged with co-ordinating this work and establishing a single agency—in effect a sector skills council for planning—tasked with delivering the required number of planners with the required skills. (Paragraph 84)

Councillors

27. We agree with the principle that councillors should be as well informed as they can be in order to perform their tasks freely, fairly and properly. We profoundly disagree, however, with the idea that compulsory training for councillors is either essential or necessary. (Paragraph 97)

Conclusion

28. Perhaps the most surprising, and frustrating, point to arise repeatedly from this inquiry is the fact that labour and skills shortages in planning are so unsurprising. They have been evident for well over a decade but review after review, report after report, recommendation after recommendation have not resulted in their reduction. This must change. Without this capacity, our towns, our cities and our economy will be threatened either by paralysis or chaotic and under-regulated growth. (Paragraph 98)

Glossary

ASC	Academy for Sustainable Communities
ATLAS	Advisory Team for Large Applications
BPF	British Property Federation
CABE	Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment
CIL	Community Infrastructure Levy
CIPFA	Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Administration
CLG	Communities and Local Government
CPD	continuous professional development
EP	English Partnerships
HC	Housing Corporation
HCA	Homes and Communities Agency
IDeA	Improvement and Development Agency
LDF	Local Development Framework
LGA	Local Government Association
ODPM	Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
PAS	Planning Advisory Service
PDG	Planning Delivery Grant
POS	Planning Officers Society
RDA	Regional Development Agency
RIBA	Royal Institute of British Architects
RICS	Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors
RTPI	Royal Town Planning Institute
SEEDA	South-East of England Development Agency
TCPA	Town and Country Planning Association
UWE	University of the West of England

Formal Minutes

Monday 14 July 2008

Members present:

Dr Phyllis Starkey, in the Chair

Sir Paul Beresford
Mr Clive Betts
John Cummings
Anne Main

Mr Bill Olnier
Dr John Pugh
Emily Thornberry

Planning Skills

Draft Report (*Planning Matters—labour shortages and skills gaps*), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 98 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Eleventh Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That written evidence received in connection with the inquiry be reported to the House for printing with the Report.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till Monday 6 October 2008 at 4.20 pm]

Witnesses

Monday 28 April 2008

Page

Sir John Egan

Ev 1

Mr Stuart Hylton, Director of Strategic Planning and Transport, Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, and Convenor, South-East Region, **Ms Lynda Addison**, Consultant, Planning Officers' Society, and **Mr Lindsay Frost**, Director of Planning and Environmental Services, Lewes District Council

Ev 4

Tuesday 6 May 2008

Ms Liz Peace, Chief Executive, British Property Federation and **Ms Sue Willcox**, British Property Federation

Ev 12

Councillor Ruth Cadbury and **Councillor Norman Dingemans**

Ev 17

Monday 12 May 2008

Mr Robert Upton, Secretary General, and **Ms Sue Percy**, Director of Membership, Education and Lifelong Learning, Royal Town Planning Institute

Ev 21

Mr Paul Lovejoy, Executive Director, Strategy and Communications, **Ms Pat Tempany**, Head of Urban Renaissance, Housing and Policy, **Ms Miranda Pearce**, Renaissance Manager, South-East England Development Agency and **Mr Dominic Murphy**, Executive Director, Sustainable Communities Excellence Network

Ev 26

Monday 19 May 2008

Professor Peter Roberts OBE, Chair, **Dr Gill Taylor**, Chief Executive and **Mr Kevin Murray**, The Academy for Sustainable Communities

Ev 31

Rt Hon Caroline Flint MP, Minister for Planning, and **Mr David Morris**, Deputy Director, Planning, Delivery and Performance

Ev 37

List of written evidence

1	The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors	Ev 44
2	Janet Askew, MRTPI, Head of the School of Planning and Architecture, University of the West of England, Bristol	Ev 45
3	The Institute of Economic Development	Ev 48
4	The Chief Economic Development Officers Society and the County Surveyors Society	Ev 50
5	Ann Hockey, Senior Lecturer in Spatial Planning, Anglia Ruskin University	Ev 52
6	The Planning Officers Society	Ev 54
7	Audit Commission	Ev 61
8	Regional Management Board for the RTPI South East Branch	Ev 63
9	Lindsay Frost, Director of Planning and Environmental Services at Lewes District Council	Ev 64
10	The Royal Institute of British Architects	Ev 67
11	British Property Federation	Ev 68
12	Department of Planning, School of the Built Environment, Oxford Brookes University	Ev 71
13	Tim Edmundson, Head of Department of Urban Development and Regeneration, University of Westminster	Ev 74
14	Planning Advisory Service and Improvement and Development Agency)	Ev 83
15	Town and Country Planning Association	Ev 88
16	Sheffield Hallam University	Ev 92
17	The Department for Communities and Local Government	Ev 94
18	The Royal Town Planning Institute	Ev 101
19	Advisory Team for Large Applications	Ev 112
20	South East England Development Agency	Ev 117
21	The Planning Inspectorate	Ev 120
22	Trevor Roberts Associates	Ev 122
23	Professor David Shaw, Head of Department of Civic Design, University of Liverpool	Ev 126
24	The Environment Agency	Ev 129
25	The Academy for Sustainable Communities	Ev 133
26	Sustainable Communities Excellence Network	Ev 141
27	Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment	Ev 147
28	London Councils	Ev 150
29	Home Builders Federation	Ev 153
30	Musgrave Retail Partners GB	Ev 155
31	The Academy for Sustainable Communities	Ev 157

List of unprinted evidence

The following memoranda have been reported to the House, but to save printing costs they have not been printed and copies have been placed in the House of Commons Library, where they may be inspected by Members. Other copies are in the Parliamentary Archives, and are available to the public for inspection. Requests for inspection should be addressed to The Parliamentary Archives, Houses of Parliament, London SW1A 0PW (tel. 020 7219 3074). Opening hours are from 9.30 am to 5.00 pm on Mondays to Fridays.

Fordham Research
 Environmental Services Association
 Merseytravel
 Institution of Highways and Transportation

Archaeology Training Forum
 Roy Rizvi
 Professor Chris Webster, Director of the Centre for Education in the Built Environment
 Local Government Association
 Horticultural Trades Association
 English Heritage
 Urban Forum
 RENEW Northwest
 Institute of Historic Buildings Conservation
 South East Region of the Planning Officer's Society
 Inspire East
 Mr J K Preston
 The Urban Design Alliance (UDAL)
 Northamptonshire Enterprise Ltd
 Asset Skills
 University of Chester—Faculty of Lifelong Learning

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

Session 2007–08

First Report	Coastal Towns: the Government's Second Response	HC 70
Second Report	DCLG Annual Report 2007	HC 170 (<i>Cm 7335</i>)
Third Report	Local Government Finance—Supplementary Business Rate: the Government's Response	HC 210
Fourth Report	Work of the Committee in 2007	HC 211
Fifth Report	Ordnance Survey	HC 268
Sixth Report	Refuse Collection: Waste Reduction Pilots	HC 195
Seventh Report	Existing Housing and Climate Change	HC 432
Eighth Report	The Supply of Rented Housing	HC 457–I HC 457–II
Ninth Report	New Towns Follow-Up	HC 889
Tenth Report	Community Cohesion and Migration	HC 369–I HC 369–II
Eleventh Report	Planning Matters—labour shortages and skills gaps	HC 517–I HC 517–II
First Special Report	Ordnance Survey: Government's Response to the Committee's Fifth Report of Session 2007–08	HC 516
Second Special Report	Refuse Collection: Waste Reduction Pilots—Government Response to the Committee's Sixth Report of Session 2007–08	HC 541

Session 2006–07

First Report	The Work of the Committee in 2005–06	HC 198
Second Report	Coastal Towns	HC 351 (<i>Cm 7126</i>)
Third Report	DCLG Annual Report 2006	HC 106 (<i>Cm 7125</i>)
Fourth Report	Is there a Future for Regional Government?	HC 352–I (<i>Cm 7119</i>)
Fifth Report	Refuse Collection	HC 536–I
Sixth Report	Equality	HC 468 (<i>Cm 7246</i>)
Seventh Report	Local Government Finance—Supplementary Business Rate	HC 719
Eighth Report	Local Government Finance—Council Tax Benefit	HC 718
First Special Report	Local Government Finance—Council Tax Benefit: Government's Response to the Committee's Eighth Report of Session 2006–07	HC 1037
Second Special Report	Refuse Collection: Government's Response to the Committee's Fifth Report of Session 2006–07	HC 1095