AtkinsRéalis

Planning at Pace

Creating Certainty for Investment and Delivery



The Planner

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Foreword

Planning is one of the UK's most powerful tools for delivering growth. It shapes where homes are built, how infrastructure is delivered and how communities evolve. But when planning lacks certainty, investment slows and delivery stalls.

In this context, uncertainty extends beyond planning determination times and includes confidence in decision making, policy stability, project viability, infrastructure provision and the ability to move successfully from consent through to delivery.

At a time when investment is critical to economic growth and prosperity, and to delivering the infrastructure that helps places thrive, understanding the causes of delay and uncertainty has never been more important. Against a backdrop of mounting pressure on the planning system, AtkinsRéalis commissioned this research to explore where these challenges arise and how they can be addressed. Building on the findings of our report, ***De-risk, Incentivise, Deliver: Funding UK Infrastructure for Growth***[1], this research draws on a sector-wide survey and insights from industry stakeholders to examine the factors influencing confidence, investment and delivery across the planning system.

The findings paint a nuanced picture revealing a system experiencing cumulative friction across multiple stages, from local authority capacity and statutory consultee engagement through to infrastructure coordination, viability and delivery. Planning is often presented as the primary barrier to growth, but our findings suggest the reality is more complex: there is no single cause of delay, but multiple factors influencing confidence, investment and delivery outcomes.

What emerges most clearly is that speed alone is not the issue. Rather, investors, planners, policymakers and delivery partners value certainty, consistency and clarity.

There are encouraging signs that progress is being made. Recent reforms, including changes to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), the Planning and Infrastructure Act and the expansion of government's devolution agenda, all seek to create a more coordinated and delivery-focused system. Many of the themes identified through this research are already being addressed through ongoing policy change.

The priority now is to ensure that recent reforms are implemented effectively, given time to bed in, and supported by the resources and ways of working needed to improve delivery.

Achieving greater certainty depends not only on the policy framework, but on how people work within it. It requires investment in skills and capability, more collaborative and delivery-focused behaviours, and the effective use of digital tools to support consistency and productivity across the planning process.

This report forms part of a wider conversation about certainty, confidence and delivery. Continued engagement with key industry stakeholders will be essential to strengthening confidence in the UK's planning and development pipeline, as well as identifying the next steps required to support long-term investment and infrastructure delivery.

Planning at pace is not simply about faster decisions. It is about creating a system that gives investors, communities and decision-makers sufficient certainty to move confidently from strategy to consent, and from consent to delivery.

The findings in this report demonstrate that there is no single solution, but they also point to a clear opportunity. Planning reform is under way, awareness of the challenges is growing, and there is increasing recognition of the need for greater collaboration across the public and private sectors. By building on that momentum, the UK has a real opportunity to create the certainty needed to unlock investment and deliver the infrastructure and homes that will support long-term growth. Working together, the sector can help ensure that planning is viewed not as a constraint on progress, but as a catalyst for thriving places and communities.

Chris Ball,
President, UK & Ireland
AtkinsRéalis



1 https://www.atkinsrealis.com/~/media/Files/A/atkinsrealis/download-centre/en/report/funding-uk-infrastructure-report.pdf

Introduction

Our report, *De-risk, Incentivise, Deliver,* found strong investor appetite for UK infrastructure: 90% viewed the UK as attractive. Yet 64% had walked away from opportunities where the business case did not stack up, and nearly three in ten regarded the UK as a high or very high investment risk.

Returns were the main reason for investors withdrawing, but political, market and regulatory uncertainty also weighed heavily. Planning reform emerged as the government measure most likely to improve infrastructure investment, highlighting the need not simply for faster decisions, but for greater certainty in how projects move from strategy to consent and delivery. That finding prompted this research: where does uncertainty arise in the planning system, how does it affect investment and delivery, and what practical changes could address it?

To answer these questions, the Planning at Pace programme combined three sources of evidence: a survey of planners and developers conducted in April and May 2026; a UKREiiF roundtable with planners, investors, developers and policymakers; and the findings of our earlier investor research.

The evidence points to a system constrained less by one blockage than by cumulative friction: limited capacity, delayed consultee input, inconsistent decision making, fragmented processes and weak alignment between planning, infrastructure, funding and delivery.

Too much time is lost to rework and low-value activity, while overstretched teams struggle to provide the clarity and consistency that investors and developers need. The central issue is therefore not speed alone, but confidence in the process and outcome.

There are grounds for optimism. Recent reforms respond to many of the issues raised, but policy change alone will not be enough. Effective implementation will require stable frameworks, stronger skills and capacity, more collaborative behaviours, and better use of digital tools and standardised processes. Seven in ten survey respondents identified investment in skills across local authority planning teams and consultees as the greatest opportunity to deliver planning at pace.

Planning at pace therefore means more than accelerating decisions. It means creating an integrated, delivery-focused system that gives investors, communities and decision-makers the confidence to move from strategy to consent and from consent to delivery.

The report begins by setting out the survey's key findings and detailed results, identifying where delays occur, what drives them and how they influence investment decisions. It then broadens the evidence base through the UKREiiF roundtable and earlier investor research, before drawing together the key issues for policymakers.

The report goes on to assess how the 2026 planning reforms respond to those challenges, and considers what is still needed to create a more integrated, delivery-focused system, including stronger capacity and skills, earlier collaboration, proportionate assessment, clearer pipelines, and better use of digital tools, standardisation and AI. It concludes by mapping the evidence to practical solutions and setting out the AtkinsRéalis view on the priorities for implementation.

"The UK government has placed infrastructure at the heart of its mission for economic growth and opportunity for all.

It has established an ambitious pipeline of projects at a national, regional and local level with £725 billion of public funding committed to help deliver on the 10 year infrastructure and industrial strategies."

AtkinsRéalis,
De-risk, Incentivise, Deliver



Planning at Pace: the survey

Key findings

69%

Ranked the speed of planning decision making as slow **(40%)** or very slow **(29%)**.

27%

Said the issues identified with slowing the planning system typically added **6-12 months** to the project duration. A further **23%** said **3-6 months**.

73%

Said local planning authority capacity and resourcing were the factors that exerted the biggest influence on the speed of planning decision making. **52%** said it was statutory consultee input.

62%

Said that planning timelines either significantly influenced investment decisions or were a major determinant.

57%

Said that faster planning decisions can be delivered without undermining the quality of decision making and the confidence that stakeholders have in the planning system.

70%

Said that investment in skills expansion across local authority planning teams and planning consultees would satisfy the greatest opportunity in delivering planning at pace. This was a clear distance ahead of standardised national planning templates, reform of consultation processes and use of digital planning tools.

Compared to other elements of the planning process, time spent on pre-application negotiations was felt to be the most valuable use of time.

Legal conditions were seen as the least valuable use of time compared to time spent on other elements of the planning process.

£

The single most impactful potential planning reform? Not policy or regulation but investment in local planning authority funding and capacity. Then clearer and more stable planning policy.

Full survey results

The *Planning at Pace* survey was conducted among Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) members by ***The Planner*** magazine on behalf of AtkinsRéalis throughout April and May 2026. Its aim was to gather high-quality, sector-wide insight into the causes of planning delays, where they genuinely arise, and provide a plan for meaningful reform that gives greater certainty to investors, developers, and planners themselves.

We asked 18 questions intended to probe the sector's thoughts on the speed of planning decision making, the factors that most impact that speed, and the subsequent effect on investment decisions.

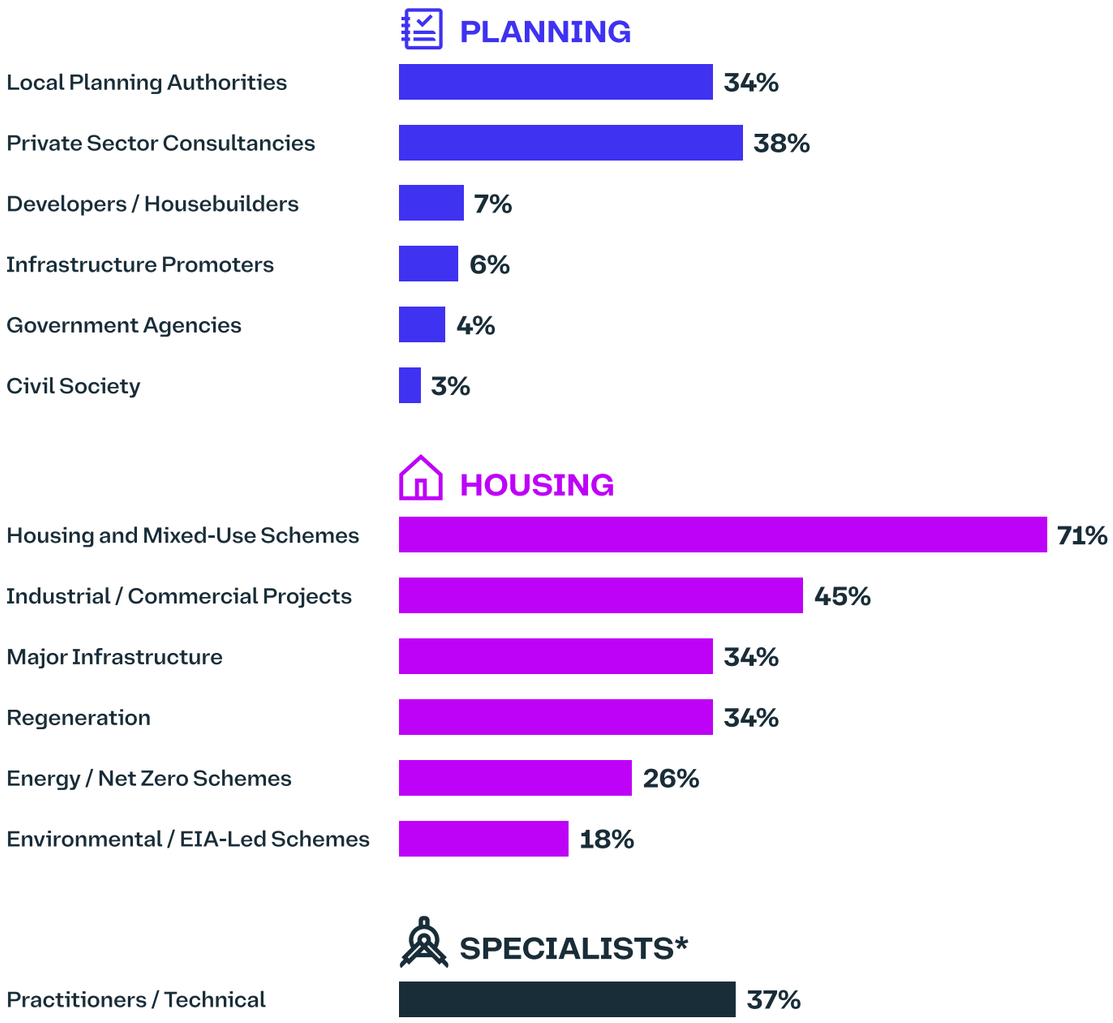
We also wanted to know whether planning decisions could be delivered in a more timely manner without compromising the quality of submissions and decisions, or undermining confidence in the planning process.

Finally, we wanted to understand what changes, if any, could bring about positive improvement in both speed and quality.

Who took the survey?

As with the earlier ***De-risk, Incentivise, Deliver*** research, our respondents could speak from the experience of working on a comprehensive spread of the projects that underpin national growth strategies. This is precisely where investment is courted and targeted; but where the previous research focused on investor sentiment, ***Planning at Pace*** builds on this by offering a view of the same issues from the planning coalface.

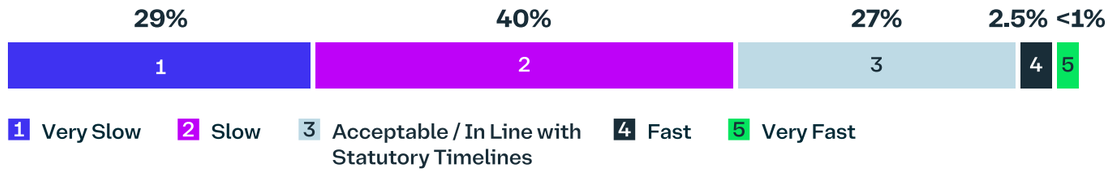
The majority of our **193** responses were from people working within the planning profession.



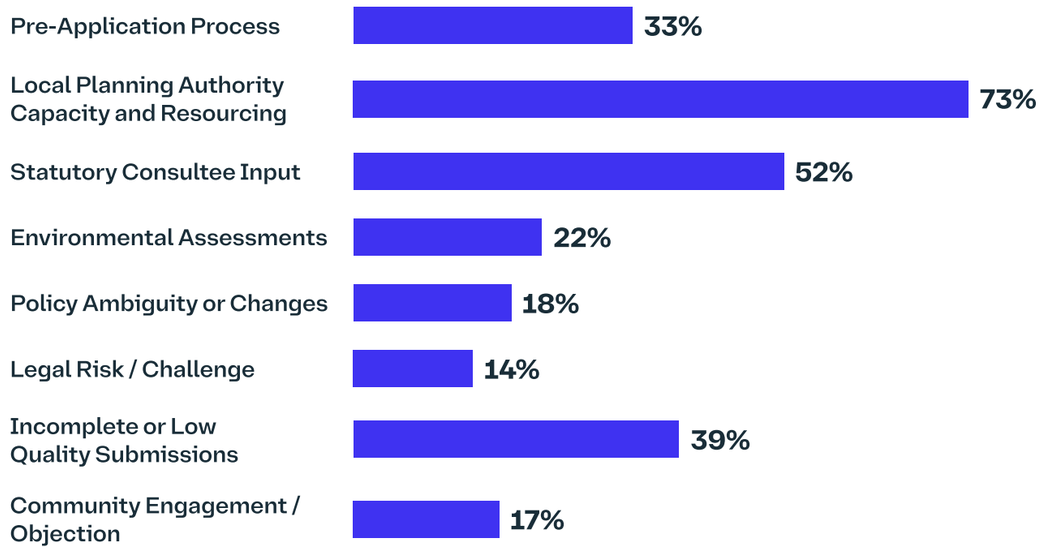
* People directly engaged with the planning system from day to day. Almost half of our respondents held senior/managerial positions, from team leaders to directors and heads of function.

Speed of decision making

How would you currently rate the overall speed of planning decision making?



Which areas of the process have the most impact on the speed of planning decision making?



There is a clear perception that decision making in planning is slower than it should be. But when we look in detail at the causes of delay, we find that policy itself is not the problem – indeed, that's quite far down the list. Local authority capacity and statutory consultee input are identified as the two greatest causes of planning delay.

Comments from respondents expressed frustrations with the factors we identified, along with other aspects of the system as a whole. They also shone a light on the consequences of this frustration: a degree of mutual distrust between applicants and those tasked with assessing applications.

27%

Of respondents said the issues identified add between 6-12 months to projects, while a further 23% said they add 3-6 months.

13%

Of respondents said that these issues typically add more than a year to the time taken to get a project through the planning process.

31%

Of respondents said delays were highly variable and project dependent, making this the single largest response.

Causes of delays

Relative to time taken, please rate the areas of the planning process – from most (0) to least (10) valuable



"Rigidity of LPA [local planning authority] decision making process, such as a refusal to accept amendments to applications during the determination period. For example, if there is resistance from a consultee and revisions or amendments are required."

"LPA capacity and resourcing, but this needs to take account of the delays for those applications that have to be determined at planning committee rather than under officer delegated powers."

All quotes
Survey respondents, *Planning at Pace*

"I work for an LPA. For me, the longer an applicant carries out pre-app and engages with stakeholders the smoother and easier the process to planning committee is."

"Genuine willingness of applicant to amend scheme to take on board concerns, advice and requirements."

"Delays caused by development promoters not really being ready to submit applications, delays due to things outside of the planning system that are lumped under 'planning'.

For example, environmental permits, licences, building regulations, etc. [...] delays caused by lack of or expense of materials and contractors, etc."

"As the process has become ever more complex, local authority staffing levels have diminished."

All quotes
Survey respondents
Planning at Pace

A picture is beginning to emerge of how the planning system is experienced in practice across the sector.

Our findings suggest that delayed decision making is endemic in the planning process. But it doesn't have a single cause. Rather, we see multiple points of friction across planning authorities, statutory consultees and supporting processes.

In particular, a lack of capacity within local planning authorities and consultees slows the process and dents confidence in decisions.

The pre-application process is a significant source of frustration, according to our correspondents; but so, too, from a local authority planner's point of view, are incomplete and poor quality submissions from applicants.

Issues around policy ambiguity, community objection, the risk of legal challenge and environmental assessments — all of which are frequently loudly blamed for issues with planning — are, in fact, lesser concerns overall.

When it comes to assessing the degree to which users of the system value the parts of the process that may contribute to delays, the message is clear: pre-decision processes, even though they are identified as the greatest source of delay, are considered to be of greater value in relation to time spent on them than the decision making process itself and post-decision negotiations around conditions and legal agreements.

This, it would seem, is a particular pain point for those involved in the planning process: even when a decision has been made, there are still delays before the development can get under way.

Delay is cumulative and systemic, rather than driven by a single issue, with multiple points of friction across planning authorities, statutory consultees and supporting processes.

Capacity and capability constraints within local planning authorities and consultees impact speed and confidence of decision making.



"No-one has a clear vision for what infrastructure we want to provide over any kind of timetable that would allow for delivery. So we end up with knee-jerk infrastructure ambitions and decision making and a lack of coherency, both nationally and locally."

"The culture and timeline for decision making offered by an authority can play a vital role in whether an investor chooses to locate in that place or not. It is a competitive process that involves prioritisation of private sector resources. Inefficient and bureaucratic processes increase cost."

"Planning requires leadership at a senior level and that leader must communicate and advocate for place-led investment and delivery to sustain economies and wellbeing of communities."

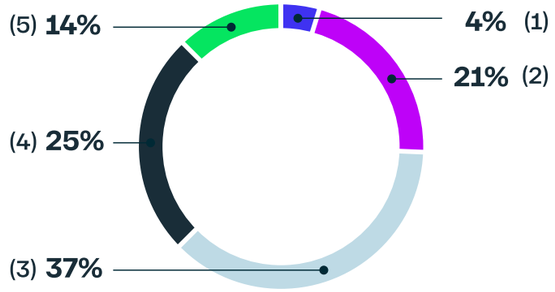
All quotes
Survey respondents
Planning at Pace

The wider view

Impacts of delays

Returning to the wider goal of calibrating the planning system to attract and enable investment in essential infrastructure, what are the real world impacts of the time the planning process takes in terms of influencing investment?

To what extent do planning timelines influence development and investment decisions?

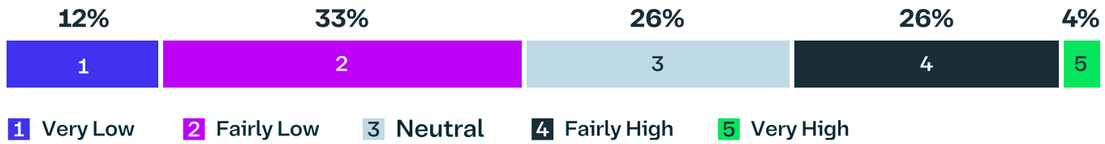


1 Not at All
2 Moderately
3 Significantly
4 Major Determinant
5 Unsure

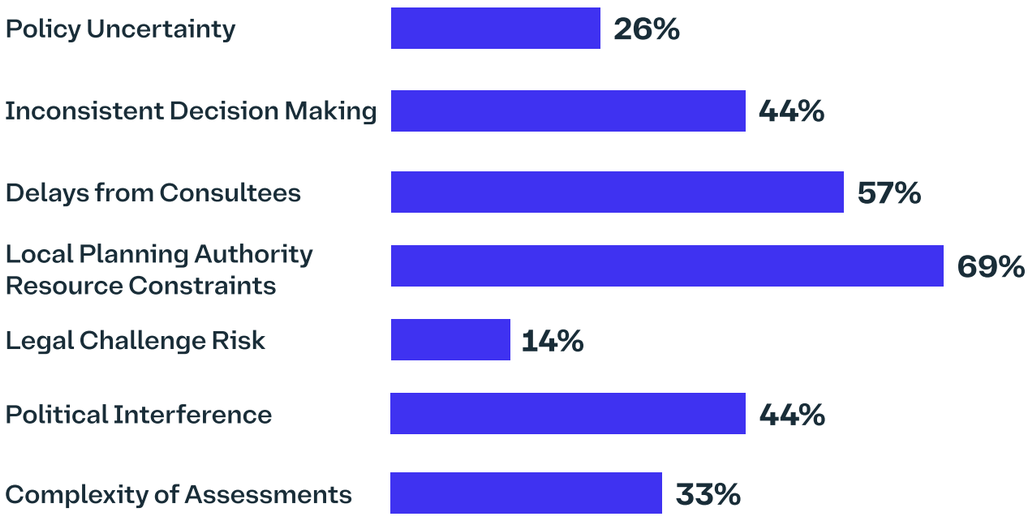
This response amplifies the findings of the ***De-risk, Incentivise, Deliver*** report. More than half of respondents said that the time it takes for the planning stage of a project to play out is either a significant factor or a major determinant in decisions about whether to invest.

Confidence in the system

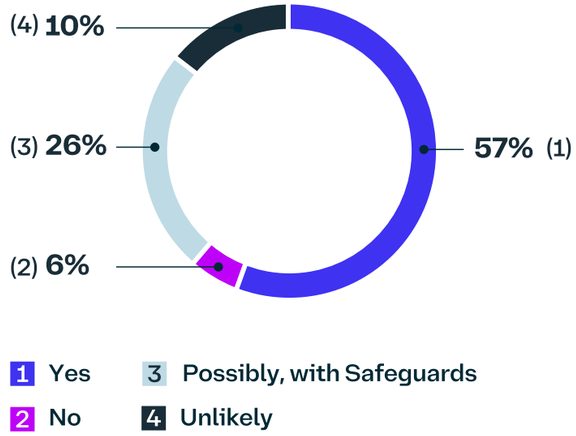
How do you rate your overall confidence in the planning system?



Which factors influence your level of confidence in the planning system? (Pick up to three)



Do you believe faster planning decisions can be delivered without undermining quality and confidence?



"If we had a coherent infrastructure strategy we would all know what we are doing. The planning process would then be a simple check: has this scheme already been identified within our infrastructure strategy and is the detail right to meet the strategic objectives?"

"For me it is about managing expectations of all participants, including applicants, and about successful placemaking and making better places. This is not achieved with a fixation about speed but through striking the right balance between quality outcomes for places and communities being made in a timely, not necessarily fast, manner."

All quotes, **Survey respondents,** *Planning at Pace*

Confidence in the planning system remains mixed. Respondents identified resource constraints within local planning authorities and statutory consultees, inconsistent decision making, and a lack of clarity around requirements and expectations as significant sources of uncertainty and delay.

Encouragingly, more than half believed planning decisions could be delivered more quickly without compromising quality or confidence. Taken together, the findings suggest there is an opportunity to improve coordination and consistency across the planning process, reducing fragmentation and creating greater certainty



In the round: highlights from the roundtable and investor research

At the UKREiiF property conference in May 2026, we brought together senior figures from public and private sector planning, government and politics, the energy industry, proptech, business and the property industry for a roundtable on the theme of ***Delivering growth at pace: what changes do we need in the planning system?***

The roundtable was intended to explore the ***Planning at Pace*** survey themes in more depth and develop a nuanced and rounded understanding of issues with decision making in planning and their impacts on investment and development.

When viewed alongside the UKREiiF roundtable and investor research, the ***Planning at Pace*** survey findings are reinforced and deepened.

Roundtable highlights

Key points to emerge from the roundtable included:

- **Investors will not be confident about planning reform until they've seen it tested through the planning process or through the courts.**
- **There is a strong need for a credible long-term infrastructure pipeline.**
- **Metro/regional mayors have potential to take decision making closer "to the point of impact".**
- **Spatial development strategies can provide a framework for investment in infrastructure.**
- **Viability is a major cause of delay even where permissions have been granted. One way to approach this is by taking a "whole system approach" to planning that scopes land, utilities and infrastructure at the outset.**
- **Much of the structural change to the planning system has already taken place. Now is the time to allow the system to bed in and to focus on delivery.**
- **The system and its operators must adapt to the challenges of AI.**

Significantly, the conversation dwelt at length on communication. One participant expressed exasperation with how "inconsistent" consultation was across the system. Another asked how consultation could be conducted in a way that balances short-term inconvenience for some with long-term social gain for a larger number.

Participants stressed the need to move away from process and talk about "purpose", to focus on outcomes and to build more human-centred narratives around investment and placemaking.

The roundtable confirmed that the central issue here is not simply speed, but clarity of purpose and certainty of process and outcome, with risk aversion and inconsistency contributing to delay.

It also highlighted that consent does not guarantee delivery, with projects often stalling due to wider viability, infrastructure or delivery challenges.

> "If you have a clear vision and align it with investment, mechanisms such as mayoral development zones can help deliver integrated planning at the right scale. Done well, this approach has the potential to bring together investment, place and delivery, creating a more attractive environment for investors and supporting the next generation of transformative projects, such as those seen in Birmingham."
>
> **Viral Desai,** Practice Director of Planning, Environmental Consenting and Communities at AtkinsRéalis

Investor research highlights

The investor research, ***De-risk, Incentivise, Deliver***, provides a complementary perspective, showing that investment decisions are highly dependent on:

- **Clear and acceptable risk profiles.**
- **Credible and visible project pipelines.**
- **Confidence in delivery pathways and programme certainty.**

The research found that 64% of respondents had walked away from UK infrastructure projects because the business case did not stack up. Outside of major issues of risk and return, investors cited public support, planning and regulatory issues, and project delivery challenges as factors influencing their decision.

In particular, our respondents said:

- **There is also great potential to deploy AI and digitisation to enable faster decision making and help to overcome resource constraints in local authority planning departments.**
- **The UK must move from strong signals and a strategy for infrastructure investment to actions that de-risk projects, attract private finance and initiate delivery.**
- **Enablers for investment include planning reform, streamlined procurement, and regulatory reform, including measures to encourage foreign investment and simplify land acquisition.**
- **A stable political and policy environment, alongside a long-term infrastructure strategy and transparent pipeline would satisfy investors' need for predictable, consistent frameworks that extend beyond electoral cycles.**
- **There is a need to improve finance mechanisms and incentives.**
- **Investors are attracted to projects that align with specific ESG mandates and show a preference for climate-resilient projects within their portfolio.**

The report argued that creating the right conditions to incentivise investment and shift programmes into delivery is now a national imperative. Several initiatives to improve the investment environment were already taking shape at this point.

Since conducting the research, a number of significant reforms have taken shape, including the introduction of the Planning and Infrastructure Act, the acceleration of devolution and local government reorganisation, the emergence of spatial development strategies, and a revised National Planning Policy Framework [see page 21].

To some extent, we can see some of the aspirations outlined in the surveys and roundtable emerging into policy. If the UK is to achieve the economic prosperity it aspires to, expansion of infrastructure has to be a core aspiration. Energy, transport, utilities, digital infrastructure, commercial and residential property all require a planning system that operates in tandem with investment goals.

Many of the building blocks are in place, with recent planning reforms helping to create a more coordinated and investable landscape for UK infrastructure. But the changes to the system are still settling in and it will require patience from planners, investors, developers and the public to give these reforms the time to embed and influence the working of the system and — crucially — its outcomes. As our roundtable participants observed, now may be the time to stop reforming, allow the restructured system to bed in and focus on delivery.

Key issues for policymakers

Bringing the two surveys and the roundtable together, a number of critical issues emerge:

Uncertainty as a core barrier

The lack of predictability in planning, environmental assessment and consenting directly impacts investor confidence and project viability.

Fragmentation and lack of integration

Planning, environmental assessment, infrastructure provision, funding and delivery are often progressed sequentially rather than in an aligned and coordinated manner.

Weak alignment between consent and delivery

Projects can achieve consent but still struggle to progress due to infrastructure, viability or funding constraints.

Over-complexity and lack of proportionality

Environmental assessment and supporting processes are often overly resource-intensive and risk-averse.

Inconsistent stakeholder engagement outcomes

Consultation processes are not always delivering clear, proportionate or decision-enabling outputs.

Capacity, capability and culture / behaviour challenges

Resource constraints, combined with risk-averse behaviours, reduce confidence and consistency in decision making.

The central issue here is not simply speed, but clarity of purpose and certainty of process and outcome, with risk aversion and inconsistency contributing to delay. Taken together, these issues suggest that planning, environment and consenting are not consistently functioning as effective mechanisms for reducing risk and enabling delivery.





The response from policymakers: 2026 English planning reforms

The findings from the Planning at Pace survey, the UKREiiF roundtable and our earlier ***De- risk, Incentivise, Deliver*** research align closely with the direction of recent planning reform in England. Many of the issues highlighted by respondents, including the need for greater certainty, stronger strategic planning, faster infrastructure delivery, improved decision making and more consistent processes, are already being addressed through recent policy changes.

In 2026, government introduced a significant package of reforms, including the Planning and Infrastructure Act, the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act, and a revised National Planning Policy Framework.

Together, these measures seek to streamline infrastructure planning, strengthen regional decision making, improve consistency across the planning system, expand the use of digital tools, and create clearer frameworks for growth and investment.

While many of these changes are still at an early stage of implementation, they demonstrate a clear commitment to addressing many of the challenges identified through our research.

Priority identified through research	Relevant reforms
Faster infrastructure delivery	NSIP reforms, streamlined consultation and examination processes
Greater certainty and consistency	National Development Management Policies, updated NPPF, regular NPS reviews
Stronger strategic planning	Spatial Development Strategies, mayoral powers, devolution reforms
Improved decision making	National scheme of delegation, mandatory planning committee training
Better alignment between planning and delivery	Mayoral Development Corporations, strategic growth plans, infrastructure levy powers
Digital planning and engagement	Digital local plans, geospatial mapping and digital consultation requirements

Towards integrated, delivery-focused planning

What potential solutions emerge from the *Planning at Pace* survey and accompanying roundtable?

Which planning reforms are likely to have the most positive impact on the speed of planning decisions? (Scale 1-10, with 1 having the most impact and 10 having the least impact)



What single reform is most likely to accelerate planning decisions?

Respondents to this open question made a number of suggestions focused on better local authority resourcing. Others included:

- Planning committee reform, including reducing the number of applications that need to go to committee.
- Greater powers of delegation for senior planning officers, with appropriate safeguards in place.
- Clearer guidance on the use and drafting of planning controls.
- National development management policies should be statutory.
- Reform of section 106 agreements / payments. One respondent suggested they should be standardised to reduce negotiating time; another that they should be abandoned altogether.
- Greater use of community infrastructure levy to fund infrastructure.
- Reduce environmental assessment and mitigation.

All quotes , **Survey respondents,** *Planning at Pace*

"The front loading of the process: offering greater certainty at pre-application remains the best way to improve certainty. This is where submissions can be improved, issues can be negotiated, and local involvement can be key. Pre-application submissions could be made mandatory to improve certainty."

"Standardised s106 requirements and removal of viability get out clause. If a fully compliant scheme is not viable then it should not be built. Months and years are lost arguing viability."

"It is not just about reform of process and policy. It is also about culture. Get the culture right and people will overcome poor procedures and policy to achieve quality outcomes."

"Clear guidance and standards for use and drafting of planning controls, AI tools and reducing need to report at planning committee for certain schemes (latter should be based on need for earlier engagement and perhaps position statements throughout process)."

What single reform is most likely to improve certainty in the system? (Open question)

There were many similar suggestions in reply to this open question, focusing on clarity and stability of policy, and on better resourcing for local planning authorities. These included:

- **Reduce the amount of planning reform and let things settle**
- **Focus on clarity and stability of policy**
- **In-depth and ongoing training of elected members**
- **Reduce the influence of elected members over decision making**
- **Develop an infrastructure strategy**
- **A fast track route for strategic projects**
- **Standardise local plans**
- **Front load the process - focus attention on the pre-application stage**
- **Make national development management policies statutory**
- **Greater use of development orders**
- **A national land use vision underpinned by stable, long-term policies at local, regional and national level**

Planning's skills gap and behavioural change

"Good project management that recognises that planning is part of the development project not all of the project. Having the hard conversations early and enabling LPA planners to be problem-solvers and regulators. Not one or the other."
Survey respondent, *Planning at Pace*

The demands placed on planners are continuing to evolve. Alongside project management, planners are increasingly expected to navigate environmental regulation, viability calculations, digital technologies, stakeholder engagement and public scrutiny. ***The Planner*** magazine's 2025 Careers Survey asked RTPI members if they felt they had sufficient resources and training to meet the challenges of planning in the 2020s. An overwhelming 71% said they did not. The same survey found that public sector planning teams faced a shortage of skilled planners, with almost 30% of respondents reporting three or more vacancies in their team.

The Public Practice Recruitment and Skills Report 2025[2] found particular deficits in the areas of digital and data, infrastructure, heritage, environment and strategic plan-making, all of which are becoming increasingly important within a rapidly evolving planning system. At the same time, expectations around consultation and engagement continue to grow, placing further demands on already stretched planning teams. The RTPI, local authorities, consultancies and developers themselves are calling for greater investment in planning capacity, skills and training. Digital tools are also beginning to reshape the profession. From site identification and consultation analysis to application processing, emerging AI-enabled technologies have the potential to reduce administrative burdens and allow planners to focus on more strategic planning, stakeholder management and problem-solving.

2 https://www.publicpractice.org.uk/reports/recruitment-skills-report-2025

The potential here is not just to bring about process efficiencies but to provide a platform for culture change within planning teams. Comments in the ***Planning at Pace*** survey reveal a picture of misaligned priorities and motivations between developers and the planners charged with overseeing development management.

By doing a lot of the administrative heavy lifting, digital tools have the potential to free planners to focus on more strategic and creative aspects of the profession. Initiatives such as the Greater London Authority's Land4LDN programme show how better use of data can improve the visibility of development opportunities, strengthen coordination between organisations and provide a stronger evidence base for planning decisions. But planners need also to embrace the range, variety and usefulness of the skills they already possess and apply them positively within a context of systemic change. As mediators in the planning process, planners have the vital role of bringing the different moving parts of the planning process into alignment.

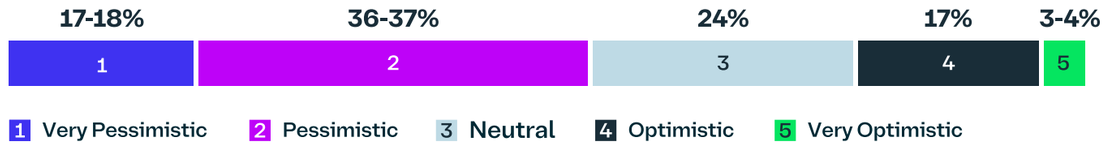
A number of the planning reforms highlighted above can facilitate that process – in particular, streamlined NSIP consultations, simplified environmental contributions (with reform to environmental outcomes reporting to come) and adoption of digital skills. The stage is set; what's needed now is time for these changes to bed in and for behaviours across the system to evolve alongside them.

The planning profession must see itself as an enabler of change, helping to deliver economic and social progress while protecting the environment. With the policy framework now largely in place, and digital and data skills gaps clearly identified, planners should build on their core strengths: managing complexity, leading stakeholders, balancing competing priorities and making sound, evidence-based decisions. As the system evolves to support housing and infrastructure delivery, planners must adopt proactive, positive behaviours and demonstrate how the profession can help people and places across the UK thrive.

Looking forward

Given the many issues identified within the ***Planning at Pace*** survey, are our respondents optimistic about the future? Cautiously, yes.

How optimistic are you that the planning system will improve in the next 5 years?

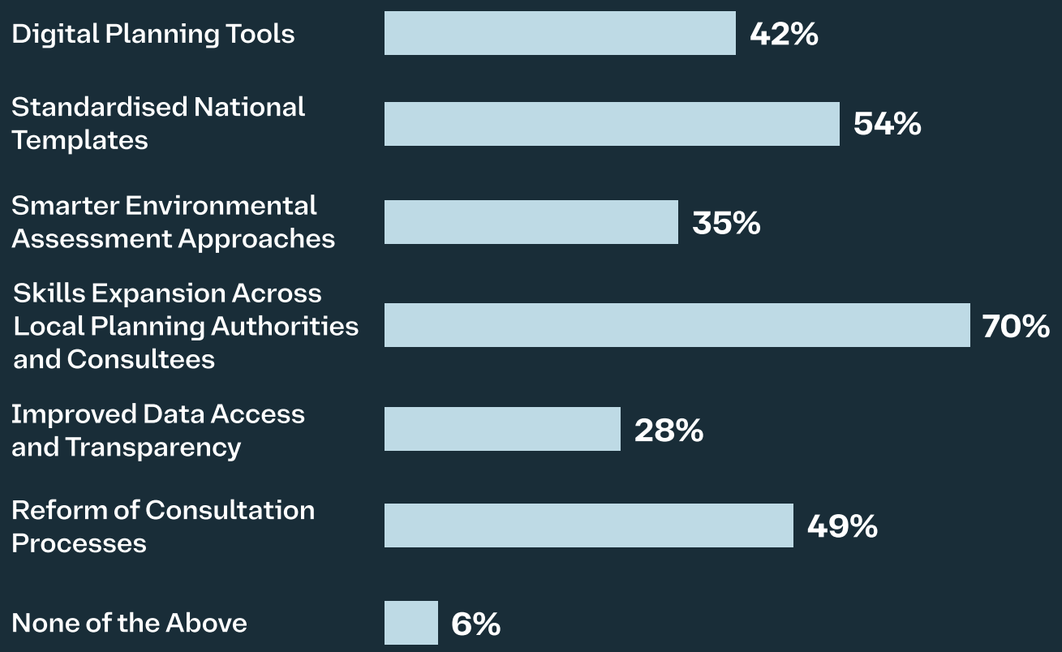


"Based on the current government changes, I consider these are beginning to put right the overarching framework so this is really positive. I believe government and the construction sector understand that under investment in planning departments needs to be rectified and addressed quickly. After all, when operating well, planning is a huge power for good for businesses, for place making and people."

"There is a lack of understanding over the benefits of planning as well as a lack of understanding over what little it can actually control — it is just the centre point within which a lot of controls are taken into account (for example, transport, education, health, electricity etc, which are controlled by other bodies). The planning system is not broken and planners have an amazing capacity to find solutions to make the system work as effectively as it can once new regulations are bedded in."

All quotes
Survey respondents, *Planning at Pace*

What emerging opportunities could help deliver planning at pace?



So, what do planners at the coalface think government needs to hear as ministers continue to reform and refine the system to meet national goals?

If you could give one message to the Labour Growth Group or government about planning reform, what would it be?

"Planning needs to be re-balanced back to focusing on getting the fundamentals right and less getting caught up in lots of detail. The big challenge is increasing housing delivery through super-charging urban retrofit rather than the current massive drive for more suburban, car-dependent housing estates creation. To this end stronger market interventions are needed!"

"Allow planning to provide the 'vision', and to facilitate the way we want to grow our urban areas. Develop a greener future for all – rather than viewing planning only as the problem."

"It needs to be done at pace, but it needs to bring the public with it. It needs to be able to survive national and local election cycles. Also, an explicit, confident and communicable legal purpose for planning would help all in the sector to communicate this to those outside of the sector."

"Faster and better decisions will come from better resourced departments. More decisions should be taken by officers as it is members/objectors that add the significant uncertainty and delay [...]The system works when it is properly resourced, and more confidence given to officers' decisions."

A whole system approach to planning

Many of the solutions suggested by our respondents have been part of the national conversation around planning for more than a decade. As illustrated in this report, many have already been established by policy.

But there is still a sense that reform is a work in progress, and a piecemeal one at that. It's clear from our surveys and roundtable that what's needed is a focus on measures that will improve certainty in the planning process and increase integration between the different stages and elements of the process.

This should then support delivery. A central theme throughout this body of work is the need to move towards an integrated, place-based approach to planning that aligns housing, infrastructure, environmental planning and investment from the outset.

In other words, this means a whole system approach to planning from the very outset of the planning process.

This would include:

Integrated planning of infrastructure and housing

Moving from project-by-project decisions to more programme-level approaches, ensuring that growth is supported by enabling infrastructure and coordinated environmental strategies.

Earlier alignment across disciplines

Bringing together planning, environmental assessment, engineering, infrastructure and funding considerations at an earlier stage to reduce downstream risk.

Proportionate, risk-based environmental assessment

Shifting from documentation-heavy approaches towards clearer scoping, materiality and early risk identification, with data at the heart of decision making, not reports.

Stronger linkage between planning, funding and delivery

Ensuring that schemes are not only consentable but also investable and deliverable, with clearer alignment to funding models and infrastructure requirements.

Improved pipeline clarity and coordination

Developing more coherent and visible pipelines that link planning strategies with infrastructure investment and delivery priorities.

More effective stakeholder engagement and social value delivery

Moving towards earlier, outcomes-focused engagement that strengthens legitimacy and supports smoother delivery.

In practice, delivering this level of integration points towards the growing importance of place-based and regional coordination mechanisms – including combined authorities, development corporations and wider local government structures – as a way of aligning planning, infrastructure and investment at the scale required.

These structures have the potential to play a stronger role in:

- **Coordinating housing and infrastructure delivery.**
- **Providing clearer pipeline visibility.**
- **Aligning consenting with funding and delivery strategies.**
- **Creating more consistent and investable environments for development.**
- **Driving decision making to a level that can achieve maximum impact.**

The solutions mapped

Theme	Survey insight	Roundtable and investor insight	Solution direction
Planning team capacity, capability and culture	Funding and skills constraints in system	Risk aversion slows decision making	Build capacity, capability and confidence across the system
Stakeholder engagement	Need for earlier involvement	Effectiveness of consultation questioned	Shift to early, outcomes-focused engagement
Engagement with statutory consultees	Slow responses delay the planning process	Not explicitly acknowledged, but a general sense that consultation needs to improve	More targeted approach to statutory consultee input, with strict response times
Infrastructure and housing	Limited coordination at project level	Investment depends on infrastructure readiness	Deliver integrated planning for housing and infrastructure
Digitisation, standardisation and AI	Process inefficiency, duplication and inconsistency across applications	Increasing volume and complexity of inputs (incl. AI- enabled responses) create pressure on the system	Introduce standardised, digitally enabled processes and structured data; apply AI and automation to triage inputs, reduce administrative burden and enable planners to focus on material issues and strategic decision making that matter.
Environmental assessment	Complexity and burden drive delay	Over-scoping and risk aversion highlighted	Introduce proportionate, risk-based environmental assessment*
Viability and delivery	Delays affect deliverability	Consent does not guarantee delivery	Align planning with funding, infrastructure and delivery models
Pipeline visibility	Lack of clarity and consistency	Pipeline confidence critical for investment	Develop clear, coordinated pipelines linked to delivery
Communities and social value	Broad but diffuse engagement	Need to balance local and national priorities	Embed clear social value within place-based delivery
Policy and stability	Desire for practical improvements	Focus on implementation over reform	Maintain stable frameworks with improved delivery

Key takeaways

The UK does not simply need faster planning — it needs a more certain, integrated and delivery-aligned system that connects planning, environment, infrastructure and investment, enabling projects to move confidently from consent through to delivery.

The survey is clear:

- Delay is not the root problem — uncertainty is. To unlock investment, planning must provide confidence, not just consent.
- Planning sits at the front end of every investment decision. Where it introduces uncertainty, capital stalls; where it provides clarity, delivery follows.
- The evidence shows that improving pace is not about faster decisions alone -it is about reducing rework, ambiguity and late-stage risk across the system.
- To move from consent to delivery, planning, environment and infrastructure must be aligned from the outset — creating schemes that are not only approvable, but investable.
- Planning at pace must evolve beyond speed, towards certainty, integration and delivery — so that the system actively enables, rather than constrains, investment in the UK.
- Reforms to local government and to the planning system introduced by the Labour government have the potential to address many of the barriers to investment and delivery outlined in our surveys and roundtable. As these changes take effect, planners, developers, investors and decision-makers will need time to embed new approaches and build confidence in the reformed system.
- Planners' behaviours need to embrace these changes, approach them positively and restore confidence in the system by playing their full role as co-ordinators of the moving parts involved in the development process.
- Greater integration of digital tools within the planning system has the potential to give planners more time to focus on strategically significant planning and decision making.
- The priority needs now not to be wholesale reform but targeted implementation measures that improve certainty, capacity and delivery for investors, developers and planners alike.

Planning is integral to achieving wider social and economic goals: renewing infrastructure, revitalising local and regional economies, reducing geographic inequality, tackling climate change and restoring nature across England. Planners must now embrace the 2026 reforms, build the skills needed for the digital transition and adopt proactive, positive behaviours. By doing so, they can provide the certainty investors and communities need to regenerate places and deliver infrastructure for future generations.

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