

Public and stakeholder opinion of the Northern Ireland Planning System

**Summary results of a
survey conducted 31st May
- 31st August 2011**

November 2011



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Introduction

This report summarises the findings of a major survey of public and stakeholder opinion of the planning system in Northern Ireland. It was commissioned by Friends of the Earth Northern Ireland and undertaken and analysed by Dr Geraint Ellis of the School of Planning, Architecture and Civil Engineering at Queen's University, Belfast.

The survey was designed with the aims of exploring;

- The role and extent of participants' engagement with the NI planning system;
- Views of the planning system in relation to the public interest and other issues;
- Perceived relationships between various stakeholders;
- Examples of good and poor planning in Northern Ireland;
- Priorities for reform;
- Demographic, political and socio-economic backgrounds of participants.

The survey was administered online using Survey Monkey (<http://www.surveymonkey.com>). Participants were provided a web-link which took them to an electronic version of the survey where participants could enter their responses directly. Only one response per ISP address was permitted.

Participants were recruited via adverts in 15 local papers throughout Northern Ireland during the first two weeks of June 2011 and the survey was also disseminated via a number of e-mail lists such as those of the Royal Town Planning Institute and the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors. The survey was opened on 31st May 2011 and the last responses accepted on the 31st August 2011. It attracted a total of 544 responses, from individuals of a wide range of backgrounds and roles in the planning system. Indeed, it is very important to note that this survey has not been designed to be a comprehensive and representative picture of public opinion of planning in Northern Ireland, but rather what is termed the 'policy community' of planning; including individuals and organizations that have the most involvement with, and/or informed opinion of, the Northern Ireland planning system. This includes the "attentive public", direct clients (such as developers) and parts of government who are involved in policy formulation and decision-making in planning. It is suggested that the survey has successfully captured the views of the group, given the demographic and socio-economic background of respondents and the attributes that would be expected for this policy community. Furthermore, this survey has attracted four times as many responses than that typically generated by DoE (NI) public consultation exercises on planning policy over the last two years.

Full details of the profile of the respondents and other aspects of the findings are listed in full in the main report of the survey.

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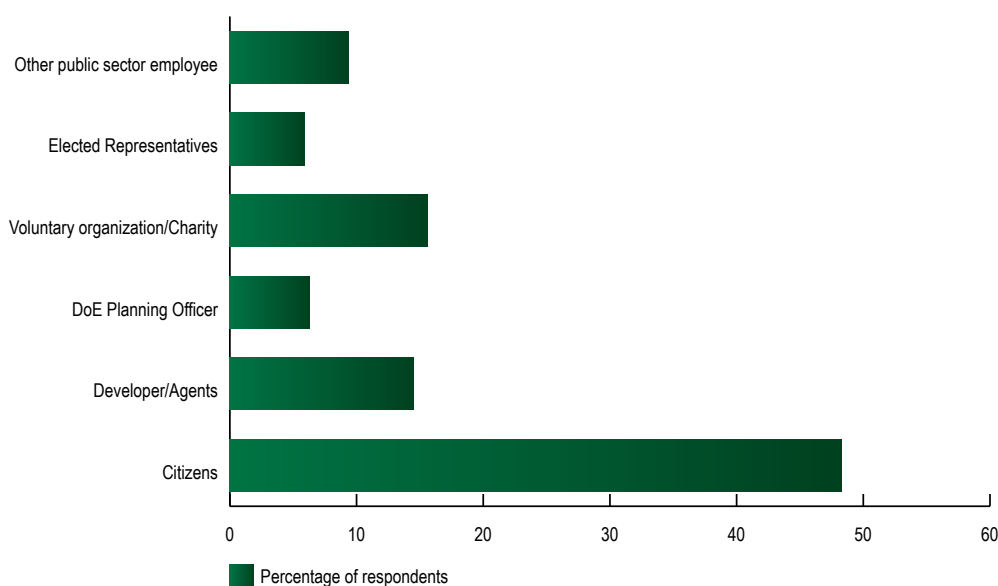
Profile of respondents

The full report of the survey breaks down the profile of the respondents in some detail. Some key figures are that:

- Responses were received from all district council areas in Northern Ireland, with the exception of Limavady. 26% of respondents live in Belfast.
- A wide range of age groups and socio-economic groups are represented in the survey, with the largest single group being those aged between 51-65 (30% of responses).
- There is a disproportionate number of males responding to the survey (65.7%), which may be explained by the gender mix of the overall policy community (for example 76.5% of district councillors, 66.8% of RTP1 members and 86.8% of local RICS members are male).

The distribution of survey respondents across the different roles in the planning system are shown in Figure 1 below, indicating that while 48.3% of respondents were citizens, there was also a fair representation from other key groups, including developers/Agents (79 responses), elected representatives (79 responses) and planners in the Department of the Environment (34 responses).

Figure 1: Distribution of respondents' primary role in the planning system (n=544)



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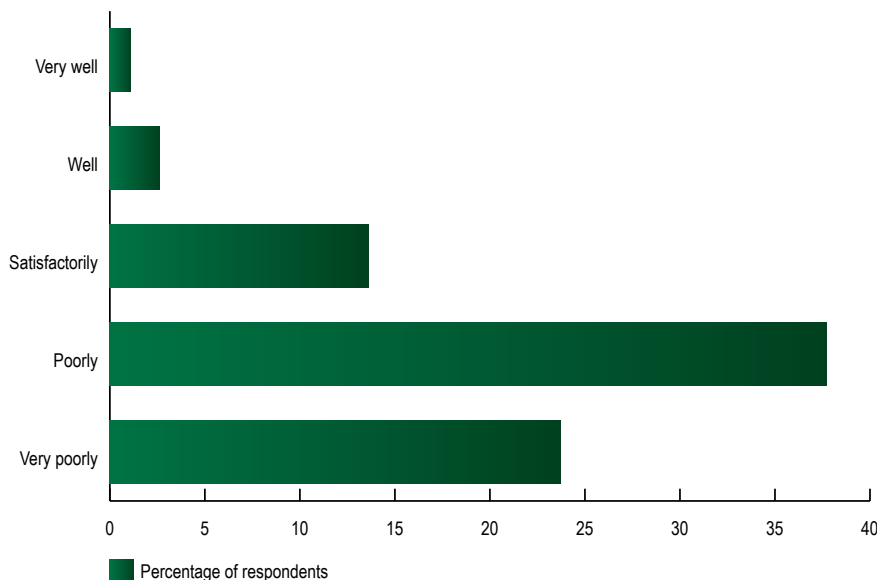
Survey Findings

The main body of the survey asked respondents to rate the Northern Ireland planning system around a number of key questions, which were then followed by asking about the priorities for reform in the planning system. The key findings from these are summarised below.

How well does the planning system serve the people of Northern Ireland?

The results from this question are shown in Figure 2, indicating that the vast majority of respondents (78%) believe that the planning system serves the people of Northern Ireland poorly or very poorly; indeed only 4.7% believe that it serves the people well or very well. The breakdown of these results by the different roles of respondents is also interesting, indicating that over 60% of all roles rated the planning system as being poor/very poor. The least critical group were Elected Representatives of whom 61.5% stated the system was poor/very poor and even 68% of DoE Planners themselves ranked the planning system this way. 79.8% of Citizens thought the planning system was poor/very poor. A similar picture arises when this question is disaggregated by voting profile; 70% of supporters of all parties believed the planning system performed poorly/very poorly, with the exception of the SDLP (current holders of the Environment Ministerial portfolio), of whom 68% ranked it in this way. Supporters of Independents, Sinn Fein and the Green Party were most critical of how the planning system performed.

Figure 2: How well does the planning system serve the people of Northern Ireland? (n=428)



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This question was followed by a prompt that gave respondents an opportunity to provide comments that justified their answer. 375 comments were provided, with a huge variety of reasons given; some reflected very specific planning decisions, some show frustrations with the process of policy making, decision making or public engagement and others hint at a general frustration that the system is not delivering the type of built environment that they expect. There were also a number of deeply concerning comments made by those close to the decision-making process that suggested improper conduct by some of those with most influence on the outcome. The main report on the survey provides a selection of these comments and the key points are summarised here:

- Overall, the comments were very negative, with only a few highlighting positive aspects of the planning system;
- Many citizens and voluntary groups see the system biased towards development and developers;
- Many citizens and voluntary groups have a critical view of the role of politicians in relation to the planning system, suggesting they primarily support developer interests;
- Citizens are frustrated by their inability to make their views known in relation to planning, with a significant number mentioning 3rd party appeals as a potential improvement that could be made in this regard;
- There was a high degree of criticism of the system made by DoE Planners who responded to the survey;
- Those DoE Planners that have responded to the survey appear to have very low morale and complain about the management of the planning system, the interference from politicians, a focus on administration rather than outcomes and in some cases, the development bias of the system;
- Many developers (but also citizens and elected representatives) complained about the length of time it takes to make planning decisions;
- Developers believe the planning system undermines investment in Northern Ireland, that it is too bureaucratic and compares poorly to other planning systems;
- Elected representatives are also critical of the planning system, highlighting inefficiency, poor performance and some frustration of how they can influence planning decisions. Some make accusations of corruption in the system;
- There appears to be a perceived lack of transparency and difficulties in communicating with planning officers and the influencing of planning decisions;
- Many people complained about the complexity of the planning system and a perceived inconsistency in the decisions made.

The results from this question clearly show a widespread lack of confidence in how the planning system serves the people of Northern Ireland. This view is present in all roles and all shades of political opinion; it is a systemic belief. The reasons why people hold the planning system with such low regard appear to be wide and varied, yet the two overriding themes that emerge are; i) many survey participants have a very negative perception of the role of politicians in the planning system, believing that they are acting for short term goals and for partisan interests; and ii) many participants (including some Developers and their agents) believe that the development sector has a disproportionate influence over planning decisions. Both of these issues have very profound implications for the planning system.

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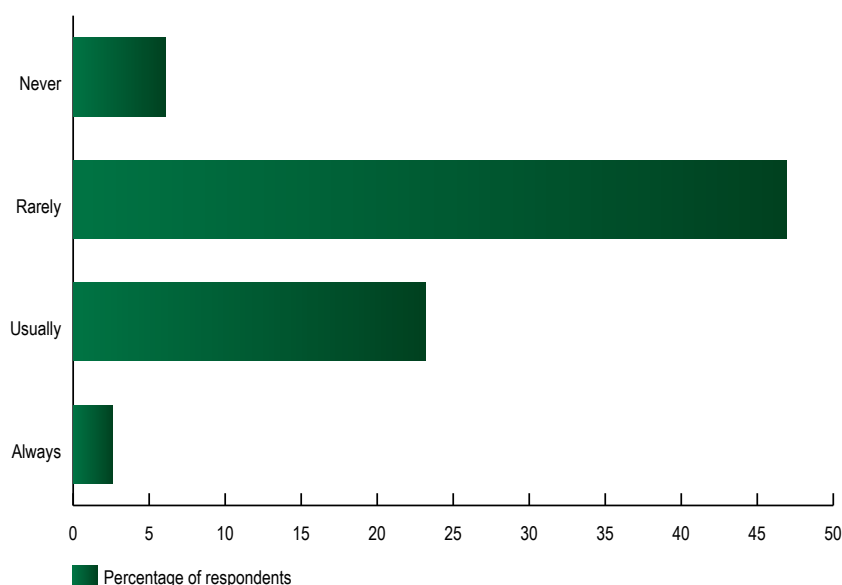
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In your opinion how well do you think the public interest is usually reflected in planning decisions?

The responses to this question are shown in Figure 3, which shows that the vast majority of respondents (67.3%) believe that the planning system serves the people of Northern Ireland never or rarely. Only 3.3% of respondents believe that the planning system *always* serves the public interest, providing a very strong indictment that almost all respondents believe that the planning system is often used for partisan interests. Current legislation states that planning decisions must be made in the public interest.

Figure 3: How well do you think the public interest is usually reflected in planning decisions in Northern Ireland (n=428)



If this question is disaggregated by the roles of respondents, we find that there is some difference of opinion on this question; the majority of most groups feel the planning system rarely/never serves the public interest, apart from Developers/Agents (44.4%), Elected Representatives (50%) and DoE Planners (44%); even here the percentages are deeply concerning, given the detailed insight these groups have on the decision-making process. No Elected Representatives believe the public interest is *always* reflected in planning decisions. The most critical group are Citizens, with 78.3% believing that the planning system reflects the public interest rarely/never. A similar picture is seen if the responses to this question are broken down by voting profile; more than 64% of supporters of all parties believe the public interest is rarely or never reflected in planning decisions. The least critical are supporters of the SDLP (current owners of the Ministerial portfolio for the Environment) - 64.5% stated rarely/never. The most critical views were offered by supporters of Independents and the Green Party (89.9% and 80.0% respectively).

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As with the previous question, respondents were given the opportunity to provide reasons for their answer to this question. 335 reasons were given and a broad selection of these are given in the full report of survey. Some of the key points and recurring themes that come out of these comments include:

- Although there are some appreciative and sympathetic comments made in relation to the challenges which have to be handled by the planning system, overall the tone of the comments are rather negative;
- Citizens highlight a number of specific issues that appear to inform their views of how the planning system performs in relation to the public interest, including a failure in enforcement and protection of the built heritage or wider environmental quality;
- A recurrent theme from the comments by Citizens is again the disproportionate influence that the development sector appears to have over planning decisions;
- Citizens are critical over how the public can engage with planning decisions, see the system as overly bureaucratic, subject to too much political interference and focussed on short term goals;
- Many of these key themes are also found in the comments made by those with other roles in the planning system;
- The DoE planners who have responded to the survey make a number of deeply concerning comments under this question, highlighting issues of potential corruption, decisions being led by political interests rather than the broader public interest, interference by senior management in officer's professional judgement and a frustration that a lack of resources is preventing them delivering on what they think is in the public interest;
- Developers/Agents make a range of interesting comments – some of these are unsurprising and are related to the slowness of the decision-making process, the competency of planning officers and the frequency in which decision do not appear to have been made in line with stated policy. However they also make a surprising number of comments that echo those made by the public in relation to political interference, lack of opportunities for public engagement and environmental protection.

These comments highlight the substantial challenge the planning system faces in fostering broader confidence in the way it operates and the level of suspicion between different stakeholder groups. While these comments must be seen in the context of competing and diverse demands on the planning system, the responses to this question would suggest that, at present, it is satisfying only a small minority of those who engage with it. As in the previous question, the critical view of the planning system is held by all roles and all shades of political opinion. There, is however, some differentiation in views across the roles, with citizens and representatives of voluntary groups and charities having a significantly more critical view than other roles. The reasons given for this are varied and there are a number of supportive comments made under this question, but the key themes once again appear to be related to the perceived role of politicians and a view that the development sector has disproportionate influence over planning decisions.

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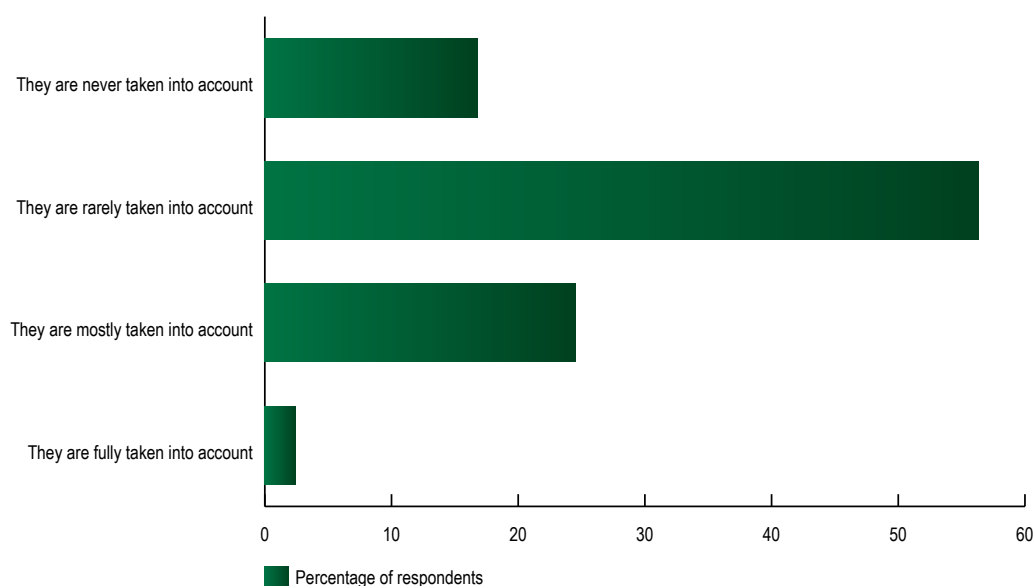
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How well do you think your views are taken into account in planning decisions?

The responses to this question are shown in Figure 4, indicating that a majority of respondents (73.1%) believe that their views are *rarely* or *never* taken into account in planning decisions. Only 2.4% believe that their views are *always* taken into account and 24.5% believe they are *mostly* taken into account.

Figure 4: How well do you think your views are taken into account in planning decisions? (n=416)



The breakdown of this question across the different roles provides additional insights. This suggests that most DoE planning officers and other public employees feel that their views are taken into account *fully* or *mostly* (69.2% and 53.6% respectfully), the vast majority of Citizens and Representatives of Voluntary groups/Charities believe that their views are *never* or *rarely* taken into account (86.1% and 87.7% respectfully). A higher percentage of Developers/Agents believe their views are *always* or *mostly* taken into account compared to Elected Representatives (36.5% and 34.6% respectfully).

In terms of voting profile, the majority of supporters of all parties believe that their views are rarely/ never taken into account; the most critical here are supporters of Independents and the DUP (88.3% and 85.2% respectfully). The group that think their views are more likely to be taken into account are supporters of "Others" (i.e. not the main parties), 50% of who think their views are fully or always taken into account.

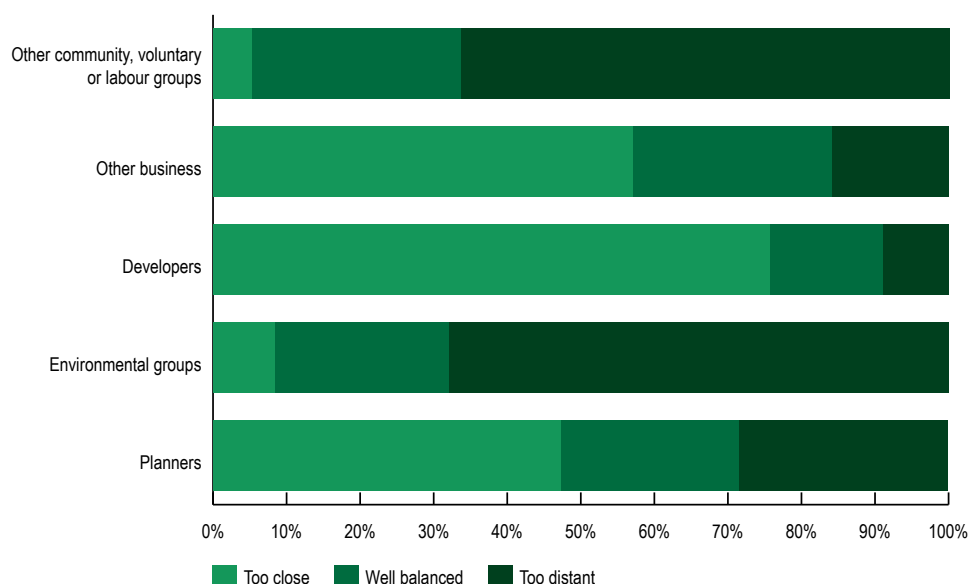
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How do you perceive the relationships between politicians (Councillors, MLAs, MPs, Ministers) and other interests?

This question asked how respondents perceived the relationships between politicians and other interests, as shown in Figure 5. This suggests that there is an overall perception of bias on the part of politicians towards Developers and Business believing their relationship with these groups is too close (75.6% and 57% respectively). Conversely, a majority of people believe their relationship with community and environmental groups is too distant (66.5% and 68% respectively).

Figure 5: How do you perceive the relationships between politicians and the following interests? (n=410)



The relationship between developers and politicians appears to be pivotal here and Figure 6 indicates how those with different roles in the planning system view this relationship. The clearest issue here is that the majority of all roles (apart from Developers themselves) believe that politicians' relationship with Developers is too close, ranging from 85.8% in the case of Citizens and 60% of elected representatives. Not so surprising is that it is Developers and elected politicians who are least critical about this relationship, although even 36.7% of Developers think their relationship with politicians is too close. Also of significance here is the large number of DoE planners (77.3%), who perceive the relationship between developers and politicians as being too close.

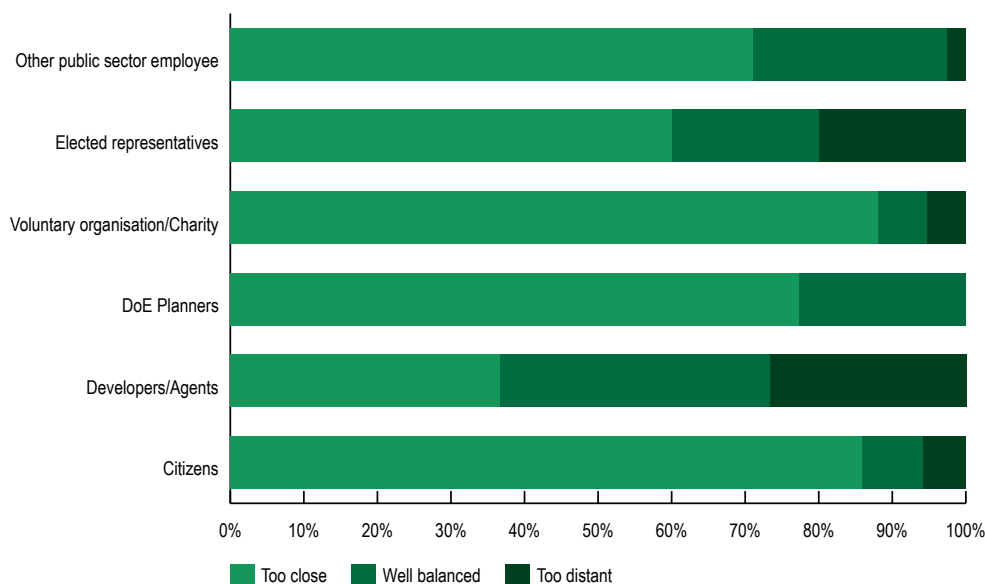
These findings appear to align with the responses and comments made in previous questions that indicate that the perception of the relationships of developers and politicians as being one of the key issues facing the Northern Ireland planning system.

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Figure 6: How do you perceive the relationship between politicians and developers?
(Disaggregated by role) (n=410)



Can you please indicate how you feel these issues are being addressed by the Northern Ireland planning system?

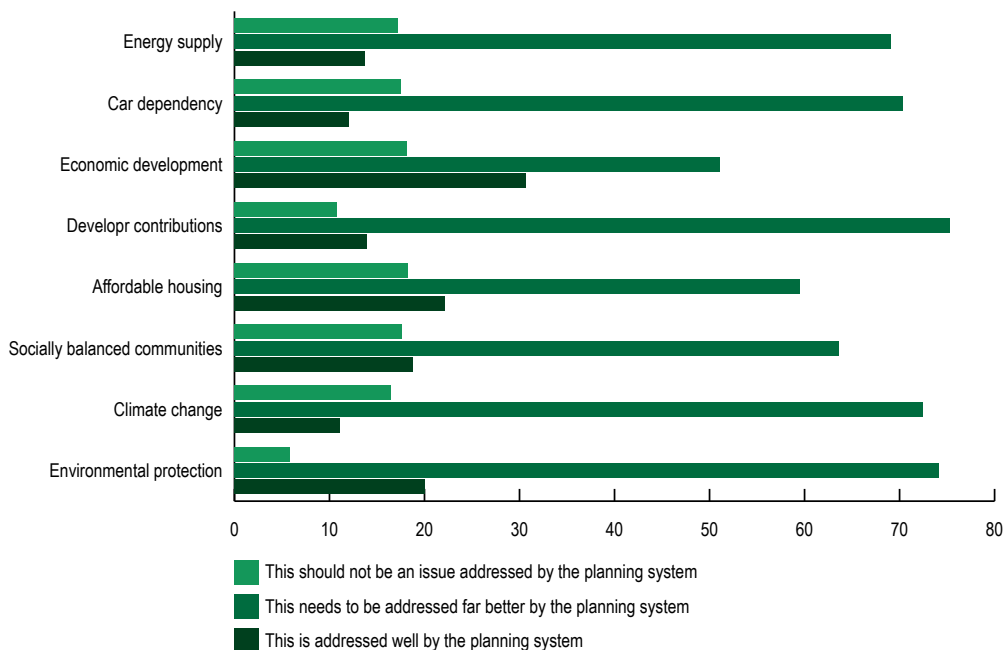
This question asked respondents about a number of key issues that could be addressed by the planning system, as shown in Figure 7. Of these, it is the issue of developer contributions that attracts most support for further action (75.3%), reflecting the critical views of Developers seen in previous questions. The other most frequent issues noted for further action were all environmentally related; environmental protection (74.1%), Climate Change (72.5%), Car Dependency (70.4%) and Energy Supply (69.1%). Of the issues that respondents felt were being addressed well by the planning system, the most frequented noted was Economic Development (30.7%) and Affordable Housing (22.2%).

If these results are broken down by role, we see that many groups (particularly citizens, voluntary organisations/charities, other public sector employees, and DoE planners) feel strongly that many environmental issues require further action, while developers see economic development as the key area requiring action. Social issues (affordable housing and socially balanced communities) are supported most strongly by other public sector employees and voluntary organisations/charities – these are the issues supported least by developers. Developer contributions appear to be supported strongly by many groups, including the majority (55.7%) of Developers/Agents.

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Figure 7: Can you please indicate how you feel the following issues are being addressed by the Northern Ireland Planning system



Priorities for reforming the planning system

The survey went on to ask respondents to identify their priorities for reform of the planning system, across a number of categories. The first of these were issues most commonly present in debates over planning policy, followed by more specific potential reforms covering strategic issues, those related to openness and transparency and public challenges to planning decisions. In all cases, respondents were asked to rank each issue in terms of their priority with 5 = Very Important and 1 = Not Important. In order to summarise these findings, each issue has been given a weighted average score, so the higher the number, the greater the priority amongst respondents (to a maximum score of 5). These are shown in Figures 8 to 11.

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Figure 8: Of the following issues, please score according to your priorities for reform of the planning system. (Weighted average scores).

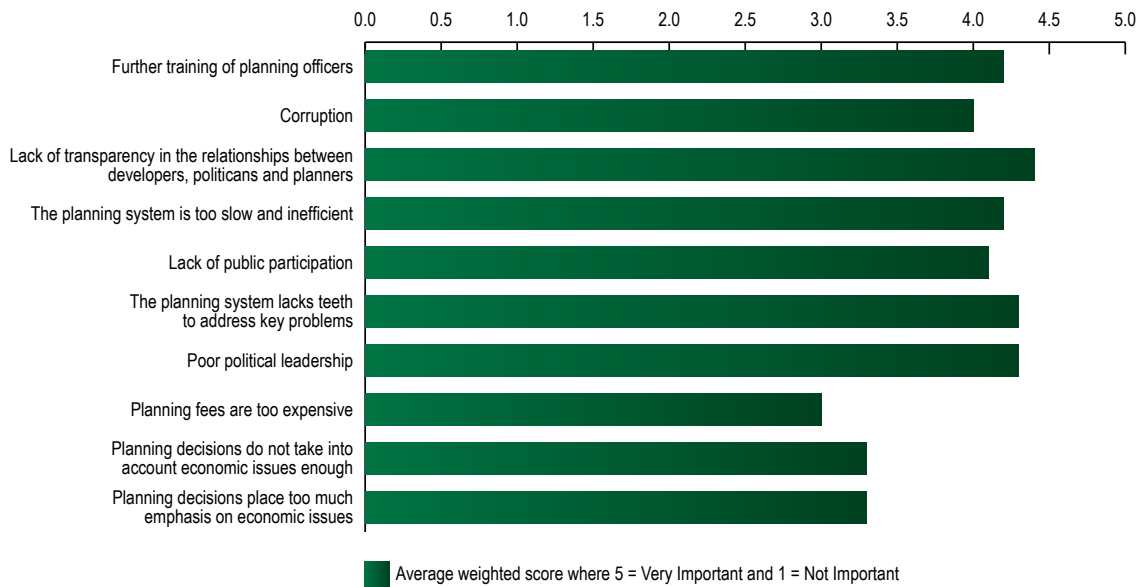
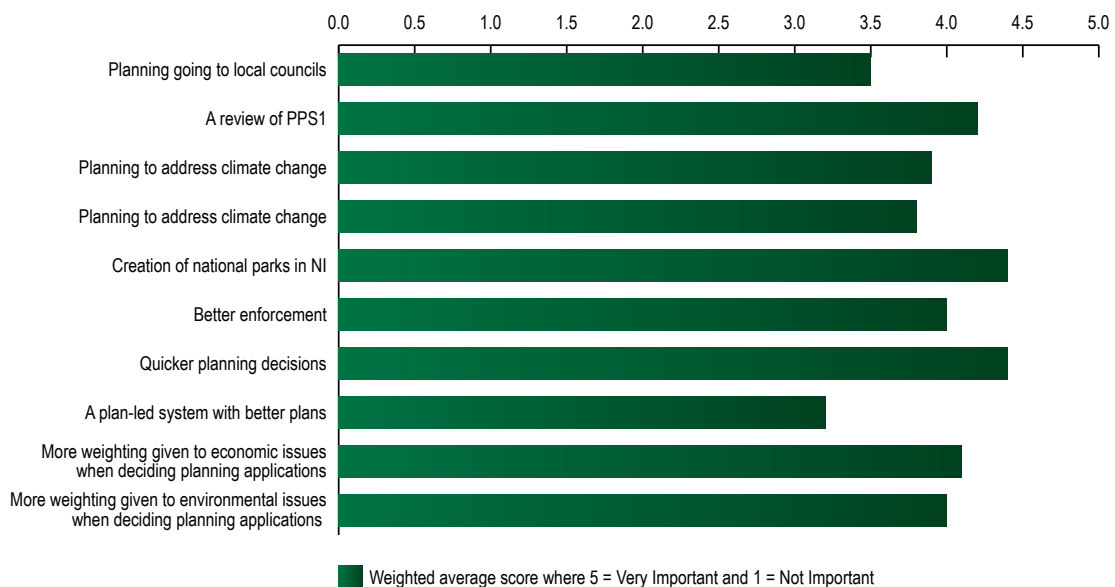


Figure 9: Of the strategic issues listed here, please score according to your priorities for reform (Weighted average scores)



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Figure 10: Please score the following issues related to openness and transparency according to your priorities for reform (Weighted average score)

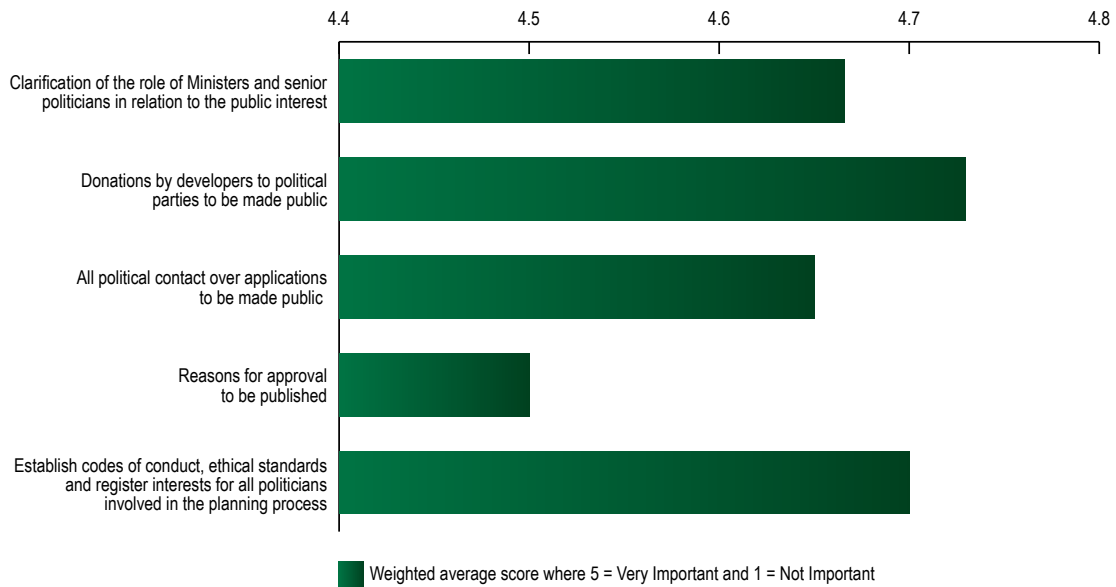
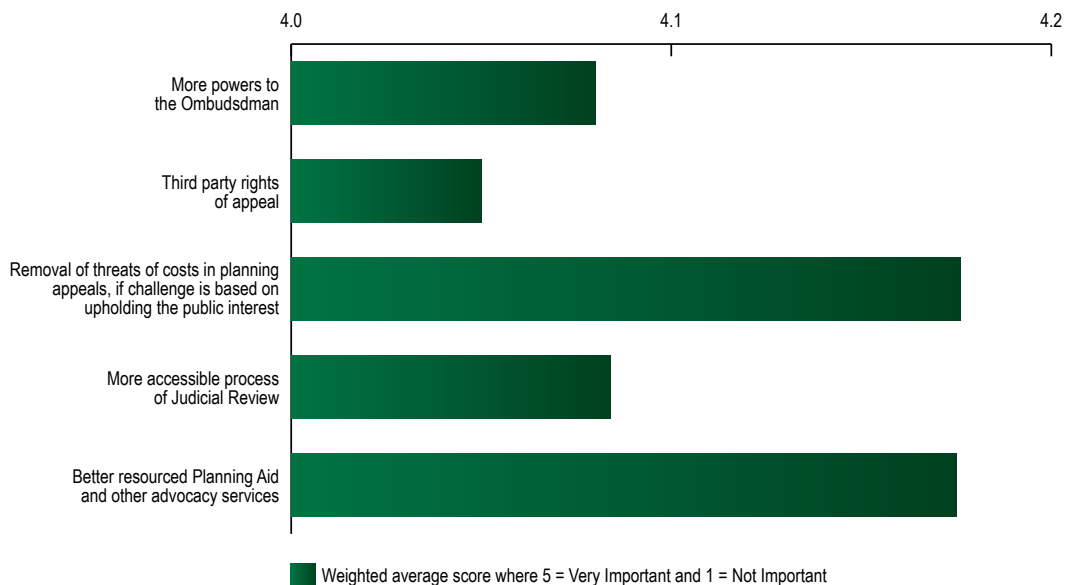


Figure 11: Please score the following issues related to public challenge to planning decisions according to your priorities for reform (Weighted average score)



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These graphs indicate that the highest priority for reform relates to issues governing transparency and openness – both in terms of how such issues are ranked in the general list for reform in Figure 8, but also the overall scores of those in Figure 10. Indeed, across all four questions, the highest ranking issue for reform is to make public the political donations by developers (with 83.3% of respondents stating this was very important) and the establishment of codes of conduct. Indeed Figures 8 - 11 clearly illustrate how respondents identify all those issues related to the conduct of politicians in the planning system as having a high priority for reform. This again complements many of the findings from previous questions; not only do respondents feel very strongly about the perceived relationships between politicians and developers, and the potential this has for how planning delivers the public interest, but there is very strong consensus across the different roles and political views that this should be the focus for reform.

Another high priority is better enforcement (64.9% noted that this was very important) an issue recently drawn attention to in a recent Private Members Debate in the Northern Ireland Assembly¹ and in contrast to the reduction of immunity timeframes for unauthorised development introduced in the 2011 Planning Act². The second priority was “A plan-led system with better plans”, also rated highly (58.7% of respondents noting that this was very Important), which follows legislation introduced in 2006 to place primacy on area plans when determining planning applications, but has yet to be formally commenced³.

The issue of efficiency and speed of planning decisions, which has been subject to a variety of reform measures is also weighted highly (55% of respondents rating this Very Important) and attracting a weighted average score of 4.2, the third highest ranking shared with “Further training of planning officers”.

Issues related to public challenges to the planning system tended to be ranked less overall, and here we see the removal of threats of costs in planning appeals in the context of a public interest challenge as the highest priority (54.4% of respondents ranking this as Very Important).

The full survey report disaggregates these priorities for reform by different roles and voting preference; here there appears to be a broad consensus across these categories that there is a need for developers' political donations to be made public and that there is a need for better political leadership concerning the planning system. However, there are differences here in the priorities of Developers/Agents compared to those with other roles, which is not surprising given that they have a very direct client relationship with the system compared to other groups. For example, Developers/Agents were the only group to rate the planning system being too slow and inefficient in their top three issues in Figure 8. There is also some interesting specific alignment of interests with priorities for reform – for example the need for further training for planning officers is stressed by DoE Planning officers (the only group along with Developers/Agents to note this). The issues prioritised by elected representatives also highlight the lack of transparency between politicians, developers and planners (55% noting this as being “very important”).

1 <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/record/reports2011/111108.htm#a3>

2 See s.248 of the 2011 Planning Act. This is amongst the first sections of the act to be subject to a commencement order (as announced on 11/11/11)

3 Planning Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, s.4.

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For each of these questions, respondents were also given an option to state which other reforms they would prioritise for the planning system, with recurring themes being:

- Increased opportunities for public participation and community engagement;
- More consistency in planning decisions;
- The introduction of third party planning appeals;
- Issues concerning the transfer of planning responsibilities to local government, mostly of a critical nature;
- Planning decisions made more closely in line with adopted planning policy and a plan-led system;
- More planning information made publically accessible, such as on the internet;
- Anti-corruption measures, such as an assembly commission or new legislation;
- A statutory definition of the “public interest” to support the aims of the planning system;
- Clearer statements of conflict of interests of those involved in planning decisions;
- Better publicity of proposed development, including site notices;
- Improved resourcing and strengthening of the role of the Ombudsman;
- Increased opportunities to challenge decisions without resorting to legal means;
- Better protection for historic buildings and other heritage features;
- Training for councillors;
- Greater emphasis on sustainability, environmental issues, biodiversity etc.

Examples of good and poor planning in Northern Ireland

The survey asked respondents to provide examples of what they thought were examples of good and poor planning from Northern Ireland. 260 respondents provided examples of good planning in Northern Ireland issues while 293 provided examples of poor planning – a huge variety of issues were highlighted in these questions and Friends of the Earth Northern Ireland will be conducting an in depth analysis of the issues that these raise. An account of these is also provided in the full report of the survey.

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Conclusion

This survey provides the first ever insight into how a broad section of interests view the Northern Ireland planning system. The results are rather remarkable, and deeply concerning, for a number of reasons. First is that there are very strong views that the planning system is not performing well for the people of Northern Ireland and there is strong desire for reform. Second is that there is a very robust consensus on such critical views, irrespective of the role and political view of the individuals taking part in the survey. Third, is the contrast between the views articulated in this survey and those that are most frequently heard in debates on planning. Indeed, it would appear that many of the concerns expressed in the survey have largely been by-passed in policy and legislative reform of the last 20 years, which has largely emphasised procedural and efficiency measures, with less emphasis on public confidence, transparency and outcomes, which are repeatedly stressed as a priority in these research findings. Finally are the views of those very closest to decision-making in planning, including elected representatives and DoE Planners, who highlight serious concerns about accountability, openness and the relationship of planning decisions to the public interest.

While the survey gives rise to a range of very detailed findings, some of the main findings include:

- There is a very strong view that the planning system serves the people of Northern Ireland poorly or very poorly – a view held by 80% of respondents. Only 4.7% of respondents believe that the planning system serves the people of Northern Ireland well or very well.
- Similarly, the majority of respondents believe that the public interest is reflected never or only rarely in planning decisions (67.3%) and that their views are taken into account rarely or never (73.1%).
- While one could understand that different interests may feel unhappy about different planning issues, what is quite remarkable is that these critical views are broadly held, irrespective of the role and political opinion of the respondent.
- Although there is broad consensus on many of the answers to the survey questions, it is notable that the group that is least critical of current arrangements for planning are elected representatives; 62% of this group felt the planning system served the people of Northern Ireland poorly or very poorly.
- In the answers to many of the questions and in the opportunities for open responses, a key issue emerges regarding the perception of politicians and their relationships with the development industry – indeed 75.6% of respondents suggested the relationships between politicians and developers were too close and highlighted this as a key area needing reform. This view was also held by a majority (60%) of politicians and 36.7% of developers.
- In terms of the issues that respondents would like to see better addressed by the planning system, the survey provided a clear message that a large majority (75.3%) would like to see action in relation to developer contributions, followed by a number of environmental issues (Environmental protection 74.1%, climate change 72.5%, and car dependency 70.4%). Somewhat surprising given the state of the economy, only 51.1% stated that they thought that economic development needed to be better addressed – this was the issues that the highest number of respondents thought was being addressed well by the planning system (30.7%).
- Another very clear issue to emerge from the survey is the apparent level of frustration and criticism that emerges from those planners working in the Department of the Environment who decided to respond (34 in total). Their responses suggest a low level of morale within the Department, are generally very critical of the overall management of the planning system and point to a high level of political interference in professional planning decisions.

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- The survey also explored respondents' priorities for reform; while there are some interesting and detailed variations in the responses to the questions on reform, it is again issues of transparency, political leadership, accountability and the relationship between politicians and developers that come out as the highest priorities for most groups. The issue of speed and efficiency of the planning system, an issue often in the news, appears only to be a high priority for Developers/Agents.

Taken collectively, it is very difficult to avoid the conclusion this survey has highlighted what amounts to a widespread crisis of confidence in the Northern Ireland planning system and indicates a clear set of priorities the policy community would like to see addressed as part of a programme of planning reform. These concerns appear to focus on a suspicion of the influence of the development sector on planning decisions, and have a lack of confidence in politicians to uphold the public interest. While this survey has dealt only with the perception of the conduct of politicians, the source of such views, coming from those very closely related to the decision-making process does give rise to an imperative need for a full investigation of this matter, if only to dismiss such perceptions and help rebuild confidence in the planning system.



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