

# PLACE / POLITICS / PRIORITIES: NATIONAL SURVEY OF LOCAL AUTHORITY COUNCILLORS WITH A FOCUS ON PLACE QUALITY

The Government, both in its manifesto and in the recent Housing White Paper<sup>\*1</sup>, committed itself to a step change in the delivery of high quality new homes across the country. Unfortunately, the recent Place Alliance report<sup>\*2</sup> puts those aspirations in doubt because of a worsening design skills gap in English local planning authorities. It demonstrates that urban design skills and capacity within local planning authorities are woefully low and declining and that these gaps are not being filled by the patchy, albeit increasing, use of Design Review. Critical gaps exist within local planning authorities, including the ability to produce proactive design guidance in-house to positively shape the future of new housing developments. Understanding the role of councillors in this, by allocating resources, establishing priorities and focusing on the quality of places is an important next step to understanding and influencing the field.

**The research asked, how are our local politicians playing their part in helping to deliver better design?**

## 1. THE RESPONSE

### 7.3% Completion rate

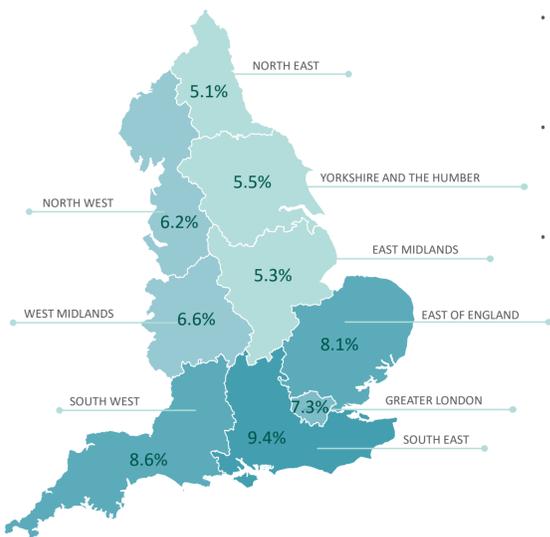


Fig 1. Survey completion rate by region.

- A survey was sent to 16,578 councillors in England. A total of **1213 councillors** (including county councils) responded to the survey.
- Councillors in all political parties and across all regions of England share the concern to see high quality residential design in their area.
- Almost all councillors believe that better design can make development more acceptable to local residents.

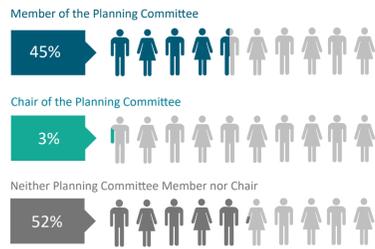


Fig 2. Response breakdown according to councillors' roles.

## 2. STANDARDS OF DESIGN

- Overall, councillors believe that the quality of design in new housing development has improved in recent years.

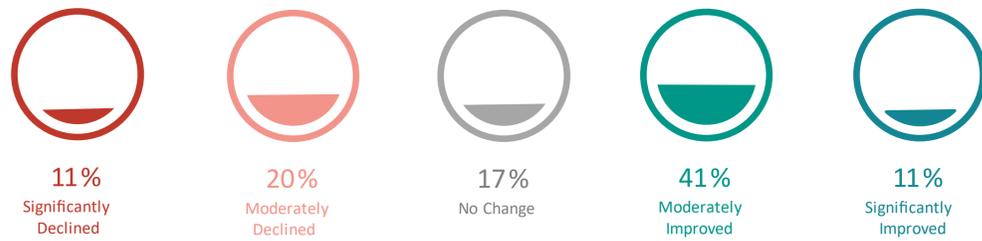
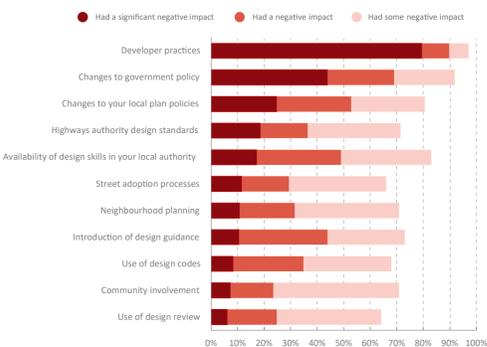
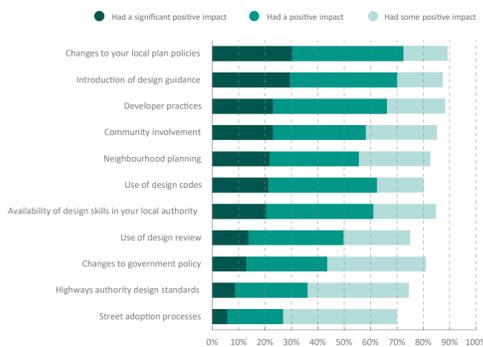


Fig 3. Change of the quality of design in new housing in recent years.

### Why have design standards declined?

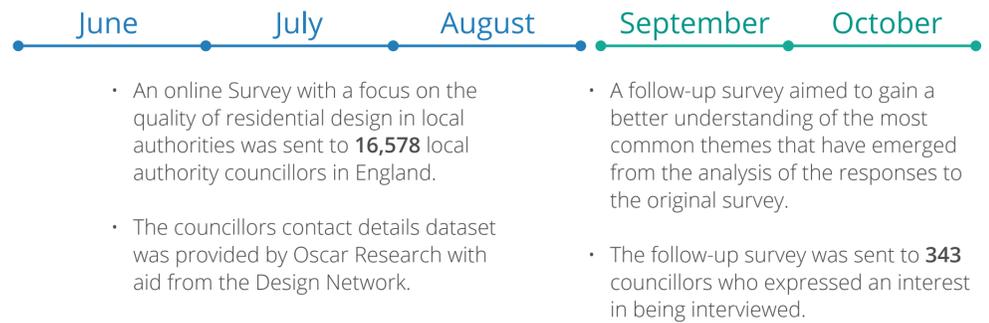


### Why have design standards improved?



- Looking at the responses by regions, **the greatest positive change** in the design quality of new residential development was in **Yorkshire and the Humber, the North West and the East Midlands**.
- Southern regions** (South West, South East and Greater London) were seen as **having the biggest decline in the quality of design in new housing development**.
- Aspects of design such as **overdevelopment, local character, parking and access to local facilities and amenities** were of greatest ongoing concern, whereas practices encouraging walking, integration of bins and play facilities were least important.

## PROJECT TIMELINE



## 3. LEADERSHIP

- There is an **overwhelming concern about design quality among councillors** - 90% of respondents considered the quality of design to be a very important issue.
- Councillors see themselves as **intermediaries between the community and planning authorities**. Councillors see their unique contribution as acting as a bulwark against powerful developers (and national policy) seeking to impose inappropriate developments upon their localities for short-term economic reasons.
- Whilst councillors were generally supportive of their planning team's capabilities, this did not mean that they were supportive of every decision they made. Indeed **83 per cent of councillors who sit on the Planning Committee indicated that they do not always support planning officers on design matters**. The most frequently mentioned grounds for disagreement between councillors and planning officers are:
  - The proposed development is out of context with the area.
  - The proposed development might have a negative impact on the community or the needs of local people were neglected.
  - The proposed development's design is of poor quality.



Fig 4. What distinctive role do councillors play during the design process for residential development?

## 4. GOVERNANCE

- Based on the responses, there is a direct link between the planning teams' capacity to influence design for the better by having requisite skills and councillors' perceptions of how quality of design has changed in recent years.
- Around half of the councillors identified the **planning teams in their local authorities as capable of influencing design for the better** (Fig.5). Councillors who sit on the planning committee tend to be more positive about the skills and capacity of planning teams in their local authority compared to those councillors who do not sit on the committee.

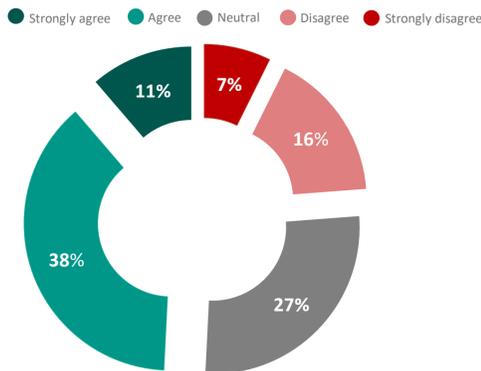


Fig 5. Are local authorities properly equipped to address design issues?

- In order to encourage better residential design, respondents suggested that Local Authorities should reject more schemes on design grounds. **Strengthening Local Plan Policy** together with **Neighbourhood Planning fostered by better community engagement** would reinforce local design aspirations and encourage design matters to be taken more seriously by developers (Fig. 6).
- Use of design governance tools would help define and establish a clear set of design aspirations** and thus provide certainty for Local Authorities, developers and local communities.



Fig 6. Suggested actions in order to encourage better residential design.

#### REFERENCES:

\*1 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2017), Fixing our broken housing market.

\*2 Carmona, M., Giordano, V. (2017), Design Skills in English Local Authorities.