

REPORT

National Planning Improvement Customer and Stakeholder Survey Results

National Analysis



Contents

Introduction	3
Response Numbers	6
Satisfaction with Time Taken	8
Standard of Communication	10
Quality of Information	12
Service Offered by Staff	14
Time Taken to Respond	16
Treated fairly	18
Overall Satisfaction	20
Comments from Respondents	22

Introduction

We are pleased to share with you the results of the first National Customer and Stakeholder Survey 2024 for planning authorities. This is the first year of the survey and we are hoping the results will inform discussions on how we can improve customer care across planning authorities in Scotland.

It aims to capture feedback from those with experience working with planning authorities across Scotland over the past year. Participants were asked to respond in relation to the individual planning authority they interacted with and indicate the type of interaction they had and their background relating to this interaction. The analysis below highlights the feedback from respondents across all 34 planning authorities.

The survey is undertaken at a time when public services work within a reduced resource base and public confidence in them can be low. The most recent Scottish Housholder Survey (2023) found that 42% of people strongly or somewhat agreed that their council provides a high quality service and that the council was doing their best with the money available. Only 30% strongly or somewhat agreed that their council was good at letting them know how it was performing.

Why we undertook the survey

We wanted to work with planning authorities, their customers and stakeholders to get a good understanding of the situation regarding customer care and the quality of stakeholder engagement.

A new National Planning Improvement Framework (NPIF) is currently being piloted across all 34 planning authorities in 3 cohorts. It sets out 12 attributes of a high performing planning authority including if the planning authority has good customer care, and, if it has effective engagement with stakeholder and communities.

In initial discussions during the development of the NPIF there was interest in developing a national customer and stakeholder survey to help provide evidence and data to inform planning authorities. It was agreed that the National Planning Improvement (NPI) team would take this forward. This has allowed for consistency across planning authorities in gathering information on customer satisfaction, while also having minimal resource implications for planning authorities as it is taken forward by the NPI team.



How we undertook the survey

We had conversations with stakeholders during the summer of 2024 to agree to the approach taken. We commissioned our research team at the Improvement Service to set up the survey and analyse the results. The survey was then launched in November 2024 to pilot the approach, it was live for 3 weeks and was open to anyone who had interacted with a planning authority in the last year. This report summarises the results across Scotland and each planning authority is provided with their individual responses.

As we were looking to pilot this approach, one of the questions we asked was for feedback on the survey itself. We will review this when considering the approach taken in future years.

We created a communications toolkit for the planning authorities to promote the survey with their stakeholders. It was also promoted by members of the High Level Group (including the IS, HOPS, Scottish Government, COSLA, SOLACE, RTPi Scotland, Key Agencies Group and SOLAR), and other umbrella bodies with a stake in the planning service such as Homes for Scotland, Scottish Property Federation, Scottish Renewables, Scottish Planning Consultants Forum, Scottish Environment Link, and Scottish Community Councils. We are pleased with the response rate for the first time round and will look to improve this in future years.

In designing the survey we were very aware of the contested nature of planning has led to a number of planners facing harassment and abuse and some felt the survey could invite more negative responses. When writing the questions we also invited respondents to provide constructive criticism and suggestions for improvement.

What has the survey told us?

The full details of the survey are set out below. A high level summary is:

- The survey attracted 639 responses.
- There were responses from every planning authority area, though these ranged from 1 to 83.
- Over 90% of respondents' interaction with the planning service was to submit or comment on a planning application.
- Just under 40% of responses came from a community member, around 34% from an applicant and 25% from a consultant or architect.
- 44.7% of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied about the time taken to deal with applications or enquiries although 55.3% were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied

- 49.5% of respondents were either very satisfied or satisfied with the standard of communication whilst 50.5% were either very unsatisfied or unsatisfied
- 54.4% of respondents were very satisfied or satisfied with the quality of information provided by the planning authority with 45.7% very unsatisfied or unsatisfied
- 51.3 % of respondents were very satisfied or satisfied with the service offered by planning authority staff, with 48.6% finding it very unsatisfactory or unsatisfactory
- 45.6% of respondents found the time taken to respond to queries very satisfactory or satisfactory whereas 54.5% were very unsatisfied or unsatisfied
- 55% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they were treated fairly by the planning service with 45.1% saying they disagreed or strongly disagree
- 46.2% of respondents were very satisfied or satisfied with the over service provided by the planning authority and 53.8% very unsatisfied or unsatisfied.

It is clear that community members had higher dissatisfaction rates of all the respondents. This did not come as a surprise, as engaging with communities has been a recurring topic in discussions through the NPIF.

Many planning authorities have included actions to improve in this area in their action plans through NPIF, for example by developing an engagement strategy. We are also working with the High Level Group to continue to promote the positive benefits of planning.

The survey has highlighted a more positive response from key agencies and other internal local authority staff.

What's next?

We will use the results of the survey to identify areas where we can make improvements and will work with planning authorities on these.

We will be conducting the survey again at the end of 2025.



Response Numbers

A total of 639 individuals who had interacted with a planning authority responded to the survey. As highlighted in figure 1 all 34 planning authorities were represented in the survey, however the largest proportion (13%) of respondents had engaged with North Lanarkshire planning authority.

Figure 2 and Figure 3 respectively, show a breakdown of these respondents by the type of interaction they had with the planning authority and the type of respondent they represent. The largest proportion of respondents stated their interaction with the planning authority was “To discuss and/ or submit a planning application”, which represented 58.7% of respondents. Community member respondents were the most common type of respondents with 39.6% selecting this.

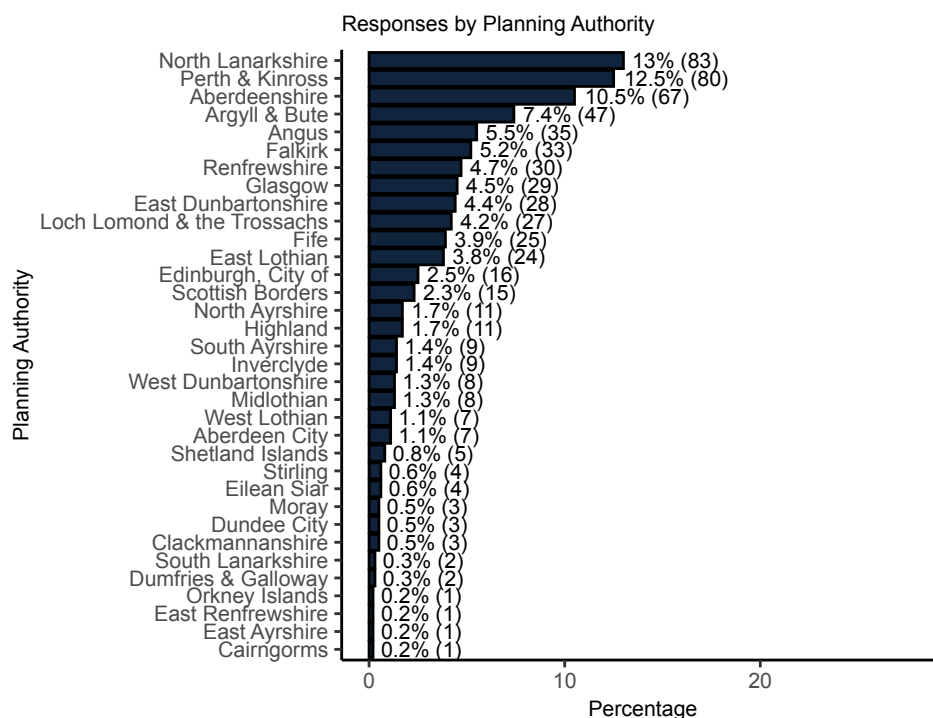


Figure 1: Responses by Planning Authority

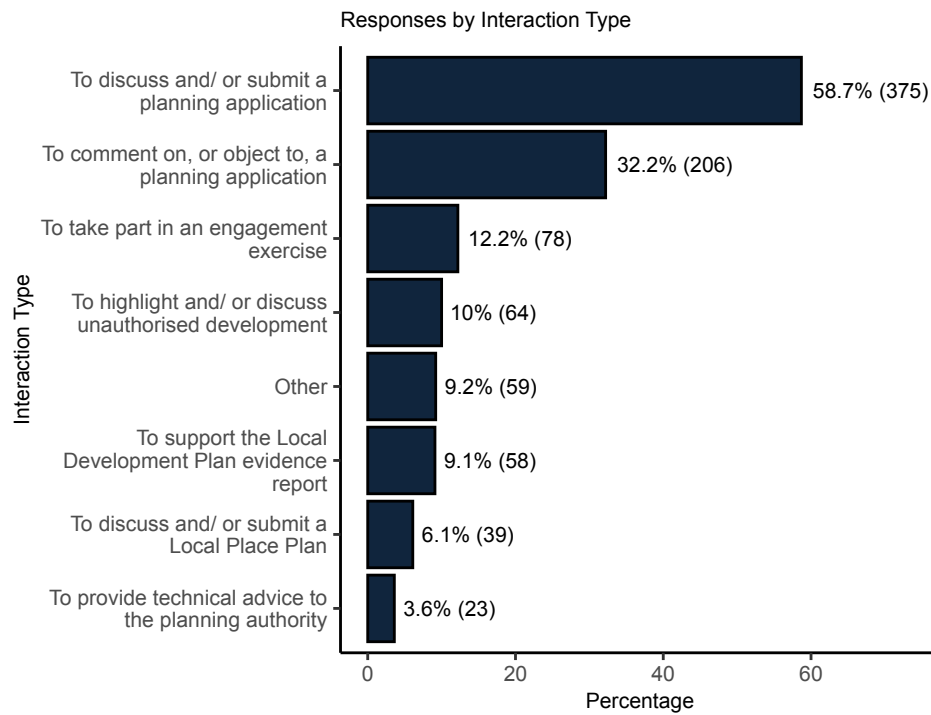


Figure 2: Responses by Interaction Type

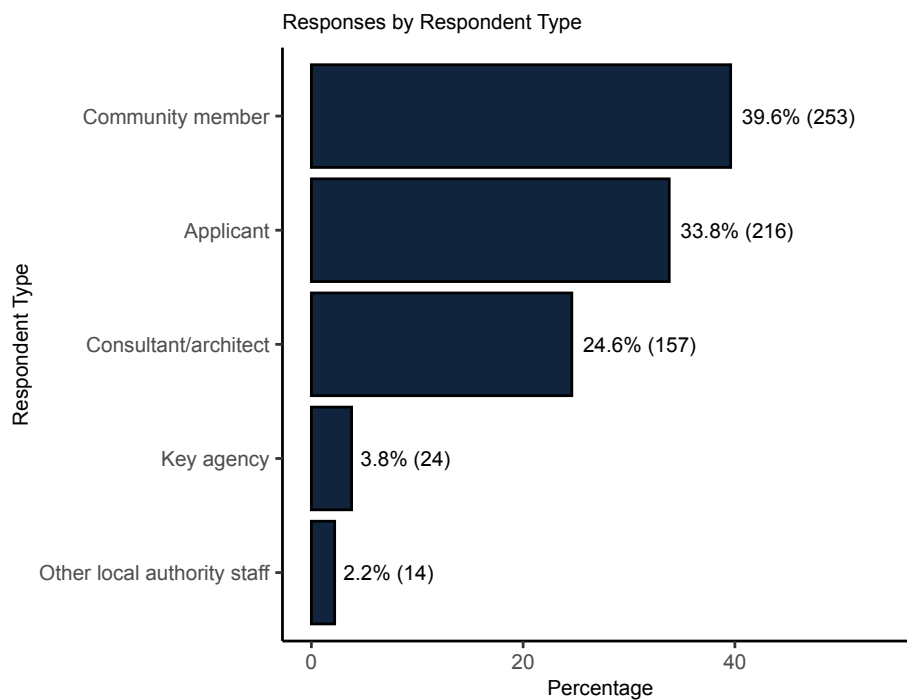


Figure 3: Responses by Respondent Type

Satisfaction with Time Taken

Respondents were asked, when thinking of their engagement with the planning service from beginning to end, how satisfied they were that the time taken to deal with their application or enquiry met the timescales they were promised. Figure 4 highlights a breakdown of responses to this question. The largest proportion of respondents (30.1%) said they were “Very dissatisfied” in relation to this statement. “Very satisfied” or “Satisfied” was selected by 44.7% of respondents.

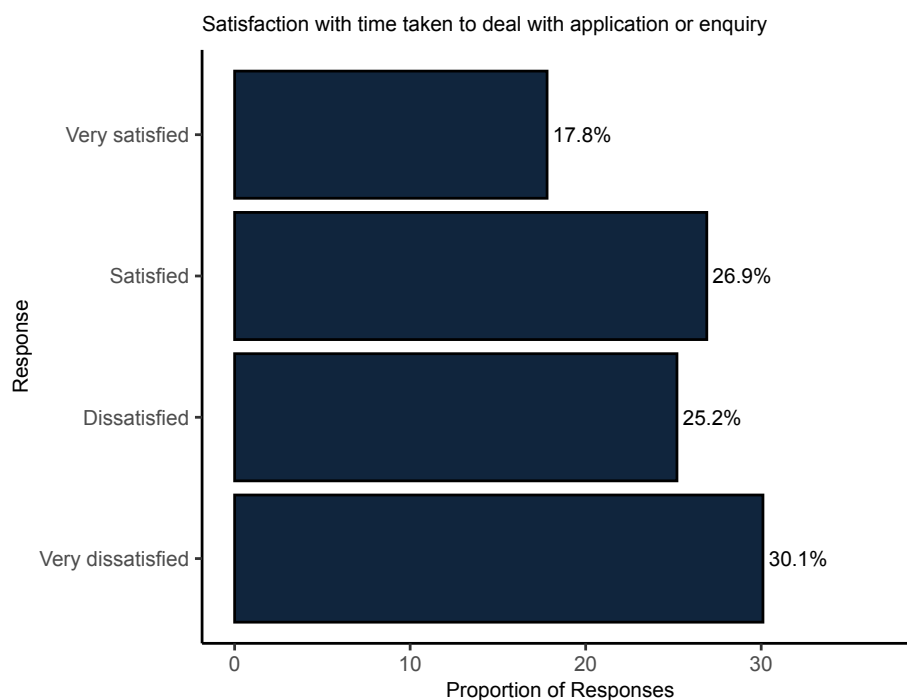


Figure 4: Satisfaction with Time Taken

Figure 5 shows a breakdown of the responses to the question, “Thinking of your engagement with the planning service from beginning to end, how satisfied were you that the time taken to deal with your application or enquiry met the timescales that you were promised?” by the type of interaction the respondent had with the service. Respondents who had interacted with the service to “To support the Local Development Plan evidence report” had the largest proportion of “Very satisfied” responses to this statement, with 31.5% selecting this. However, respondents who had interacted with the service to “To provide technical advice to the planning authority” overall had the largest proportion of positive responses, with 68.2% stating they were “Very satisfied” or “Satisfied”.

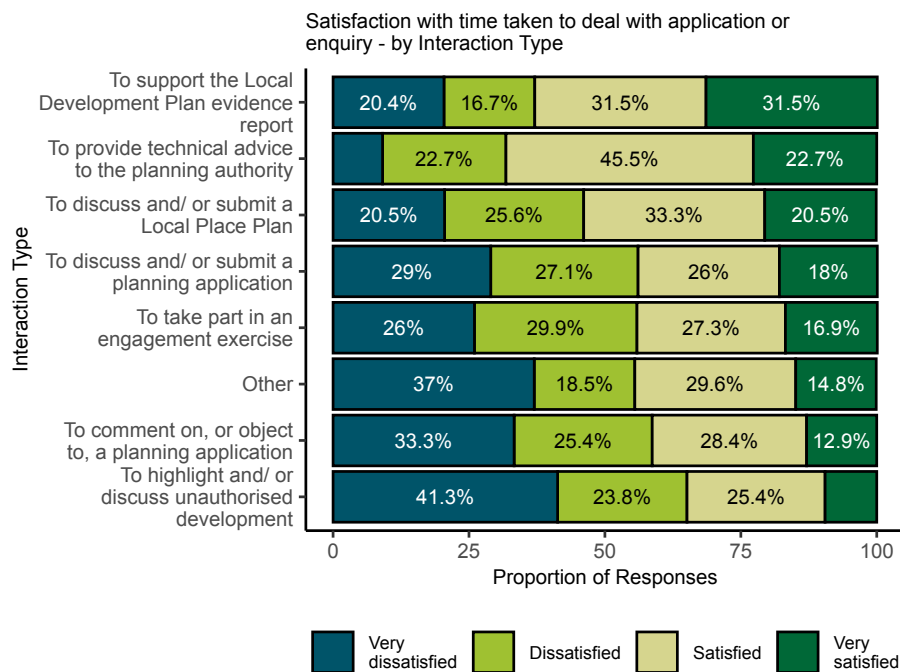


Figure 5: Satisfaction with Time Taken - by Interaction Type

Satisfaction with time taken also varied by the type of respondents. Figure 6 shows a breakdown of responses by the type of respondent with those who stated they were “Key agency” showing the highest rates of satisfaction. “Very satisfied” or “Satisfied” was selected by 86.4% of these respondents.

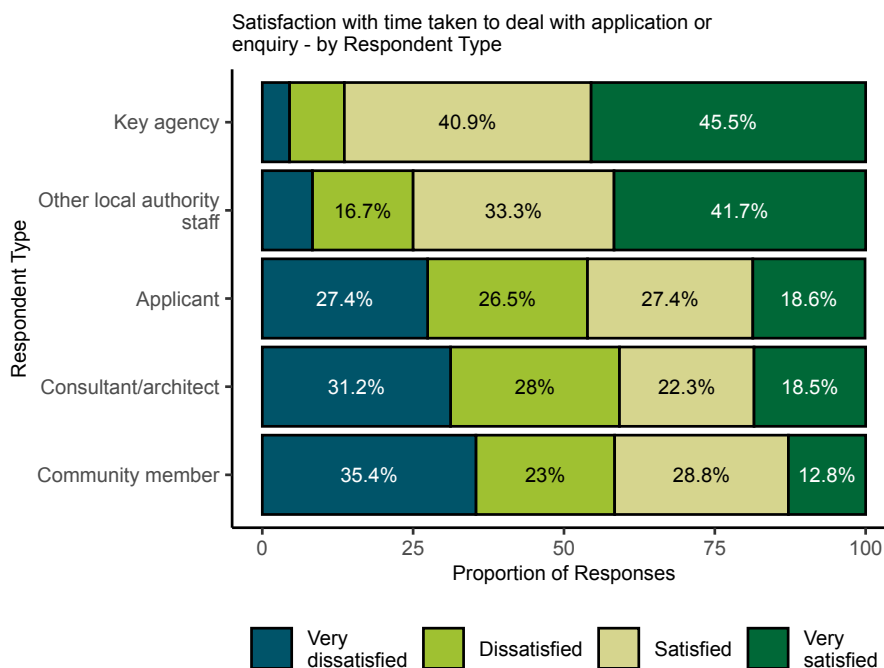


Figure 6: Satisfaction with Time Taken - by Respondent Type

Standard of Communication

Figure 7 shows a breakdown of responses to the question, “How would you rate the standard of communication provided by the planning service following your initial contact?”. A total of 49.5% responded positively rating communication as either “Very good” or “Good”. The most common response was “Very poor” representing 28.9% of respondents.

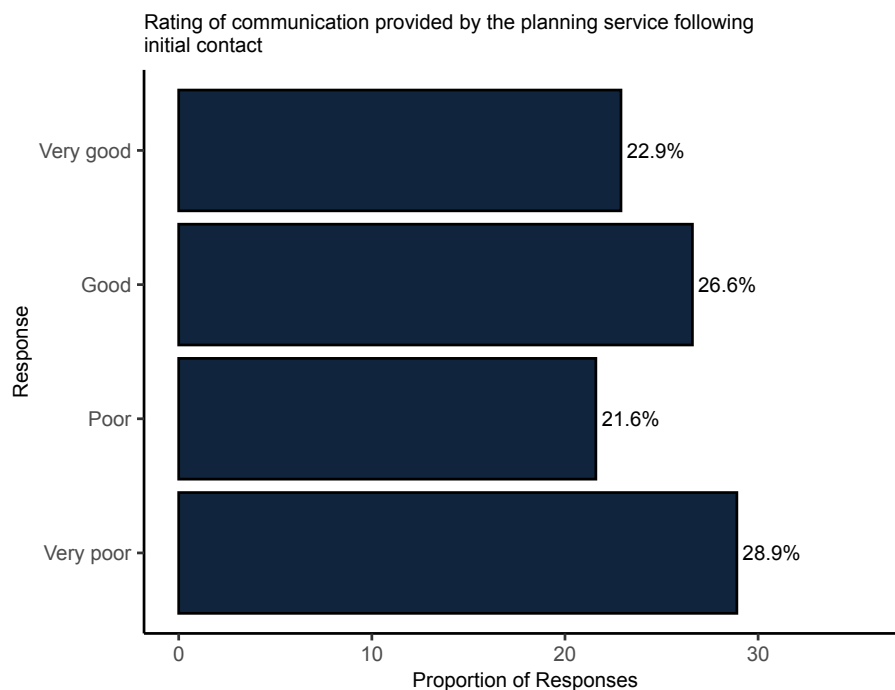


Figure 7: Standard of Communication

When asked about the standard of communication, respondents who interacted with the planning service to “To provide technical advice to the planning authority” responded most positively with 40.9% stating that communication was “Very good”. A full breakdown of responses to this statement by interaction type is shown in figure 8.

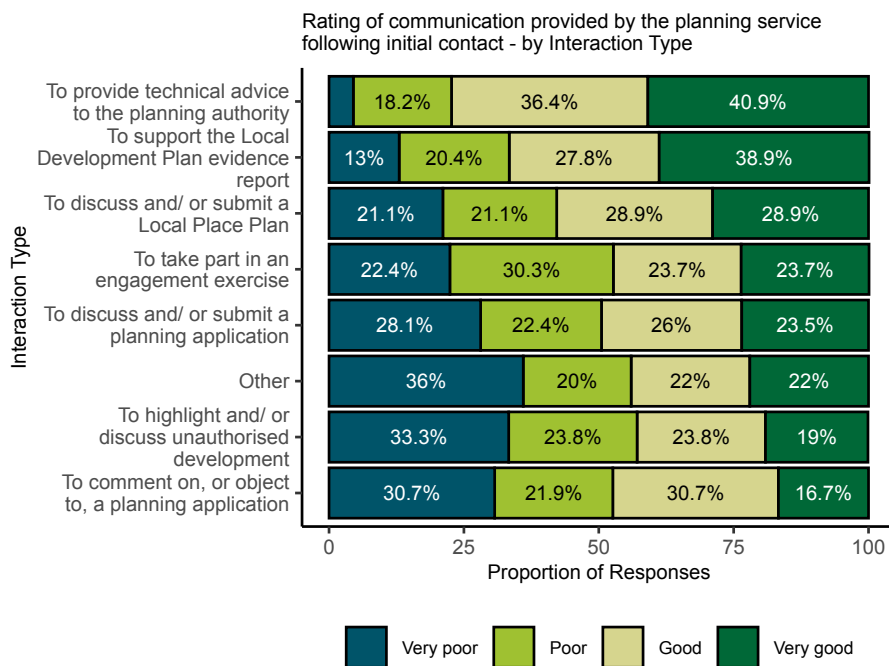


Figure 8: Standard of Communication - by Interaction Type

As shown in figure 9, respondents who stated they were “Key agency” rated the standard of communication very positively. None of these respondents selected “Very poor” and 90.9% stated it was “Very good” or “Good”.

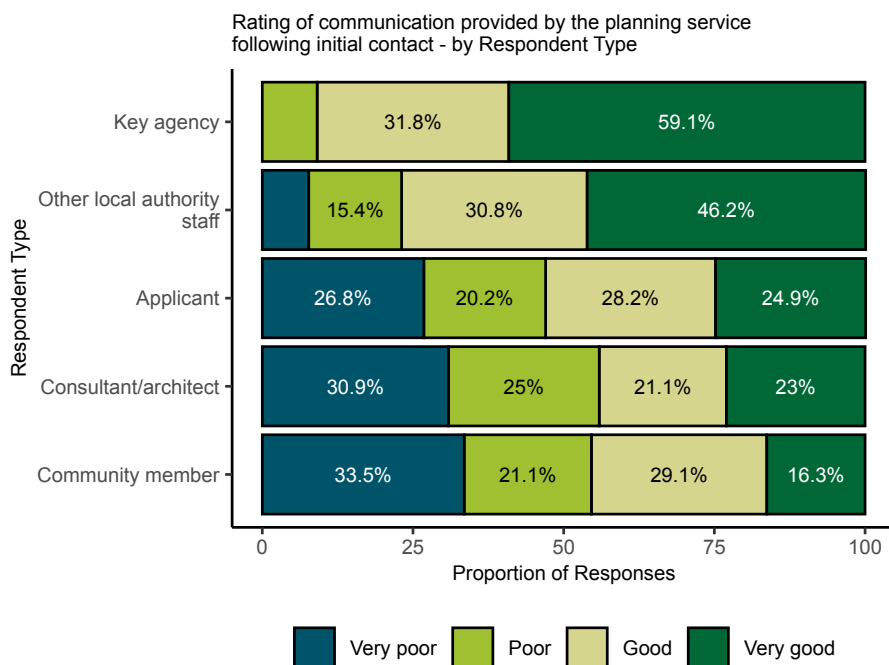


Figure 9: Standard of Communication - by Respondent Type

Quality of Information

When asked about the quality of information in relation to their experience as a customer/stakeholder of the planning service, the largest proportion of respondents (33.8%) stated this was “Good”. A total of 54.4% respondents stated the quality of information was “Very good” or “Good”. Figure 10 highlights these responses.

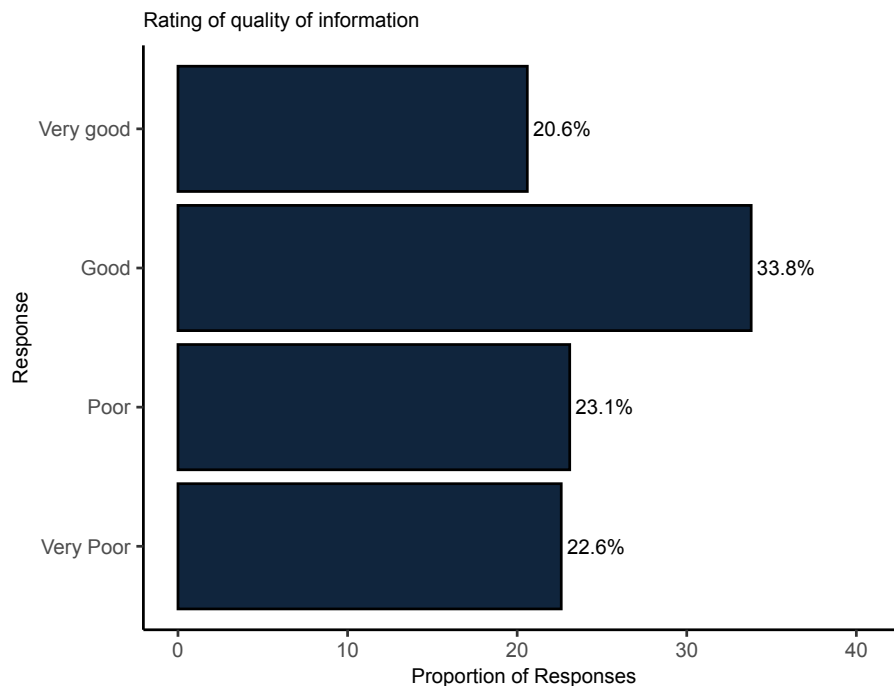


Figure 10: Quality of Information

Figure 11 shows a breakdown of respondents rating of the quality of information by the type of interaction the respondent had with the planning service. There was wide variation in the proportion of positive responses. Respondents who interacted with the service “To highlight and/ or discuss unauthorised development” had 43.5% who rated the quality of information as “Very good” or “Good”, compared with 95.2% of respondents who interacted with the service to “To provide technical advice to the planning authority”.

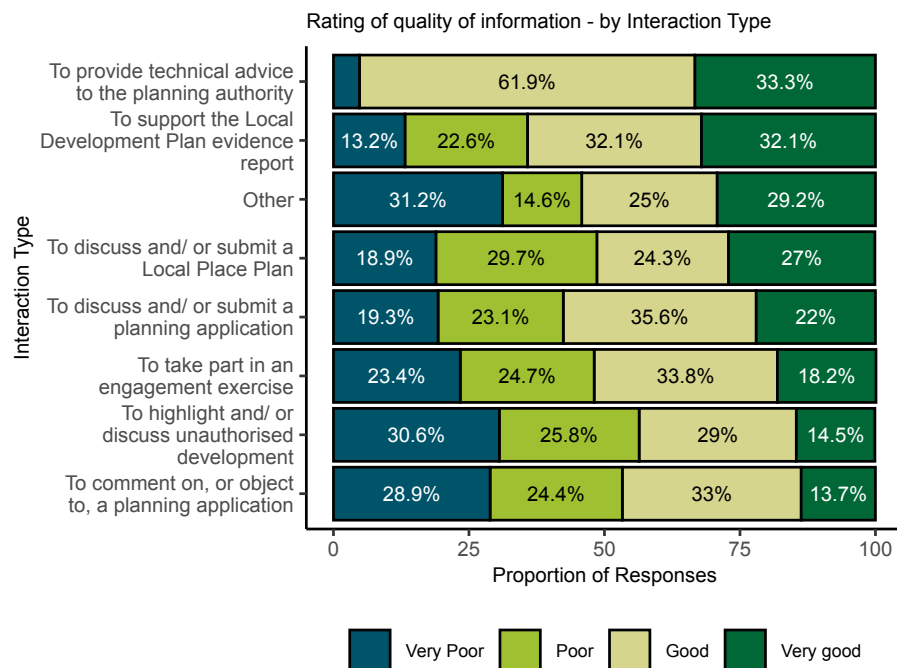


Figure 11: Quality of Information - by Interaction Type

Figure 12 shows the breakdown of how different respondent types rated the quality of information in relation to their experience with the planning service. For all but one respondent type, more than half of respondents responded positively, selecting either “Very good” or “Good”. This was as high as 95.2% for respondents who stated they were “Key agency”.

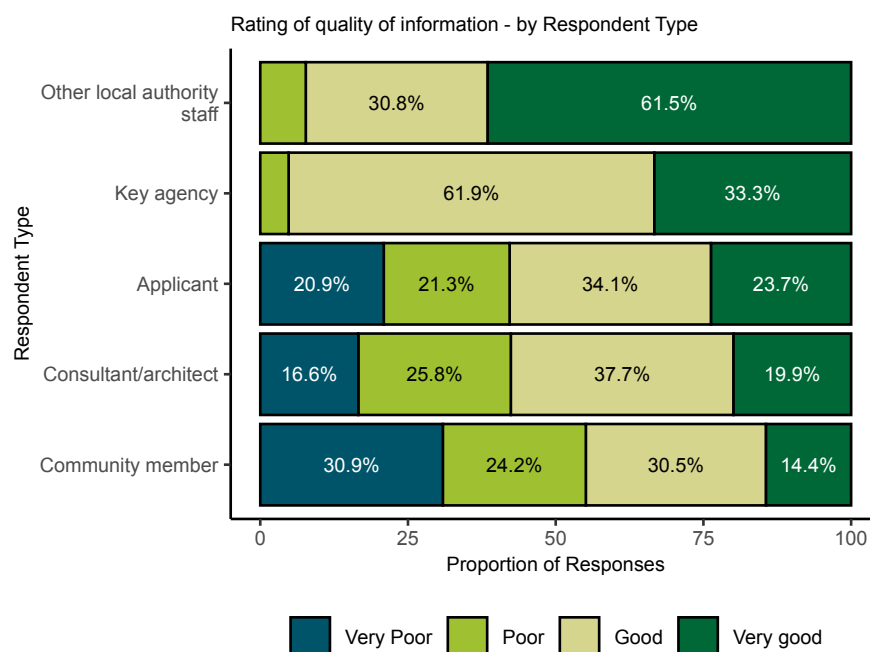


Figure 12: Quality of Information - by Respondent Type

Service Offered by Staff

A total of 51.3% respondents stated the service offered by staff was “Very good” or “Good”. A full breakdown of responses to this statement are shown in figure 13. The largest proportion (28.7%) of respondents stated the service offered by staff was “Good”.

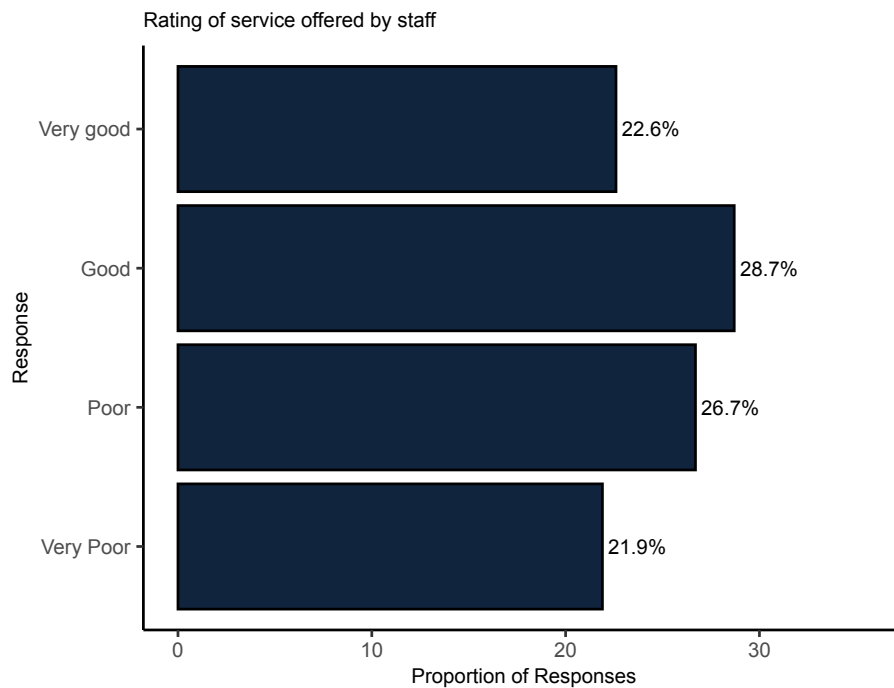


Figure 13: Service Offered by Staff

The service offered by staff was very highly rated by respondents who interacted with the planning service “To provide technical advice to the planning authority” with 95.2% of these respondents rating this as “Very good” or “Good”. Figure 14 shows a full breakdown of the ratings of the service offered by staff by the type of interaction the respondent had with the service.

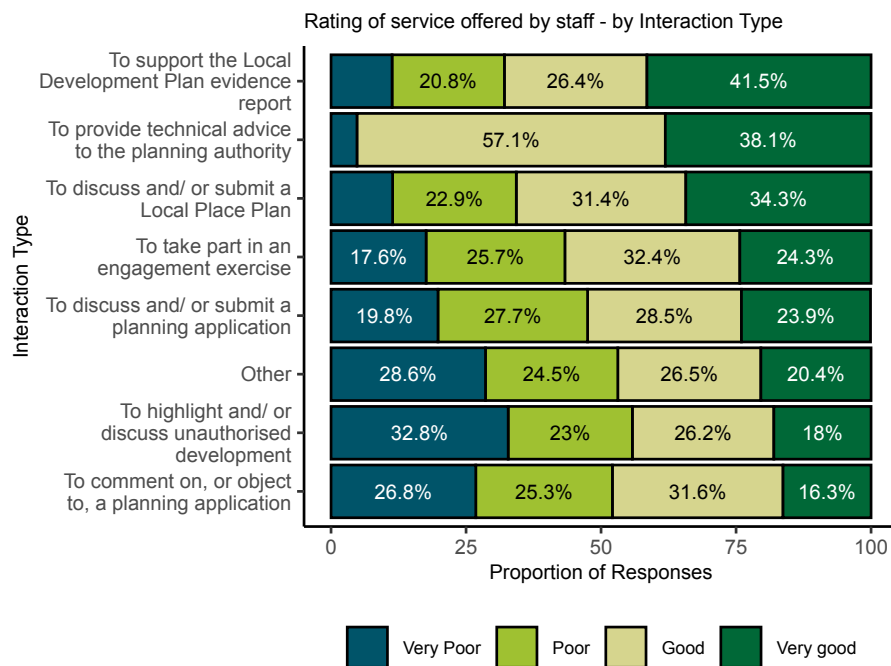


Figure 14: Service Offered by Staff - by Interaction Type

The service offered by staff was rated very positively by respondents who stated they were “Other local authority staff” or “Key agency”. Both of these type of respondents had over 90% of respondents who selected “Very good” or “Good” in relation to this statement. A full breakdown is shown in figure 15.

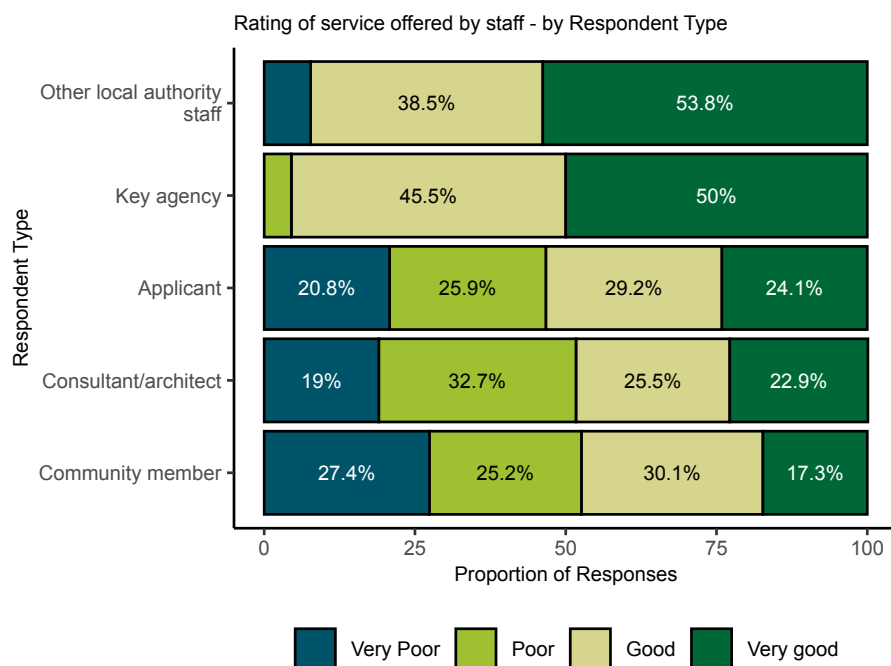


Figure 15: Service Offered by Staff - by Respondent Type

Time Taken to Respond

Figure 16 shows how respondents rated the time taken to respond to any queries or issues raised. Most respondents (32.2%) rated this as “Very Poor”. “Very good” or “Good” were selected by 45.6% of respondents in relation to this question.

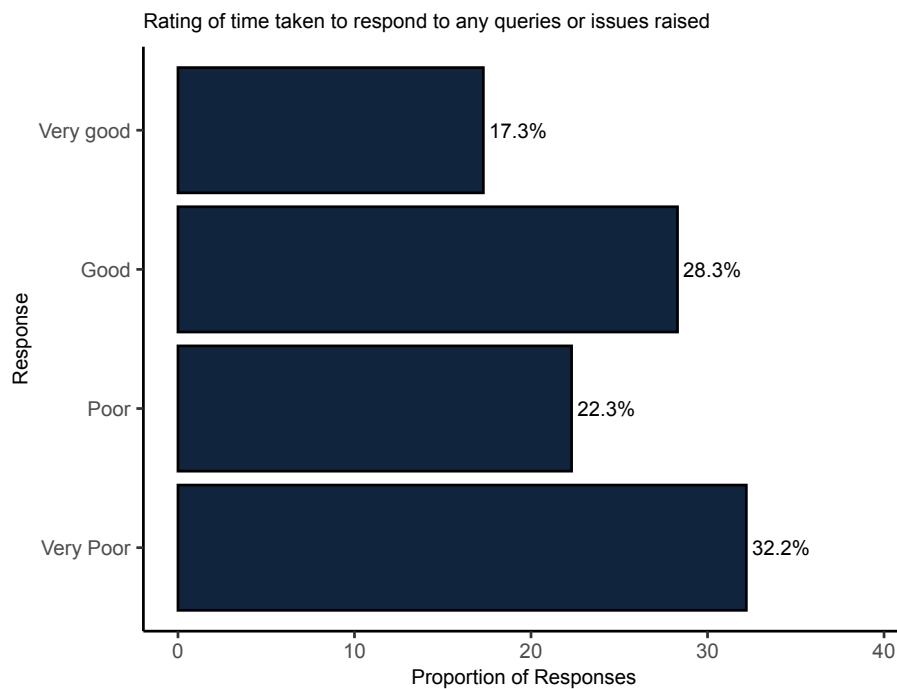


Figure 16: Time Taken to Respond

As shown in figure 17, there was wide variation in the proportion of respondents who rated the time taken to respond to any queries or issues raised, as “Very good”. This ranged from 11.7% of respondents who interacted with the service “To comment on, or object to, a planning application” to 35% of respondents who interacted with the service “To provide technical advice to the planning authority”.

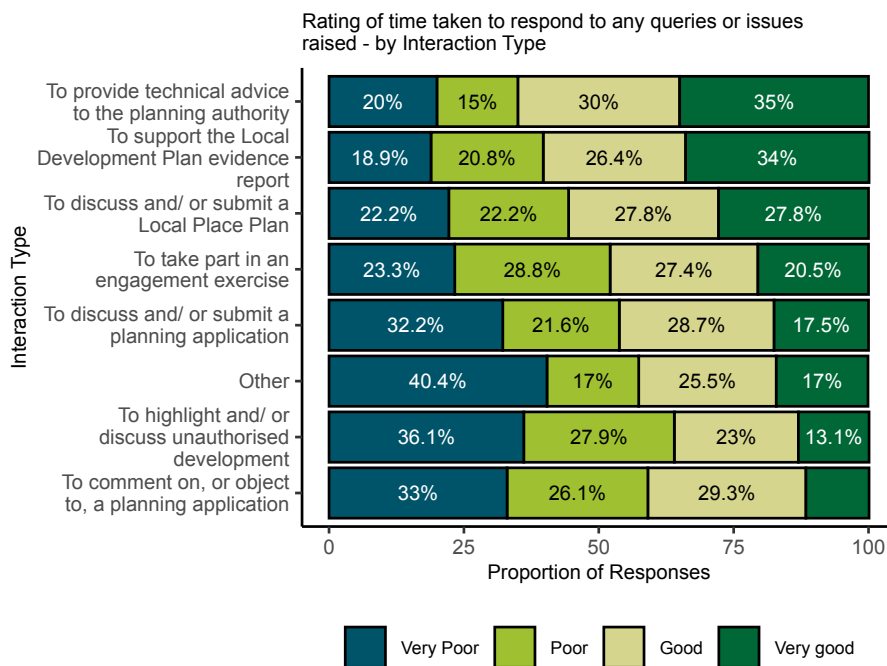


Figure 17: Time Taken to Respond - by Interaction Type

Respondents who stated they were “Key agency” had the largest proportion of positive responses when asked about the time taken to respond to any queries or issues raised. “Very good” or “Good” was selected by 81.8% of these respondents. These figures are highlighted in figure 18.

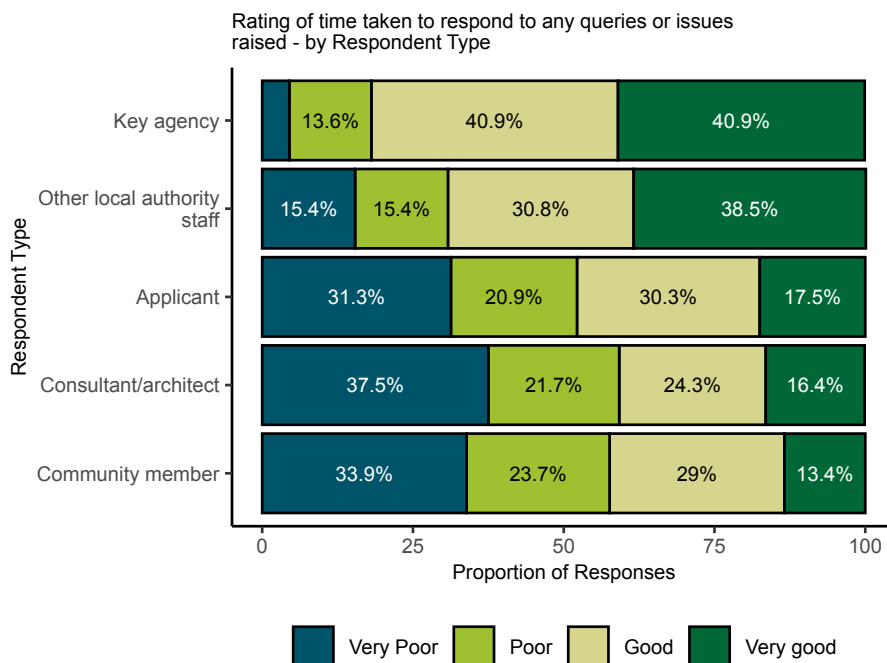


Figure 18: Time Taken to Respond - by Respondent Type

Treated fairly

Respondents were asked to what extent they would agree that they were treated fairly by the planning service. As highlighted in figure 19, most respondents stated they “Agree”, with 31.4% selecting this. Positive responses, “Strongly agree” or “Agree”, were selected by 55% of respondents. This question received the largest proportion of positive responses across the survey questions.

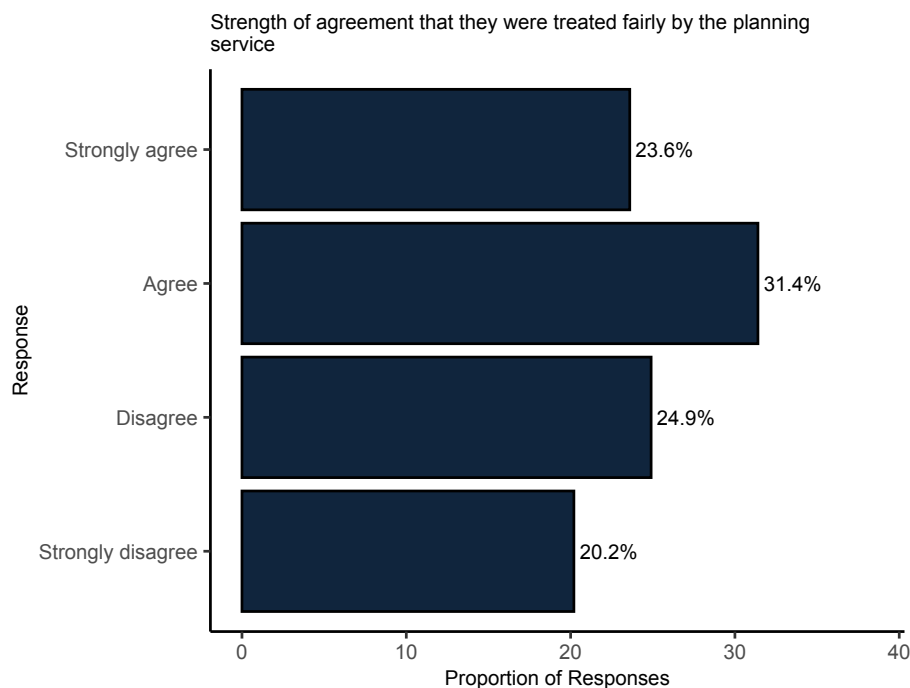


Figure 19: Treated Fairly

When asked to what extent they agreed they were treated fairly by the planning service, there was high rates of strong agreement across the different types of interactions respondents had. A full breakdown is shown in figure 20. All but two interaction types had more than half of respondents who “Strongly agreed” or “Agreed”. The most positive responses were from respondents who interacted with the service to “To provide technical advice to the planning authority” where more than half strongly agreed that they were treated fairly.

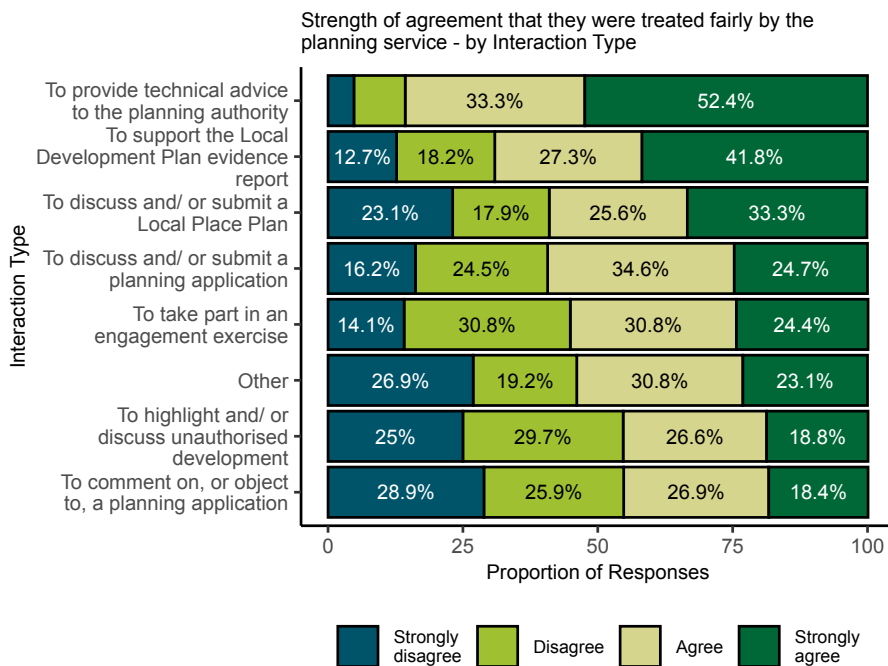


Figure 20: Treated Fairly - by Interaction Type

Respondents generally had high rates of agreement that they were treated fairly by the planning service. For all but one respondent type, positive responses, “Strongly agree” and “Agree”, made up over half of responses and for two respondent types there were no “Strongly disagree” responses. However, responses did vary by the respondent type. Respondents who stated they were “Community member” had 17.3% of respondents who stated they “Strongly agree” they were treated fairly, compared with 66.7% of respondents who stated they were “Other local authority staff”. A full breakdown of these responses is shown in figure 21.

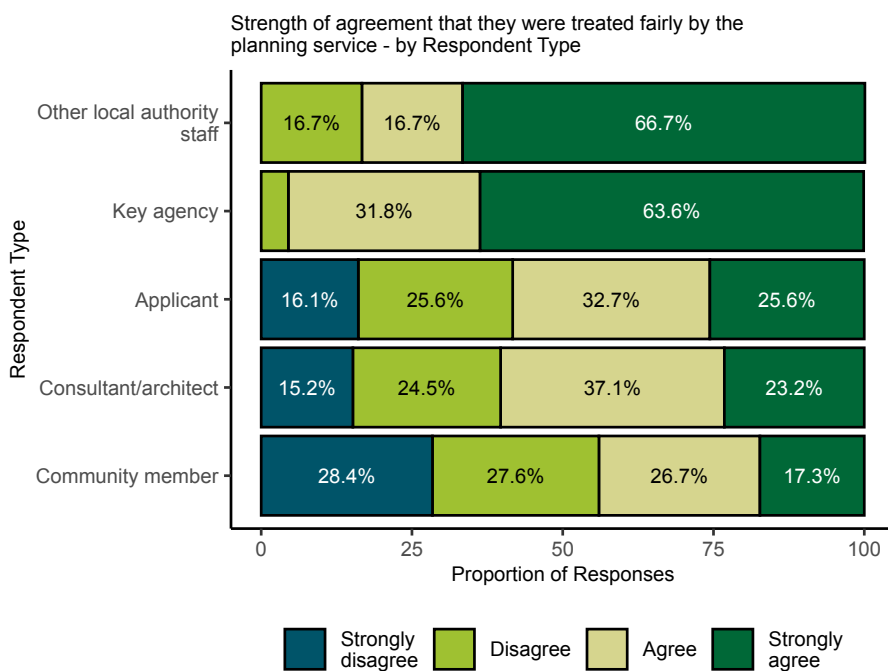


Figure 21: Treated Fairly - by Respondent Type

Overall Satisfaction

Following the more detailed questions, respondents were also asked to rate overall, how satisfied they were with the service provided by the planning service. The largest proportion of respondents (27.2%) said they were “Very dissatisfied”. Positive responses, “Very satisfied” and “Satisfied”, accounted for 46.2% of responses. Figure 22 highlights these responses.

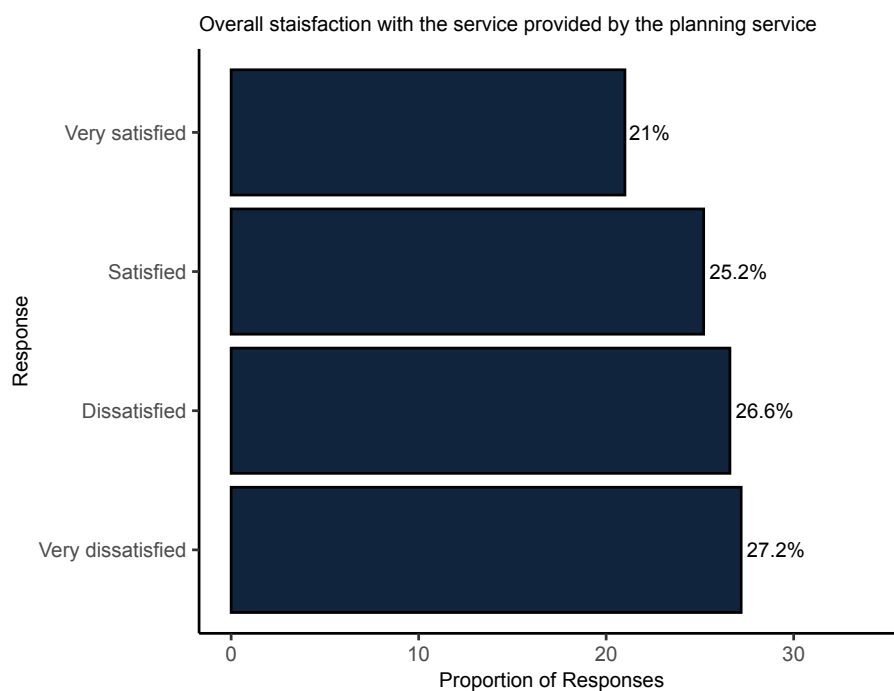


Figure 22: Overall Satisfaction

Figure 23 shows how respondents rated their overall satisfaction with the service provided, broken down by the type of interaction the respondent had with the service. The proportion of total positive responses varied widely between the interaction types ranging from 42.1% of respondents who interacted with the service “To comment on, or object to, a planning application” to 81.8% of respondents who interacted with the service “To provide technical advice to the planning authority”.

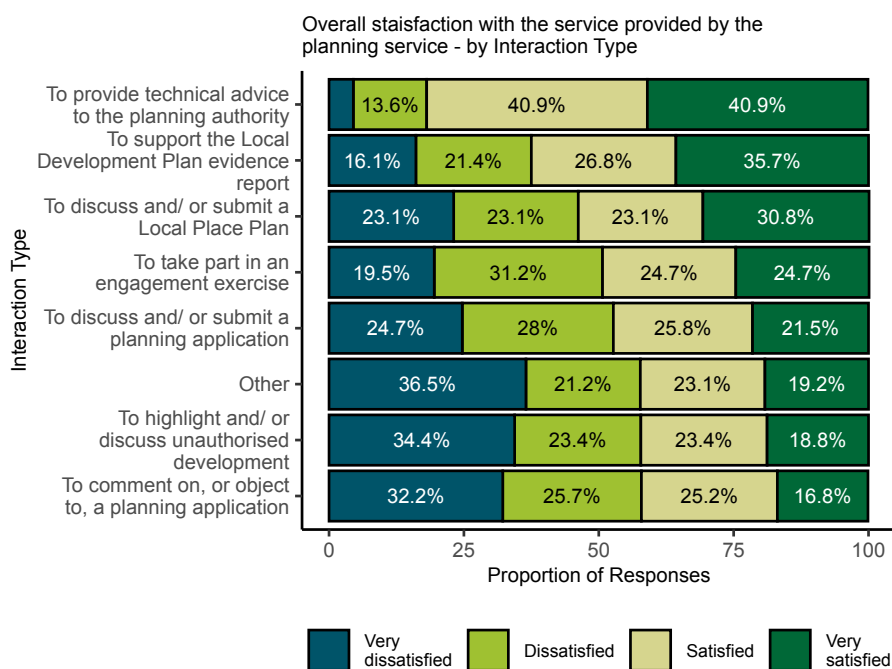


Figure 23: Overall Satisfaction - by Interaction Type

Rates of overall satisfaction also varied widely by the type of respondent. Figure 24 shows a breakdown of how different respondent types rated their overall satisfaction with the service. Respondents who stated they were “Community member” had 39.1% who selected “Very satisfied” or “Satisfied” compared with 90.9% of respondents who stated they were “Key agency”.

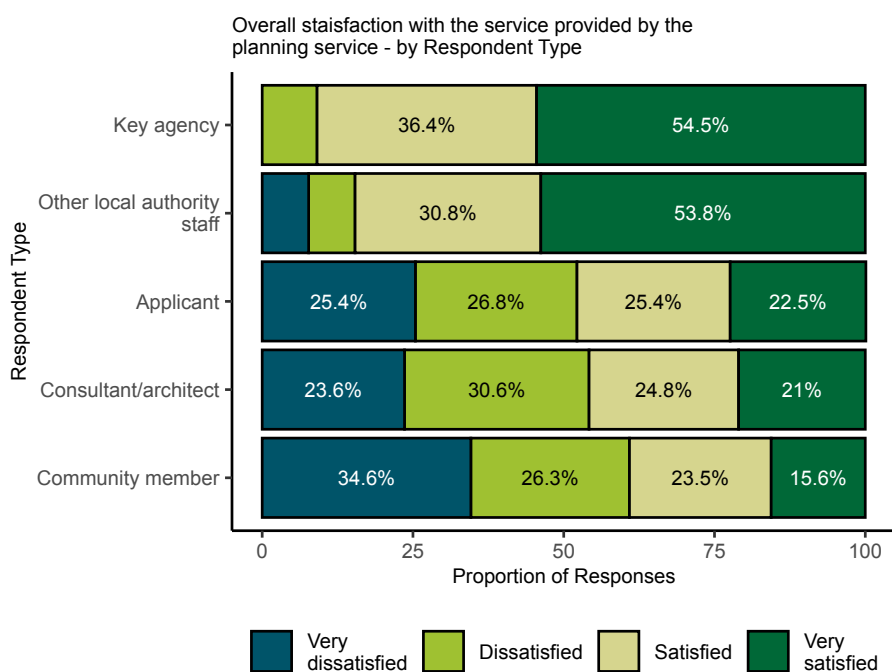


Figure 24: Overall Satisfaction - by Respondent Type

Comments from Respondents

At the end of the survey respondents were given the opportunity to highlight anything the planning authority did particularly well as well as offer any suggestions for improvement. Comments from respondents noted a range of potential improvements but also offered praise in some cases, recognising the resource constraints services currently operate within.

Comments that highlighted good practice predominantly focused on examples of good communication from the service often praising individual members of staff for their professionalism, knowledge and understanding and willingness to help. For example:



“One planning officer I dealt with was exceptionally helpful and demonstrated excellent communication skills. Despite occasionally missing deadlines, he consistently kept me informed about updated timelines and the reasons for delays. This transparency was invaluable when relaying information to the client. All planning officers should strive for this level of communication.”



“Good knowledge and openness about the process. As a ‘normal person’ rather than a professional who handled all of my own application, the team were extremely helpful and supported me with information that helped a lot to complete the process. When things were not quite as required they were straightforward in saying what needed changed to meet the requirements.”

The service was also praised for taking a collaborative approach, engaging with key stakeholders and agencies in constructive dialogue to find solutions.



“On a recent project we were invited into the office to discuss a planning application for housing and ideas on site layout to come a workable solution. The meeting, in person, was very fruitful, quickly found solutions and allowed both ourselves and [the council] to frankly explain their stances so as to be as transparent as possible.”







“They should be commended on how well the planners and staff communicate and don’t shy away from discussion in order to find a positive solution.”





“The planning teams willingness to engage with key agencies to support larger projects is much appreciated.”



Whilst communication from the service was praised by some respondents, this was a prominent issue for others. Concerns focused mainly on poor response rates from the service and a lack of direct contact, with respondents suggesting that more opportunities for face-to-face contact and more regular updates throughout the process would be valuable.

-  *“Responsiveness - even when there isn’t an answer that the agent/ applicants want, a quick response to say that is better than no response at all.”*
-  *“Ability to book in person appointments to discuss planning applications. Sometimes a verbal 30 mins can be just as efficient as writing a full response to a pre-app which must take a lot longer.”*
-  *“Access to someone who knows the planning process locally, to talk to would be better. Don’t like the fact everything is done online, especially when there is no response back.”*
-  *“Communication needs to improve/exist. Acknowledgement of receipt of emails/information would help (even if this was an automated standard response). Currently there is no indication at all that emails have been received by anyone.”*

Respondents also expressed concerns regarding the complexity of processes which contribute to longer timescales, and make it difficult to understand. Respondents suggest this could be streamlined and made more efficient.

-  *“Streamline everything. One reference number for the whole process. One point of contact for all the departments. People to look at paperwork in a timely manner before work is done. Fire officer for example. So that we know what we need to do BEFORE the building goes up and not when they come and ask things to be changed.”*
-  *“Gaining access to the supporting documents is delaying the length of time in being able to respond to planning application consultations. There are various problems with the current planning portal where the supporting documents cannot be accessed resulting in delays to the consultation process. Often I need to access 5 or 6 documents to provide a response to Planning and cannot access them which draws the whole process out. Currently using Civica.”*



“The amount of time taken to get through the whole consent process is too long. For us at the moment this is mostly to do with Building Standards and the level of information now required and the level of scrutiny. For an example a standard house design application 10 years ago consisted of around 6 drawings showing plans, sections elevations some pertinent details and an outline specification. The last house we did this year had 40 drawings.”

“Current Planning processes are far too drawn out, clunky and taking too long, to the detriment of all parties. It needs to change, become faster and more streamlined.”

“Reduce bureaucracy and review processes to be more customer focused and flexible for non material changes.”

Several respondents also felt that services could improve engagement with communities and other stakeholders to ensure feedback is considered in decision making. This could also support greater transparency in the process, ensuring decisions are understood and consistent.

“Improvement requires senior planners to read all recommendations and apply consistent decision making and overturn reports if they are lacking consistency with other decisions. Currently this does not happen resulting in poor decisions being made and along with the not fit for purpose review system the service is failing.”

“There is also a lack of transparency within the system which makes some decisions unclear, there is also an unwillingness within the department to enforce conditions on commercial projects.”

“They need to engage with residents in a more communicative, sympathetic and understanding way.”

“Improved engagement with Local Professionals, willingness to work collaboratively and develop proposals that can satisfy requirements of the local authority and applicants.”

Respondents were also asked for any other comments they had regarding their experience. These comments followed similar themes. Praise was given most commonly for specific individual planning officers for being helpful, professional, and responsive.



“The process was collaborative and, as a Planning Consultant, this was greatly welcomed. It also added value to the process. The applicant was also very satisfied with how their application was handled, not just with the outcome.”

“Very good and refreshingly easy to deal with.”

“Planners were good at listening to advice and trying to find solutions and a way forward despite being obviously stretched and under pressure to approve applications.”

Again, issues highlighted mainly focused on lack of communication, delays and complexity of the process as well as a lack of transparency and consistency around decision making.

“Communication with agents is the key concern throughout the industry. Early and regular communication would make everyone's experience a lot more easier.”

“Planning is a complex system that needs to be better explained to everyone, from ‘ordinary’ residents who might engage with the local authority only once or twice in their lifetime, to agents who may work with planning applications on a daily basis. Even professionals can get it wrong - whether intentionally or not - as the complexity of appeals and enforcement cases often reveals.”

“The system needs to be more transparent with explanations for non-experts. They are a lot of common gripes about planning, trees, parking, daylight, medical services etc that people have. Possibly better information would reassure people.”

“There would appear to be very inconsistent application of conditions to developments of a similar nature which can impose additional costs on projects.”

“I don’t think that Councillors should be able to merely override professional council official’s recommendations and ignore the principles on which they are based without further consultation and accountability.”



