

Planning Advisory Service
Annual Impact Evaluation
2015-2016

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This report takes into account the particular instructions and requirements of our client.

It is not intended for and should not be relied upon by any third party and no responsibility is undertaken to any third party.

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Ove Arup & Partners Ltd
13 Fitzroy Street
London
W1T 4BQ
United Kingdom
www.arup.com



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1 Main Findings

1.1 Purpose of this report

In line with its remit, PAS regularly checks that its offer remains relevant through feedback on specific services and through broader surveys.

This Annual Impact Evaluation summarises the findings from a survey undertaken as part of an external evaluation process. The survey asked councils what they thought of the existing offer, and their needs and priorities for future support. More details on the survey methodology can be found in Appendix A.

1.2 Summary of main findings

The key findings from the survey are:

- **Councils are engaged with PAS.**
Around 79% of councils in England took part in this survey to help shape PAS’ offer. Of those who responded, more than 98% showed an awareness of PAS.
- **PAS services are well used and valued.**
Over 74% of respondents have used PAS services in the last year – an increase on the previous year. Events and web-based materials continue to be the most valued types of support (by volume); less widely-delivered services such as councillor briefing sessions and the Planning Quality Framework are also highly valued.
- **Councillors are more engaged.**
The survey shows that councillors have become more involved in PAS services, most noticeably in more technical support such as the Planning Quality Framework.

- **PAS is providing relevant support.**
Nearly 90% of respondents consider that PAS has either maintained its relevance or is becoming more relevant, largely due to the scale of recent change in national planning policy coupled with continued resource constraints.
- **PAS is on track to reach its success measures.**
Some 172 respondents from 122 councils found that PAS support helped them make progress with the Community Infrastructure Levy. In addition, more than 74% of respondents agreed that PAS support has helped them confidently manage the neighbourhood planning process.
- **PAS remains the ‘go to’ place for planning-related support.**
Around 87% of respondents would go to PAS if they needed help with planning – an increase on the previous year.

Based on the findings of the survey, key recommendations for the future include:

- **Use the various strands of the PAS offer to ensure learning from recent plan examinations is shared.**
This might partly consist of a dedicated section of the website to summarise and discuss examination outcomes.
- **Review the content of long-running events and support packages to ensure they continue to reflect current needs.**
- **Maximise opportunities for the sharing of experiences.**
This could include **multi-council bespoke support and knowledge-sharing at events.**
- **Promote the Knowledge Hub as a forum for continued discussion and the creation of specialist networks.**
- **Target publicity at newly-elected councillors who are unlikely to have previously accessed PAS support.**

2 Effectiveness of PAS

2.1 Awareness of PAS

More than 98% of respondents showed an awareness of PAS, with over 90% reporting a strong awareness (Figure 1). It was officers who showed the strongest awareness of PAS; chief executives and heads of service also showed a strong awareness of PAS and its services. Councillors had a lower rate of awareness, although over 90% stated they had some awareness of PAS.

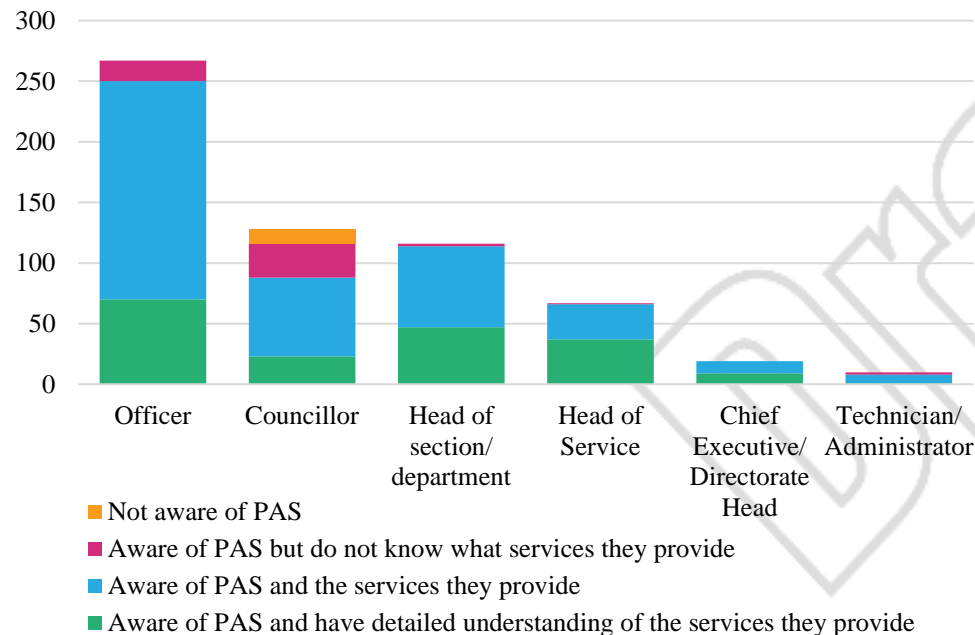


Figure 1 Are you aware of PAS and the services it provides?

Over 74% of all survey respondents stated that they had used PAS services in the past year, an increase of 7% from 2014-15. This shows the success of PAS efforts to expand awareness of (and use of) their services through providing accessible, varied and relevant support to councils, and improved publicity of this support.

Officers made up the majority of those respondents using PAS services, with almost 82% of all officers who responded stating they had used a PAS service in the last year.

Less than 2% of all survey respondents showed no awareness of PAS.

2.2 Use of services

Events remained the most popular service used – almost 57% of survey respondents attended a PAS event in the last year, an increase from the previous year (Figure 2). The proportion of respondents using direct support has also increased, illustrating the demand for PAS’ in-depth services and to address detailed issues. Conversely, the proportion of respondents stating they use PAS’ web-based materials has declined slightly (to 41%), but still remains relatively high.

“Support provided by PAS is concentrated where it is needed most, and it is always well thought out and presented.”

For most services, officers make up the majority of respondents using PAS services. However, a total of 18% of those using PAS services were councillors – a significant increase since 2014-15. This rise in councillor use of PAS services is particularly noticeable in the more technical support (such as the Planning Quality Framework), which demonstrates the success of PAS efforts to make this type of support easier for different users to access and engage with.

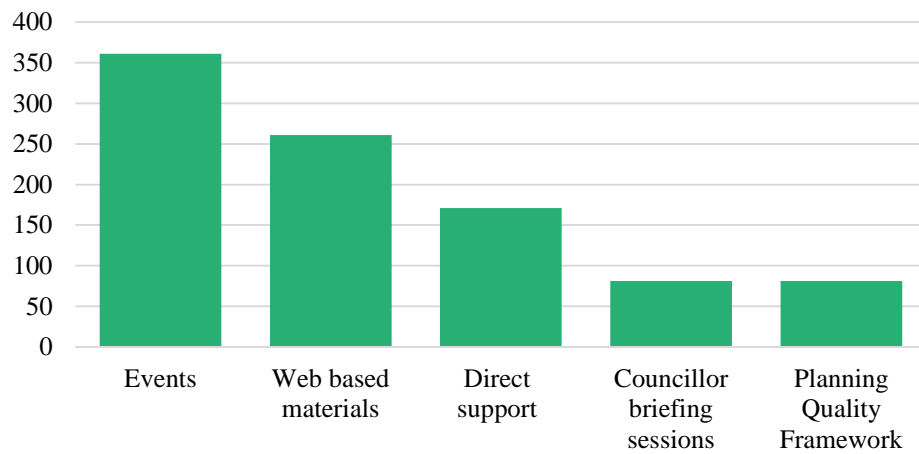


Figure 2 What PAS services have you used in the last year

Attendance at councillor briefing sessions increased from 2014-15, highlighting the success of PAS work to encourage greater councillor use of their services through greater outreach and expansion of the councillor offer. In addition, officers and heads of section or department make up 44% of attendees at these sessions. This demonstrates PAS' success in encouraging cross-working and cooperation between officers and councillors.

Finally, the proportion of heads of service using PAS services has also increased from 2014-15 to 14%. This demonstrates PAS' wide appeal and reinforces the need to ensure that PAS services remain accessible and relevant to a range of users.

Over 96% of people who have used PAS web-based materials felt that they have made a positive difference to their ability to do their work. Discussion forums and plan-making information remain the most highly used web-materials. Also well-used was information provided on specific

topics, including the duty to co-operate and strategic planning, the Community Infrastructure Levy and neighbourhood planning (Figure 3).

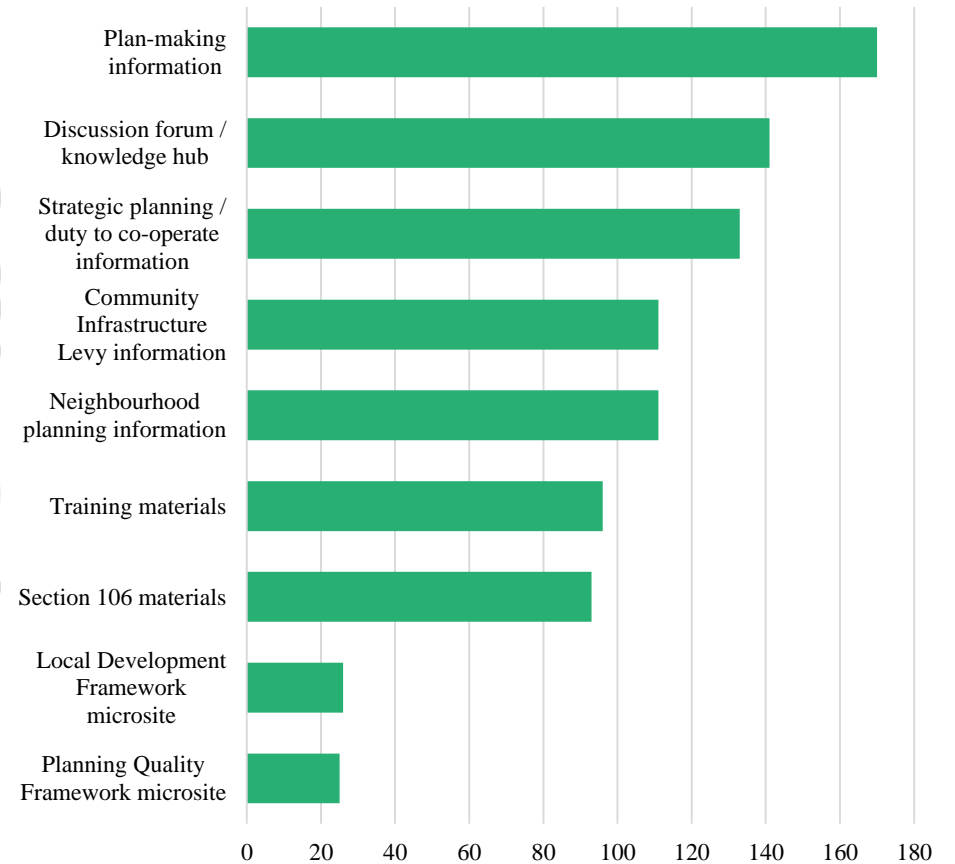


Figure 3 Which web-based materials have you used?

2.3 Outcomes following PAS support

Respondents were asked whether recent engagement with PAS, or use of their materials, had resulted in a positive impact on their work. A wide variety of examples were provided across all of services, a small selection of which are outlined below.

Web based materials

- The online ‘Local Plan Checklist’ aided an internal audit of a draft Local Plan prior to submission, reducing the risk of the Plan being found unsound.
- PAS’ online guidance on legal compliance for neighbourhood planning resulted in improved advice to local communities during examination.
- Use of the guidance on the Community Infrastructure Levy allowed officers to assess the potential benefits of moving towards a tariff system, and supported the smooth transition following adoption of the charging schedule.

Events and direct support

- Direct support on Sustainability Appraisals allowed councils to more confidently procure consultants, and in some cases to undertake the work in-house.
- After participating in a PAS resource review, funds for a planning improvement project were requested from the council.
- Viability training event led to the production of supplementary planning documents on planning obligations, in-house whole plan viability testing, as well as better engagement with landowners and developers.
- The support package for ‘designated authorities’ led to major changes, which ultimately improved the council’s service and led to de-designation.

Councillor briefing sessions

- Multiple respondents said that councillor briefing sessions had improved working relationships between officers and councillors and led to better decisions and fewer appeals.

Planning Quality Framework

- Participation in the Planning Quality Framework led to a corporate decision to review pre-application charging.
- Performance improvements have been targeted, including reducing non-productive hours and duplication of work.

Knowledge Hub

- Following discussion on the Knowledge Hub, a council’s approach to calculating five year housing land supply was improved.

“I engage with PAS staff through the Knowledge Hub, particularly in relation to debates around interpreting government guidance, which helps to provide greater clarity.”

Other support

Several respondents referenced ad hoc advice they had received from the PAS team (via email or telephone conversations) on topics such as housing land and supply, second homeownership, early Local Plan review and the Community Infrastructure Levy. Respondents felt this advice was valuable in informing the position taken by the council, as well as signposting further PAS support available to them.

3 PAS' engagement with its audience

3.1 Relevance of services

The survey found that **over 88% of the respondents to the survey felt that PAS is either becoming more relevant or is maintaining its relevance.** This proportion is an increase on the 86% who held this view in 2014-15. There were two main reasons given for this view:

- The scale of recent change in national planning policy and legislation means that PAS continues to play a key support role for local planning responsibilities. This is considered to be likely to continue into the future as the implications for the March 2017 Local Plan deadline, the government's 'Fixing the Foundations' Paper, and the Housing and Planning Bill begin to impact on planning practice. Some respondents felt that PAS had been particularly successful in focussing their recent events on current and emerging issues.
- PAS is responsive to the resource constraints felt by many councils. Respondents appreciated the in-depth support and training they could access for free, stating that they would not be able to receive such support otherwise. Respondents also mentioned the benefits of support packages such as resource reviews, plan-making support and the Planning Quality Framework for using resources effectively and 'getting it right first time'.

Other reasons given for this view were:

- PAS remains a key source of information for councils, providing guidance and good practice on pertinent topics.
- PAS acts as a network for officers and councillors across the country, allowing experiences and lessons learnt to be shared.

- PAS services are useful resources which are often not available through any other means or providers.

“In times of fundamental reforms to the planning system and reductions in resources, PAS is necessary to continue to champion good practice and provide support.”

Less than 1.8% of respondents felt that PAS had become less relevant, which is an improvement compared with the 2014-15 Annual Impact Evaluation. Some reasons given for this were:

- PAS is not sufficiently independent of government.
- There is a perception of reduced proactive contact with councils.
- Examination outcomes are becoming less consistent, so plan-making support and guidance has become less valuable.

Many of those that did not have a view on the relevance of PAS (approximately 10% of respondents) were either not aware of PAS services or stated that they are infrequent users.

Neighbourhood Planning

One of PAS' current strategic objectives is to provide support to councils on neighbourhood planning, with the target of at least 80% of councils having found the support made a positive difference in confidently managing the process. Of the 89 councils which have made use of the neighbouring planning information¹, 66 (**over 74%**) **felt that it had helped them manage the process**. PAS has therefore made good progress in reaching this target for the strategic objective.

Respondents suggested that further guidance could be provided on specific issues, including: conformity with Local Plans; the application of the requirement for a five year housing land supply; and post-examination and post-referenda support from councils.

3.2 Valued services

Figure 4 shows that respondents highly valued PAS services over the past year. By volume, events were the most highly valued services provided, with web-based materials also strongly valued among respondents. Less commonly available services such as councillor briefing sessions and the Planning Quality Framework are also highly valued.

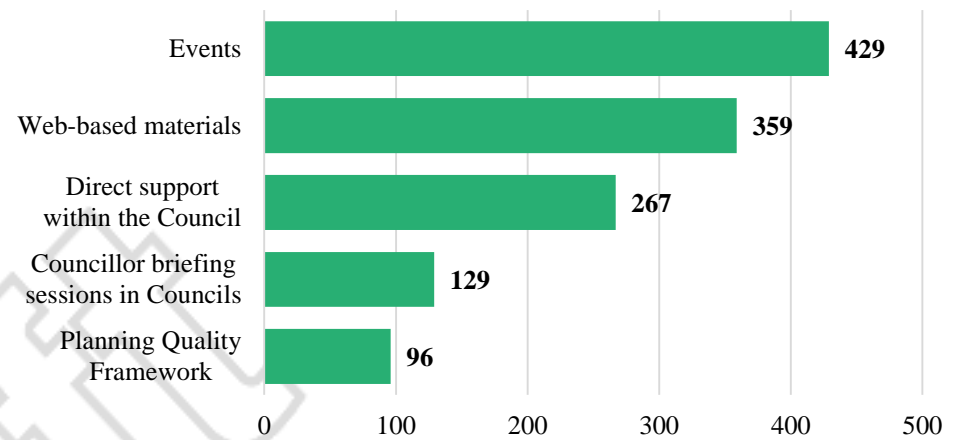


Figure 4 Which PAS services do you value most?

The proportion of respondents who stated that they **valued direct support within the council has increased from 2014-15 to 42%**. This suggests that PAS' approach of tailored support to guide individual councils is viewed as worthwhile and is being taken up.

As was also the case in 2014-15, PAS services were more highly valued than used, with more respondents stating that they valued PAS support than using services over the past year (see Section 2.2). In particular, direct support was seen as particularly valuable by councillors, relative to their uptake of this service. This reflects the fact that PAS' value, and the effects of support, are felt and recognised on a wider basis than just those directly accessing the support.

¹ Excluding those who had made use of neighbourhood planning information but are not involved in managing the neighbourhood planning process.

3.3 Future uptake of services

Around 87% of respondents said that they would use PAS for help with a planning related issue in the future – a slight increase from 2014-15 (Figure 5). This demonstrates PAS’ important future role in continuing to provide a resource to help and guide councils through planning issues.

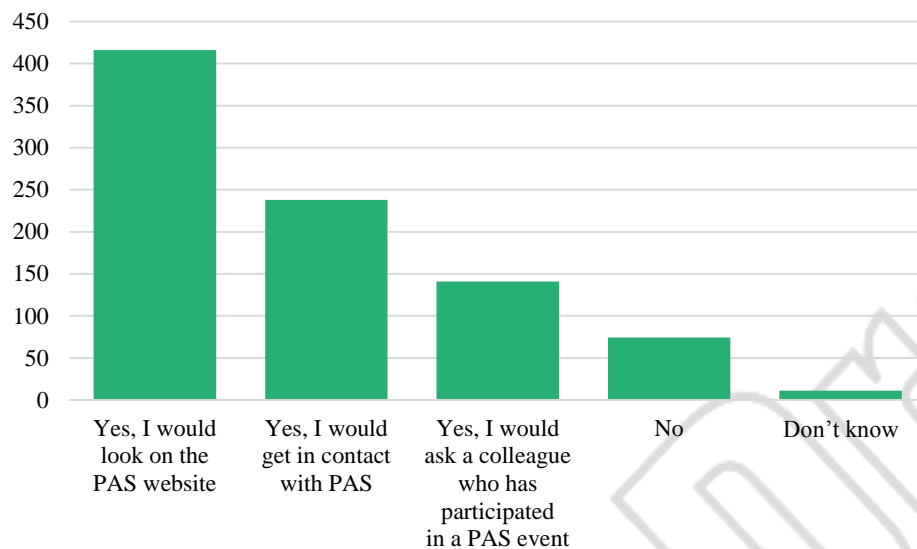


Figure 5 When you need help with something related to planning, do you think of approaching PAS?

The majority of respondents said that they would use the PAS website for help, which corresponds with the high value placed upon web-based materials. There has also been an increase in the proportion of respondents who would both contact PAS directly and those who would ask a colleague who has participated in a PAS event. This demonstrates the success of PAS in providing an approachable and easy-to-access support service.

Community Infrastructure Levy

One of PAS’ current strategic objectives is to support councils in setting and implementing a local Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) schedule, with the target of positively helping at least 120 councils make progress. Some **172 respondents from 122 councils found that PAS support has helped them make progress with their CIL**. PAS has therefore been successful in meeting and exceeding this strategic objective. Respondents stated that both web-based materials, and events and support packages were valuable resources for progressing CIL.

Respondent suggested that PAS should provide updated guidance in light of the changes to the pooling of Section 106 contributions, and the impact this has on CIL.

The proportion of officers asking PAS for help (78%) has increased from 2014-15. Officers and heads of department or service are the most likely among respondents to approach PAS.

The proportion of councillors who would approach PAS to help with a planning-related issue has decreased slightly from 2014-15, despite an overall increase in use of PAS services (see Section 2.2). This may be a consequence of recent local government elections, resulting in a new cohort of councillors less familiar with the full range of support offered by PAS. This highlights the importance of ensuring that PAS services continue to be well-known and accessible for all types of users.

Recommendations for the future:

- a. Ensure that **publicity of PAS services sufficiently targets newly-elected councillors** who are unlikely to have accessed PAS services previously. This might be best done through officers, who are more likely to have a high awareness of PAS' services and have direct access to the new cohort.
- b. As progress in key areas such as CIL and neighbourhood planning is made by councils, **ensure that support provided reflects current needs**. For example, CIL support could focus on implementation, monitoring and review, and the impact of recent changes to Section 106 pooling. Neighbourhood planning support could reflect on approaches to maintaining momentum and capacity post-adoption, and drawing local views into the local plan process.
- c. Given that the perceived value of bespoke support has increased, **continue to provide direct support to councils**. Investigate the relative demand for different types of direct support (for example, Peer Challenge versus plan-making support packages) to ensure the most appropriate model is deployed.
- d. **Monitor the outcomes following PAS support** and use this understanding to tailor the support and publicise the PAS offer. This could focus on how support has driven behaviour, altered outcomes, and/or afforded savings or otherwise freed up resources for alternate uses.

4 Future areas where PAS can help

4.1 Future areas of need

Respondent highlighted a number of topic areas where future support would be beneficial. These included:

- Planning for employment uses, including functional economic market areas and Employment Land Reviews.
- Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessments (SHLAA).
- Infrastructure planning, including Development Consent Orders.
- Specific development management-related issues, particularly sequential testing, EIA screening and scoping, and planning conditions and obligations.
- Minerals and waste planning.
- Design and heritage issues.
- The impact of governance and funding changes (e.g. devolution, city regions and City Deals) on planning and development.

Respondents also mentioned a number of topics which have been covered by PAS support in recent years, including CIL, neighbourhood planning, five year housing land supply, planning for gypsies and travellers, and new models of service delivery. This suggests that there is still a demand for support on these topics.

Finally, several respondents questioned whether PAS could provide digested summaries of recent plan examination outcomes, to make sure that the relevant lessons are shared and applied.

4.2 Improvements to PAS' offer

Respondents were asked whether they had any further suggestions for improvements to the PAS offer. Many respondents were happy with the services PAS provides, and therefore had no suggestions for improvement beyond endorsing the continuation of the current offer.

Of those who proposed improvements, key suggestions included:

- Engage early with government on further reforms or changes to the Planning Practice Guidance, to ensure the views of practitioners are considered.
- Hold regional events across England which reflect the context of the area (e.g. focusing on predominantly rural or urban) and promote cross-boundary working and information sharing.
- Ensure that online guidance remains up-to-date, particularly where the online Planning Practice Guidance has recently changed.
- Offer or facilitate mentoring / coaching for targeted officers.
- Promote greater use of the Knowledge Hub to maximise their usefulness and ensure more people are engaged in discussions. This could include the creation of 'specialist networks'.
- Target publicity of PAS to newly elected councillors who are unlikely to have accessed PAS services previously.

“It is essential to continue to get support of interpretation of new policies and sharing of best practice.”

Recommendations for the future:

- a. **Continue to support councils on pertinent topics**, and investigate further the demand for the future topics suggested by respondents (see above).
- b. The format of formal web-based guidance documents (such as the Objectively Assessed Need Technical Advice Note) was particularly praised by respondents. **Expand this type of support to other topic areas** where additional guidance would be beneficial.
- c. **Consider the format of the support** to ensure that it maximises opportunities to share experiences and good practices between councils. This could be through: increased use of multi-council bespoke support (building on the success of duty to co-operate workshops); and enhanced opportunities for knowledge sharing at events.
- d. Following on from this, **promote the Knowledge Hub as a forum for continued discussion** on the topics covered through other forms of support (direct support, events and web-based materials). This would help create the development of well-engaged networks.
- e. **Ensure that councils can access the outcomes of, and can apply lessons from, recent plan examinations.** This could be done by:
 - Continuing to incorporate lessons learnt into the relevant plan-making support packages.
 - Incorporating a session on recent examination outcomes into the PAS Conference and other appropriate events.
 - Providing a dedicated section of the PAS website to act as a depository, summary and discussion space for the outcomes of recent examinations.
- f. Explore the possibility of **operating a mentoring network for officers**, as a more formalised way of sharing good practice and ‘soft skills’ such as leadership across councils.

Appendix A

Methodology

In order to seek feedback on the services provided by PAS, an online survey was made available at www.planningsurvey.co.uk.

The survey was structured around the three key focus areas, covering:

- interaction with PAS
- awareness and effectiveness of PAS
- future areas where PAS can help.

The survey included a mix of closed and open-ended questions to enable a deeper understanding of the views expressed and was open to chief executives, planning officers and councillors.

The survey was publicised through a range of mediums:

- directly contacting officers and councillors by email
- directly contacting chief planners by email, requesting they share with colleagues
- the PAS email newsletter
- the RTPI 'The Planner' email newsletter

PAS bulletin

Support, case studies, events and online discussion forums

Got 10 minutes? Help us to help you

This year's PAS survey is online and ready for your feedback. We use your responses to help us plan the events and workshops you'd like to see and develop the resources for the topics you care about most. It takes less than 10 minutes to fill out, so if you value what we do, please let us know how you think we're doing.



[Take the survey here](#)



The Planning Advisory Service (PAS) has opened up its annual 'state of the nation' survey.

Responses

Responses were received from 625 respondents, representing 287 councils. This included responses from district councils, county councils, unitary authorities and national park authorities. The breakdown of respondents by their capacity is shown below.

