



UrbanForum

# RESEARCH REPORT

MARCH 2006

## **Planning Research**

**In November 2005, Urban Forum conducted a short piece of research into awareness of the planning system amongst community and voluntary groups and the extent to which groups are able to engage with the system.**

Working with local communities has become more central to planning with the introduction of the Planning and Compulsory Act (2004). Local Authorities are now required to prepare a Statement of Community Involvement which sets out how they intend to involve the community in preparing plans and making decisions on planning applications. Also, one of the objectives of the new system is to link planning with other local initiatives such as the Sustainable Community Strategy through the work of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP).

The majority of the respondents (81%) had been involved in the planning system, either through plan preparation or development control. The majority of those involved in plan preparation participated in the preparation of the Local Development Framework (LDF); far fewer had been involved in influencing the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) and the Statement of Community Involvement (SCI). The same percentage of respondents said that planning was either very important or important to their work.

The research found that people tend to get involved in planning because of local issues that concern them (e.g. new housing development or loss of green spaces). Significantly, very few had been asked by the planning authority to participate in a consultation. Those groups that had been involved in development control had done so to comment on planning applications, mainly to oppose them.

Some organisations were not involved directly in planning, but sought to empower others by; disseminating of information on planning to residents, encouraging and supporting involvement in the planning system, highlighting the

importance of plan preparation, and making sure that community groups have access to information. One in five (19%) respondents had never been involved in planning, generally because they believed that planning did not directly affect their work, or were unaware of the benefits of getting involved.

68% of respondents had received advice on the planning system. Of those who had received help:

- The majority (65%) received help directly from their Local Authority, to access planning information, advice or involvement in community meetings.
- 20% were helped by Planning Aid, including training, planning workshops and technical advice.
- 10% received support from Friends of the Earth; receiving training or up to date information
- 5% had received advice from planning consultants

Almost all of the respondents said that getting involved in the planning system had made a difference to their work. The most common benefits were;

- A better understanding of the system and its relevance
- Having their voice heard
- Better able to influence decision making in their area

One respondent pointed out that both the community groups and the Local Authority gained when the community groups participated. Since the planners have a better idea of what the community wants, the likelihood of the project being successful are greatly increased. However some respondents suggested that community involvement often happened too late in the process. As a result engaging in the planning system can be a demoralising experience for some, with groups putting a lot of work into influencing planning decisions without success.

Half of the respondents said they were aware of the changes to the planning system. However, it was not yet clear whether these would make a difference to their work as their impact was still taking effect. The majority of respondents hoped that the changes would facilitate increased participation and that more notice would be taken of local peoples' views.