Building connected communities

An LGiU/Ramblers survey

ramblers
at the heart of walking

LGiU
the local democracy think tank

Introduction

Housing has shot up the political agenda again in 2017. During the party conference season it became clear that building is a top priority for government. In her conference speech Theresa May said that there would be a rebirth of house building under her government, trailed by discussions of a return to the levels of building last seen under Harold MacMillan.

It's worth noting that at the peak of the housing boom in the 1950s, we were building around 350,000 homes a year. Given the current low level, the required acceleration in development would be enormous.

While the push to deliver numbers is rising, it is increasingly important that we have a conversation about the places that we build. We need to ensure good connectivity, not just a large quantity of buildings. We need places for people to live healthy, happy, active lives. This means they need to be well connected, with good access to walking, cycling and green infrastructure.

It is clear from research carried out by LGiU and the Ramblers that local authorities want to build places that encourage walking and active travel. Developers do not always share these priorities, however, and many councils feel the mismatch is a challenge in achieving their goals.

But there are ways they can make a difference.

Councils should ensure they have strong local planning policies in place, which specifically require connectivity and walking access is integral to new developments. They should forge good relationships with developers to make the most of their position in the local area, and should be bolder and more confident in using the tools at their disposal.

Their tools include active travel, green space and walking strategies, local plans and public health strategies, as well as access to section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy funding.

Yet the opportunity is still not always realised.

LGiU has partnered with the Ramblers to investigate why this is the case. We surveyed 118 officers from local authorities across England to gain an understanding of the state of play in local areas. We followed up the survey with a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with officers in different parts of the country. Three case studies, in Gateshead, Tamworth and Preston, illustrate some of the ways that councils could seek to make progress in improving walking connectivity through new developments.

Key findings from the research

- Nine out of ten councils say access to walking infrastructure is a priority, but only half feel that developers agree with them; over a third say that walking or access to green space is not a priority for developers.

- Two fifths of councils say they have experienced difficulty meeting their walking and active travel priorities when delivering large developments. While most developments over the past five years were in line with targets, around one in ten were seen as not in line with health and wellbeing strategies.

- Eight out of ten told us that viability assessments make it difficult to meet priorities, while seven out of ten told us that influencing developers was a challenge.

- The lack of resources in planning departments was also highlighted as a barrier by half of respondents.

- Almost all (96 per cent) of respondents said their council had refused developments in the past based on poor quality of design, though considerably fewer had refused developments due to lack of walking connectivity. Some cited the importance of pre-application discussions in ironing out potential problems early on in the process.

Recommendations

In order to address the challenges highlighted in this paper, we make the following recommendations:

1. **Councils should ensure they have strong policies in place to require connectivity in new developments.** Local Plans can be powerful tools if they are well produced, with watertight policies that can be used to enforce walking, active travel and connectivity priorities. They must do more than set out broad principles, but should be clear, detailed and specific.

2. **Councils need to have greater confidence.** They have tools at their disposal, including walking, active travel and public health strategies, as well as Section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy money, to ensure that their priorities are met.

3. **Councils should improve their strategic engagement with developers.** Developer forums, workshops and online consultations are some of the possible approaches.

4. **Councils should build links across the council.** Many aspects of walking connectivity and active travel involve planning, housing, transport, highways, and often public health teams. A shared understanding and approach among these different parties is essential.

Walking is a priority for councils

It is clear that councils want to encourage walking and active travel by building developments that are well connected and have access to the right infrastructure. Eighty nine per cent of those surveyed told us that walking access is a key consideration for their council and ninety four per cent say they have a Local Plan in place that encourages walking and active travel.

But only forty nine per cent said that they felt developers share the same priorities. In fact, thirty five per cent said they agreed or strongly agreed that walking or access to green space is not a priority for developers.

In the North West this was more pronounced, as fifty per cent of respondents disagreed that this is a priority for developers, while forty per cent in the North East and twenty five per cent in the South West felt the same.

Strong and clear policies in Local Plans are an important tool in addressing this issue. One interviewee told us:

> *Having a clear and strong local planning policy helps when it comes to working with developers.*

In another interview, we were told councils should:

> *Make it clear from the outset, in the Local Plan and in discussions, particularly the pre-application, that this is what you are looking for, and then there will be buy-in.*

Box 1 shows examples of local policies and strategies, submitted to us by survey respondents. These examples demonstrate how walking, cycling and green infrastructure can fit into a council's wider place shaping strategy and give it real weight when negotiating with developers. One respondent stressed that policies should require, not persuade, commenting:

> *I would observe 'encouraging' anything in a Local Plan is a waste of time, you have to require it.*

Box 1: Examples of policies that ensure or encourage connectivity

- "Our Core Strategy (2010) aims to locate development where it is accessible by a choice of means of transport. Policies seek to encourage walkability in Town Centre. Land allocations and development briefs for major sites contain requirements for pedestrian connectivity. Emerging Development Management policies seek to ensure that walkability is a critical element."

- "Policy TI/2: Planning for Sustainable Travel seeks to locate and design development to minimise the need to travel and promote sustainable travel. It also seeks provision of safe, direct routes within permeable layouts that facilitate short distance trips by walking etc. In addition, the policy seeks new routes to connect to the existing Rights of Way network, as well as the protection and improvement of existing networks."

- "Policy 27 of the Local Plan specifically requires safe and suitable access for all people. Policy 12 requires that development provides a network of safe, well connected routes."

- "In 2016 we developed an active and healthy travel strategy as part of our Local Transport Plan. The strategy is overseen by a steering group, which includes public health colleagues, district and city council and local pedestrians associations. A new walking design guide which is primarily aimed at developers has recently gained council approval."

- "Policy TR2: Reducing Reliance on the Private Car in the recently adopted Local Plan to 2032, seeks to encourage alternative modes of transport where this is a practical and realistic option. However, it is also recognised that due to the nature of the Local Planning Authority area – predominantly rural with a dispersed settlement pattern, the largest of which has a population of c.12,000 – the opportunities to enable such alternatives that are safe to use, may be limited."

- "The council's Framework identifies key walking (and cycling) routes around the city and actively works to develop these routes through its environmental improvement and Development Management processes. Its Legible City Framework document sets standards for making these routes accessible to the general public through a range of communication forms."

As the table below shows, most new housing and commercial developments are perceived to be in line with council goals around active travel, green space and physical activity. However, it is notable that 10 per cent of respondents said developments were mostly not or not at all in line with their health and wellbeing strategy. This view was most pronounced in London, the North East and the North West, and less so in other regions, where it was also felt that this is less of a priority for developers. It was also striking that over a third of (mainly planning based) respondents did not know if developments were in line with their physical activity strategy and just under a quarter reported the same for their health and wellbeing strategy: this may be indicative of a lack of cross departmental working.

Table 1: In your view, have new housing and commercial developments in your area over the past 5 years been in line with the goals of your:

|	Entirely in line	Mostly in line	Mostly not in line	Not at all in line	Don't know
Active travel strategy	5%	74%	4%	1%	16%
Health and wellbeing strategy	4%	63%	6%	4%	23%
Green space strategy	11%	72%	2%	1%	14%
Physical activity strategy	5%	53%	3%	3%	35%

Viability assessments are a barrier

There are several barriers, which make it challenging for councils to achieve their goals, even with strong planning policies in place.

Seventy nine per cent of respondents told us that "viability assessments" are a factor, followed by "difficulty influencing developers", which was selected by seventy per cent. Almost half said that "Lack of resources in planning departments" was a major constraint.

Assessments of the financial viability of a development – what can and can't be afforded by developers on a particular site – is clearly a key issue. In interviews we were told that "developers tend to say 'we can only afford this and this'" and so schemes end up being less ambitious in terms of design and connectivity.

Q. 11 What factors do you think inhibit new developments (commercial and residential) in contributing towards council's broader health and wellbeing, active travel or green space objectives? Please tick all that apply
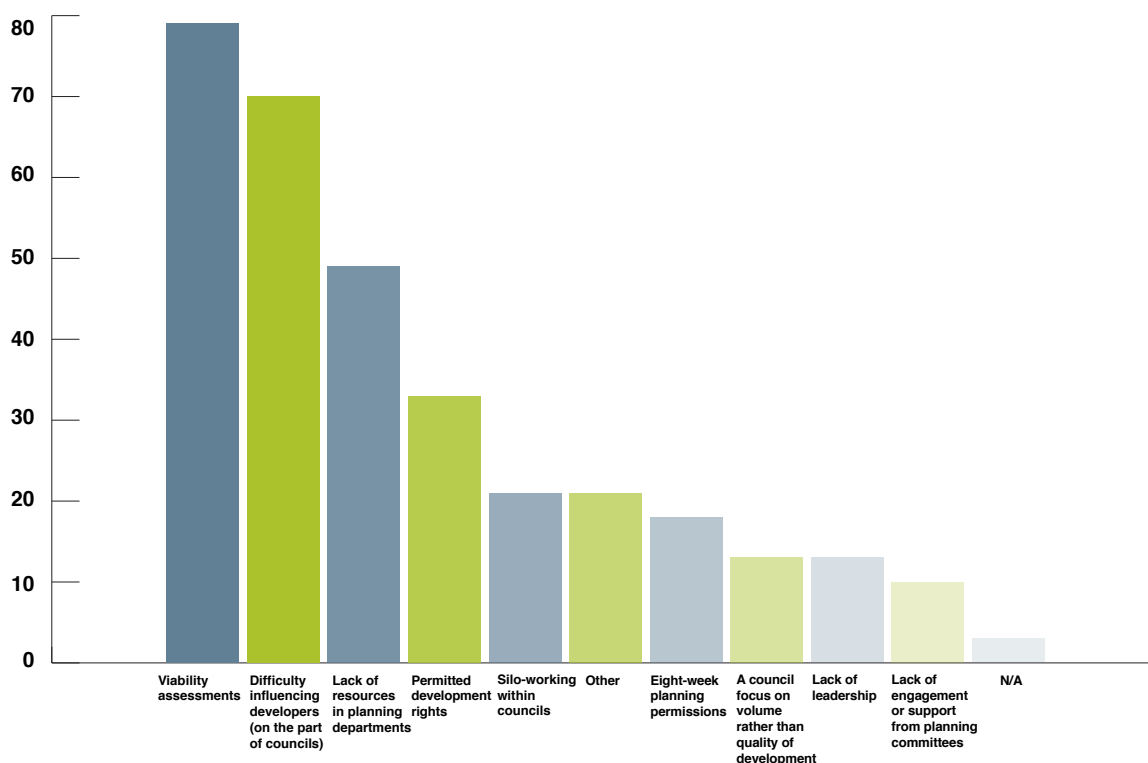
Perceived barriers differed from region to region but "viability assessments" and "difficulty influencing developers on the part of the council" were consistently the top two responses (respectively). The South East was the only region where this position was reversed and "difficulty influencing developers" was the top cited barrier. "Lack of resources in planning departments" and "permitted development rights" also featured strongly as factors inhibiting more connected developments across all regions.

The difficulty posed by viability assessments and the council's ability to influence developers was a consistent theme in interviews. One interviewee told us:

"We want a decent standard of housing, but viability makes it challenging."

While another said that:

"Viability is always a challenge"

On issues such as connectivity and place shaping, the same interviewee said:

"The issue is that is it conceptual and it costs more."

To overcome this barrier councils should make sure that they interrogate the evidence that developers use to establish viability. There should also be confident and firmly establish the value that connectivity can bring to a development. In this sense they can help to make the concept more concrete by linking it to financial benefits. As shown in *Box 2* councils might include green infrastructure studies in their pre-application process with developers, to bolster this argument.

Confidence

Despite the perceived imbalance of power and resourcing, some councils are taking a confident approach in their dealings with developers and challenging them on some of their proposals. "We are challenging them on design standards", one interviewee told us, while another said that a strong approach to place shaping "gives you determination, but it doesn't mean you win every time. You have to try very hard."

Our survey shows that other councils follow this trend and over ninety per cent have refused developments on the basis of quality of design over the past five years. However, far fewer have done the same on the basis of a lack of connectivity in development proposals, and only fourteen per cent on the basis of contribution towards active travel.

Q10. In the last five years has your council refused developments on the basis of: (please tick all that apply
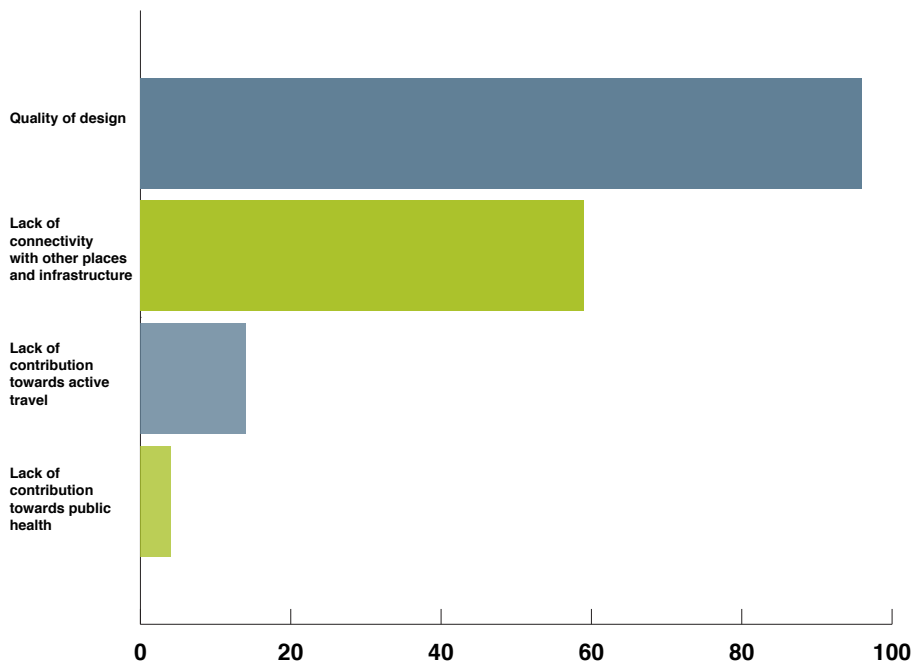
Many reasons were given for the various approaches to refusals, including the importance of pre-application discussions to iron out problems before they get to this stage. Other responses from the survey included some, which require strict adherence to guidelines and Local Plan policies:

- "We have very specific policies and require compliance with them."

- "We have a very effective pre-application process, which is design-led and irons out areas of concern prior to formal application."

Others seemed to involve more conversation and negotiation:

- "Unusual for applications to be refused and negotiations in nearly all cases result in an agreed position that can be supported for approval by officers. The design of some schemes however is so bad that they are refused and the Council has successfully defend all appeals where design was a reason for refusal."

- "We have refused applications on quality of design, which includes connectivity, but not on lack of connectivity alone."

Others still were more lenient and policy or guidance was more loosely applied:

- "Five year supply issue overrides all. Non-sustainable developments (in terms of location vis-a-vis services facilities and transport) have been upheld on appeal, but chequered."

- "We only rarely refuse planning applications."

Other routes to increasing walkability

There are a number of approaches taken by councils to promote walking and active travel in their areas.

This can include using Section 106 contributions, as one interviewee told us: "We do use S106 contributions for improving connectivity if appropriate, it helps to plug the gaps." Indeed, three quarters of respondents told us they have used S106 contributions for projects outside the red line of development over the past five years, while twenty two per cent said they had used both S106 and Community Infrastructure Levy money for this purpose.

Q7. What have contributions outside the red line of development been spent on/allocated for in the last five years? (Please tick all that apply)
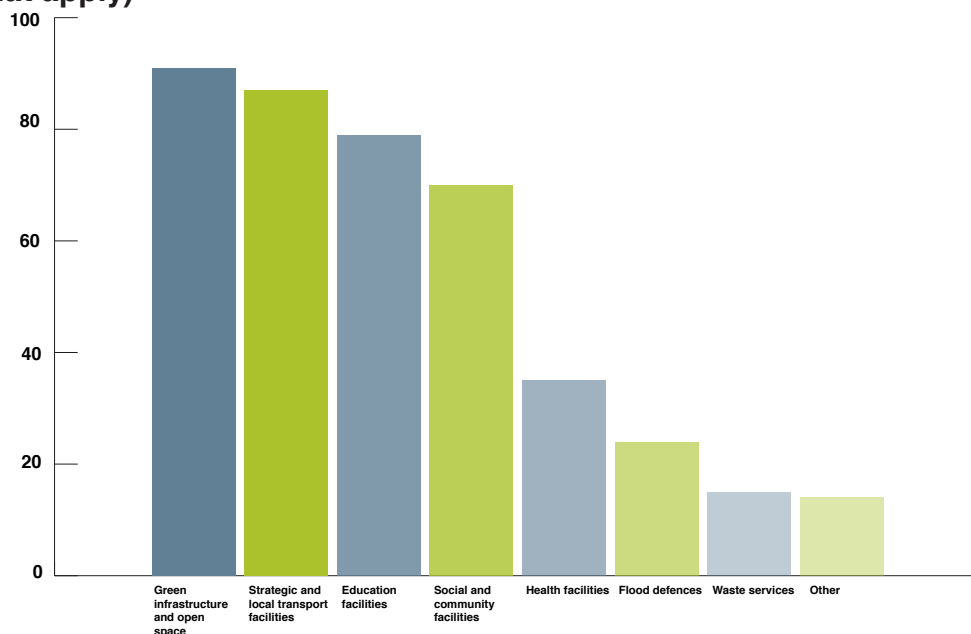
The chart above shows what these contributions have largely been used for, but other approaches have been taken around the country. When we asked **In what ways (if any) does your council ensure that active travel is a consideration in new developments?"** we received a range of responses. Some examples are in Box 2, below:

> **Box 2: Examples showing how some councils ensure active travel is a consideration in new developments**
>
> - "We promote to developers the following: The Ten Principles of Active Design 1. Activity for all 2. Walkable communities 3. Connected walking & cycling routes 4. Co-location of community facilities 5. Network of multifunctional open space 6. High quality streets & spaces 7. Appropriate infrastructure 8. Active buildings 9. Management, maintenance, monitoring & evaluation 10. Activity promotion & local champions http://www.sportengland.org/facilities-planning/planning-for-sport/planning-tools-and-guidance/active-design/"
>
> - "The council has established a My Journey App to encourage and promote sustainable modes of travel. http://www.myjourneywokingham.com/"
>
> - "The council's Rights of Way Officer is involved at the very early stages of any proposed development to ensure active travel and suitable Walking and Cycling Routes are considered."
>
> - "Our Local Plan includes a policy to protect, enhance, restore and create Green Infrastructure. 'Priority will be given to improving public and community transport provision, walking and cycling infrastructure during the plan period'."

- "Our Local Plan requires the submission of Travel Plans for those developments that will generate a significant amount of movement. The Local Plan sets out that the aim of the Travel Plan should be to propose measures to facilitate and encourage the use of sustainable travel or reducing the need to travel. The Council has a number of Access Plans – Supplementary Planning Documents including a Cycling Strategy SPD. These documents set out how access to facilities and services within towns in the Borough will be improved. It acts as a mechanism for allocating and directing funding towards these improvements."

- "We are part of the pre-application process with developers and have evidence such as green infrastructure studies to support planning decisions."

Case studies

Case study 1: Staithes Southbank, Gateshead

In 2001 Wayne Hemmingway wrote an article for the Independent, in which he criticised the "Wimpeyfication" and "Barratification of Britain. Large volume house builders, he argued, are producing "identikit rabbit hutches" rather than well designed places and spaces that leave a legacy and shape communities.

Hemmingway's challenge to the industry was taken up by the Chair of Taylor Wimpey, who contacted him with the intention of building an exemplar of a "good place". Staithes Southbank in Gateshead was proposed, one of several sites the council was developing, with more than 600 houses.

Encouraging sustainable neighbourhoods which encourage more walking is a major policy area for Gateshead council and the development at Staithes Southbank fit closely with that goal. Taylor Wimpey and architects IDP, along with the council, went back to first principles of design to shape the development around the needs of the people and the communities that would live there.

The site was designed and designated as a Home Zone, ensuring that the principle of "people first, cars second" was followed throughout. As well as a great deal of amenity space, there were walking links between the development and paths along the river, as well as a link through the site to improve the Tyne section of the coast to coast cycle way.

The innovation and success of Staithes is demonstrated by the positive response from those who live there, even after more than a decade, and by the fact that many principles of the scheme fed directly into government policy on Home Zones.

Anneliese Hutchison, at Gateshead Council, is adamant that councils need to design places for the long term, with adaptability built in and provision made for demographic changes and to cater for those with different needs. On the whole a good relationship with developers facilitates this, but occasionally different time scales come into play. She says: "Our focus is ten to fifteen years trying to ensure good design helps to create the kind of places we need for the future – for developers it is more like three to five years." And that longer time scale is a crucial aspect of how the council sees its role in place shaping for health and wellbeing. Walking is a part of that. It is more than bricks and mortar, more than the built environment, but links together all that the council does.

Case study 2: Tamworth

Tamworth Borough Council, in the West Midlands, demonstrates what can be achieved by actively promoting good relationships with developers, particularly using the pre-application process in a positive way.

The council has a range of specific policies related to delivering sustainable transport and design of new developments, with footpaths and cycle ways extended into urban developments.

It is a small authority, which is predominantly urban and as an expanding town in the 1970s and 1980s, the opportunity was take to put in footpaths and cycle lanes to connect everything together. "We've tended to continue that theme as much as possible," says John Gunn, Development Manager at the council, "particularly to ensure that new developments fit with those that are already there."

The council succeeds thanks to the strength of policies in the Local Plan, but also because of the negotiations and conversations that they have with developers. A key development of over a thousand units was placed on a golf course, owned by the council, on which it was able to exercise significant control over the design and ensure good connectivity with amenities and walking or cycling infrastructure.

With strong local planning policy in place developers have generally been supportive of the principles of connectivity that they promote. "They knew that this was the case, that this is the kind of design quality we were looking for," says Gunn. The key lesson from Tamworth is to make it clear from the outset, in local plan and in discussions, particularly the pre-application, that this is what you are looking for, and then there will be buy-in.

Pre-application gives developers a heads up at an early stage so that everyone knows where they stand and no one is over committed, and it has the added benefit of getting elected members involved early on too. They charge a nominal amount for these discussions, no more that £500, but they tend to have a positive impact and improve developments. They also eliminate any need for appeals and refusals later in the process, which can be costly.

Case study 3: Preston

Preston City Council does not own much land itself, so the task that planners are faced with is ensuring good connectivity across multiple parcels of sites. They are particularly keen to promote walking connections between and through those sites. This often involves coordinating between different landowners to match schemes together, and pushing private developers to adapt accordingly.

The relationship with neighbouring authorities has proved an essential component in this approach. The City Council, South Ribble Council and Lancashire County Council have worked in partnership for a long time, but the Preston City Deal helped to facilitate closer collaboration.

The deal also provided several pots of money to improve walking and cycling access. But by pooling their CIL and Section 106 money across the three councils, they were able to front load projects developing community infrastructure, predominantly walking, cycling and urban green space.

Nigel Roberts, Principal Urban Designer at Preston City Council says that the council has refused developments in the past based on a lack of connectivity, and says "we're fortunate to have a very clear planning policy on this", which ensures a coordinated approach to sustainable community infrastructure.

The council also works with a consultant to gather data on how paths are used and who uses them. Further planning is coordinated with parish councils, who can also pool funding on larger projects, such as the Guild Wheel route, which stretches around the city.

Survey Results in Full

There were 118 responses to the survey.

Question 1: Does your Local Plan encourage walking and/or seek to improve conditions for pedestrians?

93% of respondents answered "Yes", while 2% said "No" and 5% said "We do not have a Local Plan in place".

Question 2: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

1) Ensuring access by foot is a key consideration for my council in granting permission for new housing and commercial developments

2) Ensuring access by foot is a key consideration for private developers when planning housing and commercial developments

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1)	48% (48)	44% (47)	8% (9)	2.80% 3	0% (0)
2)	17% (18)	34% (36)	32% (34)	15% (16)	2% (2)

Question 3: Does your council have an approved Regulation 123 list to identify those projects that may be funded through the Community Infrastructure Levy?

Yes	44% (47)
No	45% (49)
Don't know	11% (12)
TOTAL	108

Question 4: If yes, does the list specifically include any of the following (please tick all that apply):

Walking routes	85% (33)
Cycling routes	97% (38)
Parks and green spaces	85% (33)

Question 5: In what ways (if any) does your council ensure that active travel is a consideration in new developments?

Question 6: In your council area in the last 5 years, have formal developer contributions (CIL and S106) been committed or used for projects beyond the red line of the development?

CIL only	1%
S106 only	76%
Both	22%
Neither	0%

Question 7: What have contributions outside the red line of development been spent on/allocated for in the last 5 years? (Please tick all that apply)
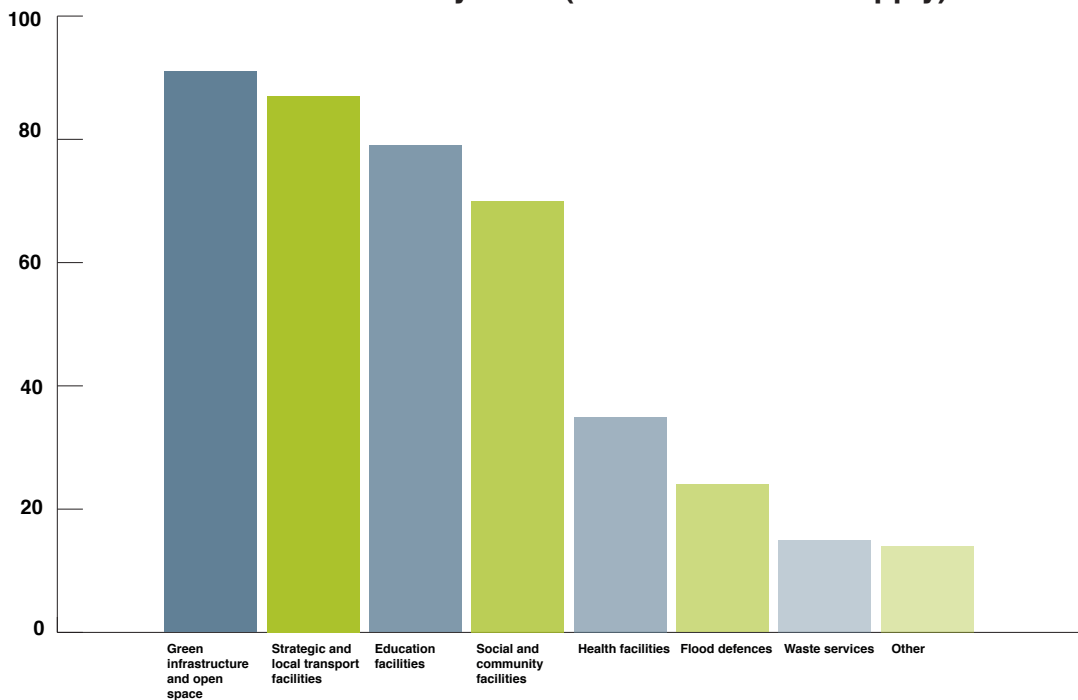
| Green infrastructure and open space	91%
Strategic and local transport facilities	87%
Education facilities	79%
Social and community facilities	70%
Health facilities	35%
Flood defences	24%
Waste services	15%
Other	14%

Question 8: Have contributions been used specifically to improve any of the following (please tick all that apply)

| Footpaths and other pedestrian routes	91%
Parks and green spaces	90%

Question 9: In your view, have new housing and commercial developments in your area over the past 5 years been in line with the goals of your:

	Entirely in line	Mostly in line	Mostly not in line	Not at all in line	Don't know
Active Travel Strategy	5%	74%	4%	1%	16%
Health and Wellbeing Strategy	4%	63%	6%	4%	23%
Green Space Strategy	11%	72%	2%	1%	14%
Physical Activity strategy	5%	53%	3%	3%	35%

Question 10: In the last 5 years, has your council refused developments on the basis of: (please tick all that apply)
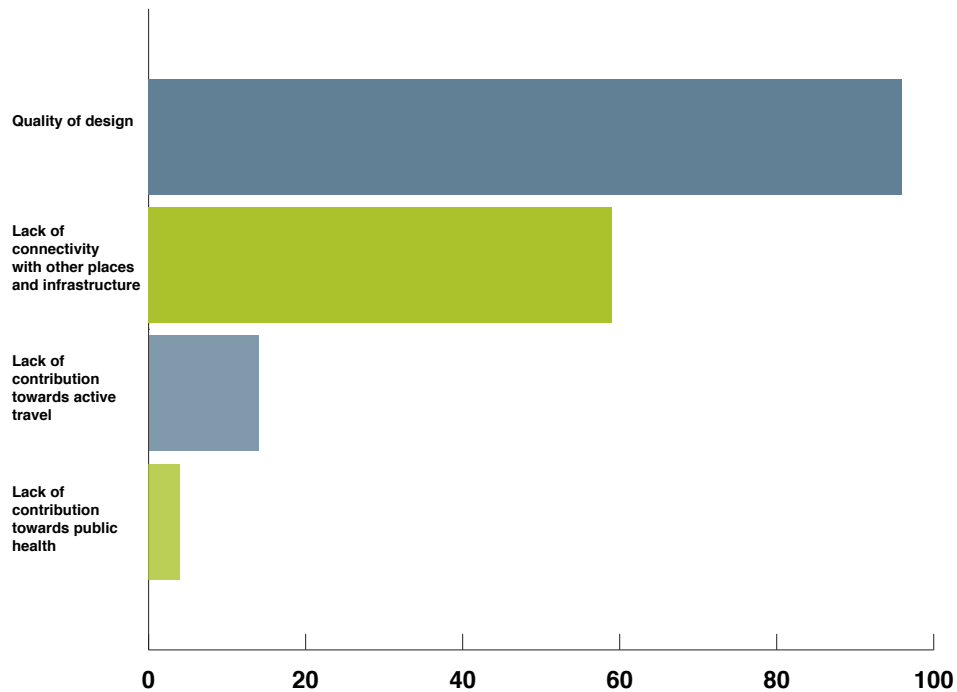
Question 11: What factors do you think inhibit new developments (commercial and residential) in contributing towards council's broader health and wellbeing, active travel or green space objectives? Please tick all that apply.
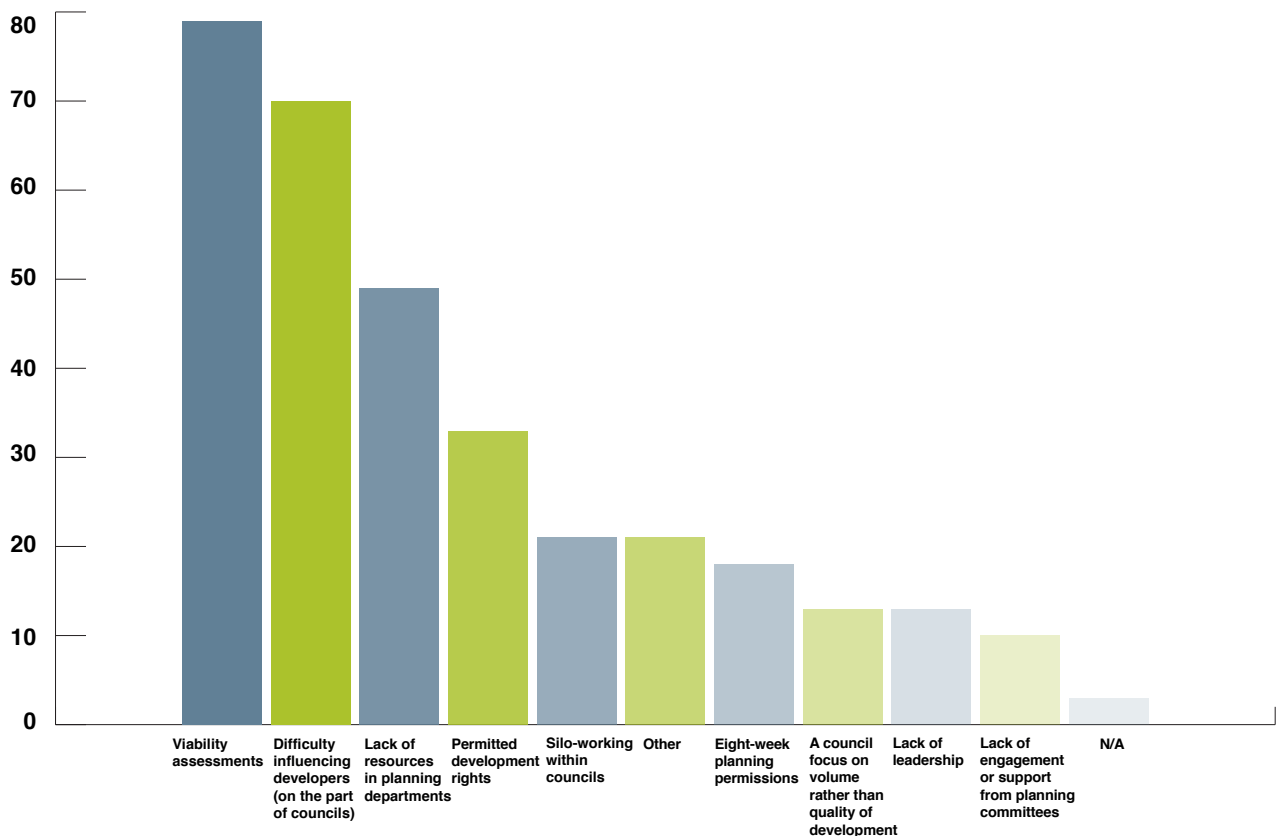
Question 13: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

1) The council works closely with large developers to ensure good quality design.

2) Walkability and access to green space is not a priority for most private developers.

3) The council has difficulty ensuring its priorities are met in delivering large developments.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1)	30%	60%	7%	1%	1%
2)	12%	25%	37%	23%	2%
3)	5%	34%	23%	34%	4%

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