



## **Analysis of Results from the Planning Service 2007/08**

### **Customer Survey**

July 2009



An Agency within the Department of the

**Environment**

[www.doeni.gov.uk](http://www.doeni.gov.uk)

## **Improving Customer Service**

Planning Service is committed to improving the quality of its services to its customers and seeks feedback on opportunities for improvement through the customer survey it conducts every 2 years..

The survey asks customers, who have recently submitted planning applications, for their opinions on how Planning Service communicated with them, provided information, handled complaints and processed applications in a timely way. (The format of the survey does not change significantly so that the results may be compared to previous surveys). This latest survey , which customers completed by post or online, was issued to a sample of 842 customers. Information is now provided on the responses to the survey and its results, which have been compiled by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.

The feedback we have received from customers from the survey has been carefully considered and used to develop a Customer Service Action Plan to help us to improve the quality of our service.

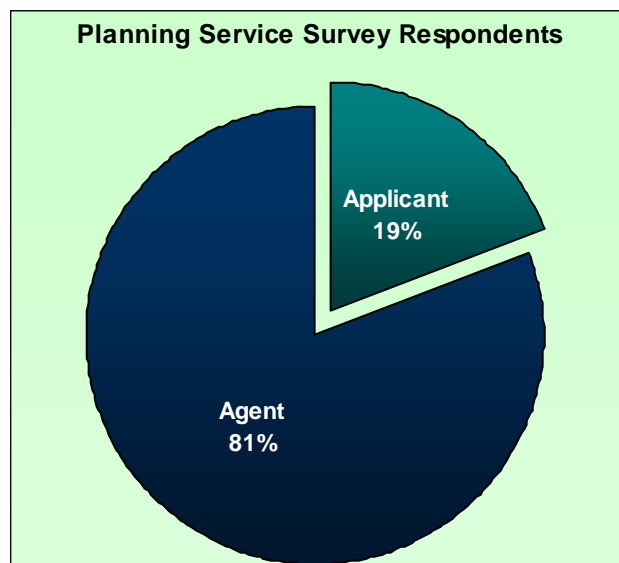
This Customer Service Action Plan is only one means through which the Agency is working to improve. Planning Service is consulting the public until 2 October 2009 on a major programme of Planning Reform to be implemented by 2011. We are also taking a number of immediate actions to address the recommendations of a recent Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit (PEDU) review of the Agency. A significant recommendation identified through the review involved the recent development of a Development Management Good Practice Guide to encourage the submission of good quality planning applications and to improve the timeliness of planning decisions. Other short-term improvements introduced include streamlined Council Consultation arrangements for processing non-contentious planning applications, which has resulted in those applications being decided within an average of 24 working days. The introduction of Pre-Application Discussions for strategically important and other major applications is helping to deliver decisions within 6 months.

Planning Service is keen to build upon these improvements and welcomes feedback from customers on how we may provide better service.

## Analysis of Results

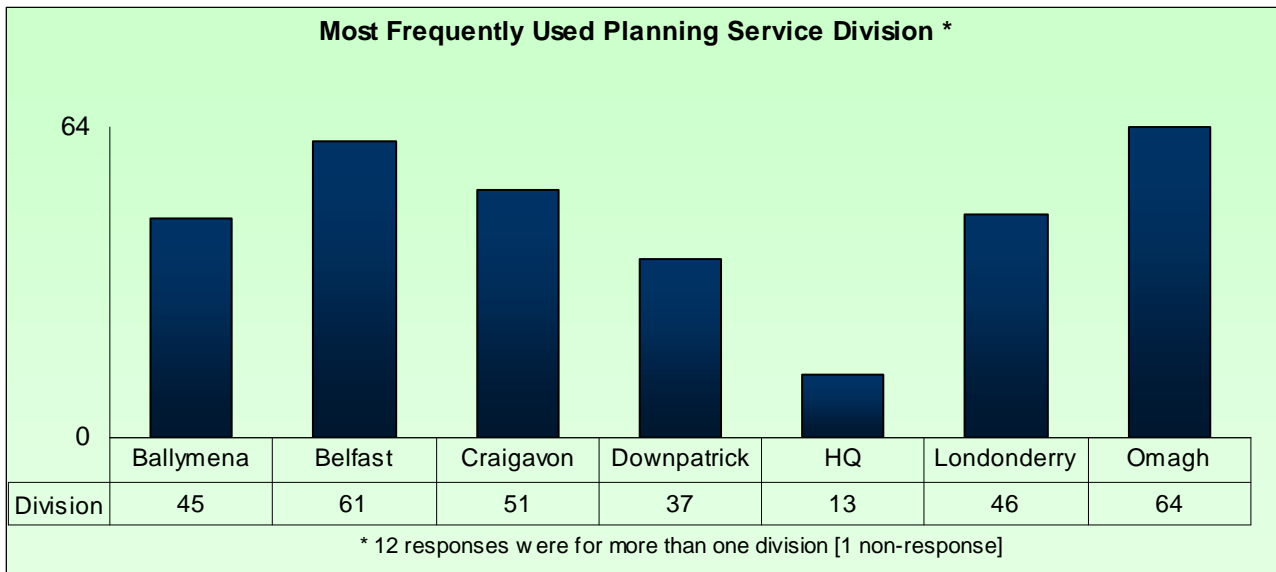
The 2008 Planning Service Customer Survey was issued to a random sample of 842 customers during the week ending 21 March 2008, who received a decision on at least one planning application between 01 April 2006 and 31 March 2007. The response rate was 39.2%; showing a 12.4 percentage point improvement when compared with the 2006 Planning Service Customer Survey response rate.

## Respondents



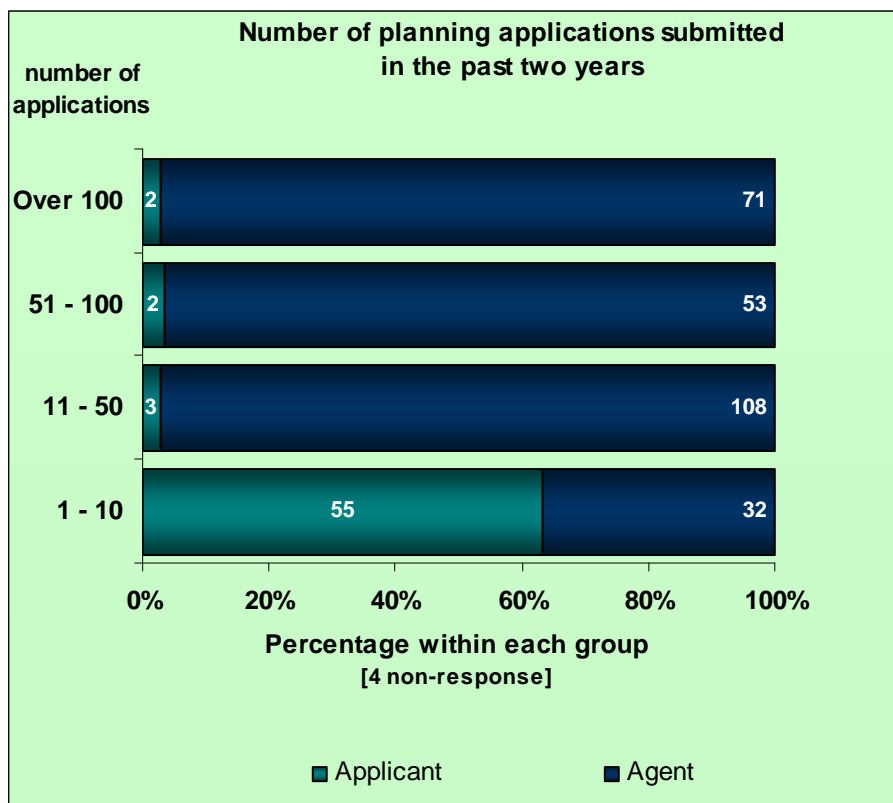
- 81% [267] respondents were agents and 19% [63] were individuals or applicants. The proportion of individuals or applicants in the survey is slightly higher than the proportion of applicants who received a decision in 2006/07 [14%]

## Planning Service Division most frequently used



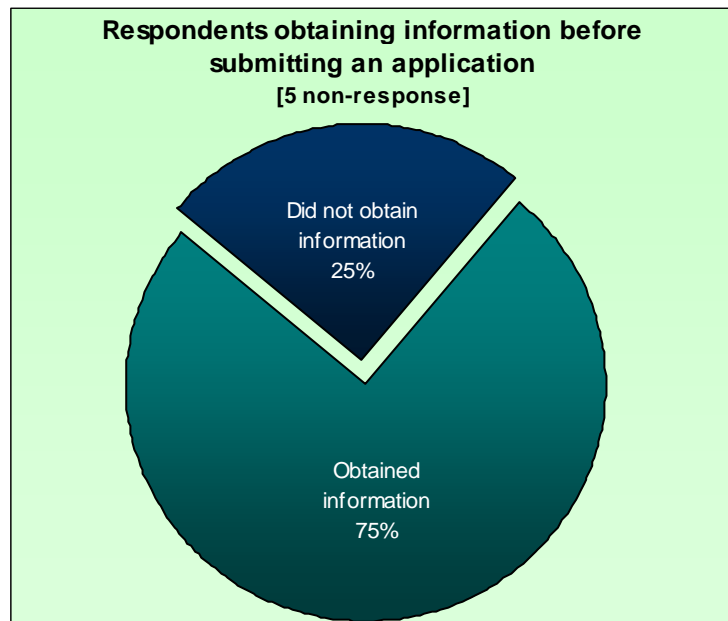
- Almost 20% of respondents used Omagh Divisional Office most often in 2006/07, followed by Belfast (18.5%) and Craigavon (15.5%).
- The percentage of responses for each division relatively match the percentage of decisions issued from the Planning Service Divisions in 2006/07. Respondents using Omagh and Belfast division most frequently are however slightly underrepresented in the survey responses received.

## Number of applications submitted in the past two years



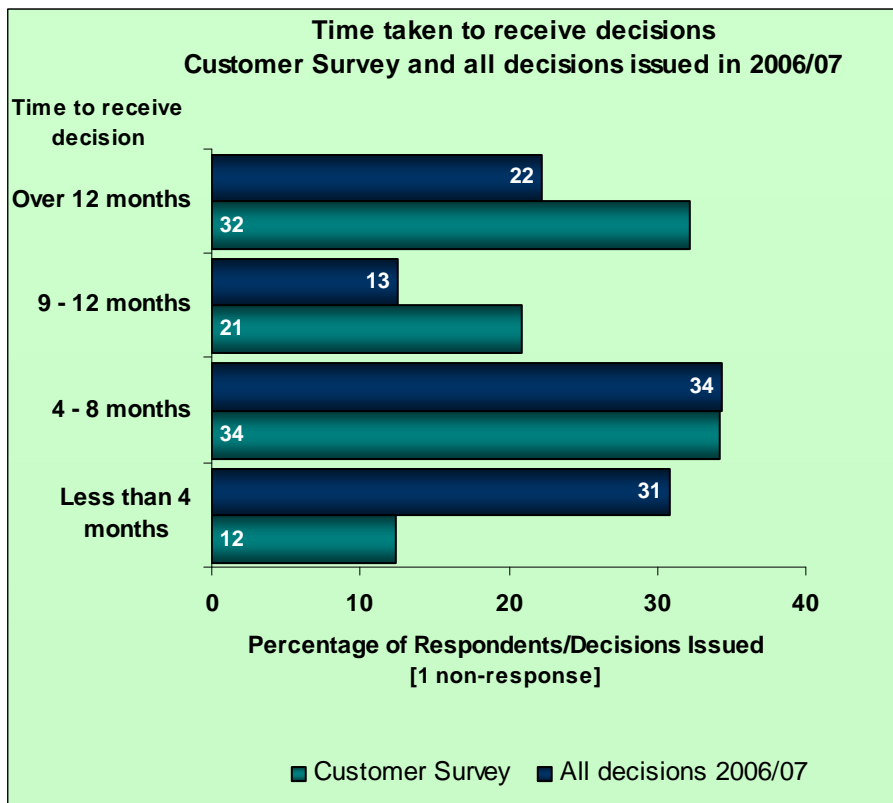
- Just over one third of respondents submitted between 11 and 50 applications in 2006/07 [111]. Generally speaking, agents are more likely than applicants to submit more than 10 applications in a two year period.

## Obtaining information from the website / published guidance & Information leaflets



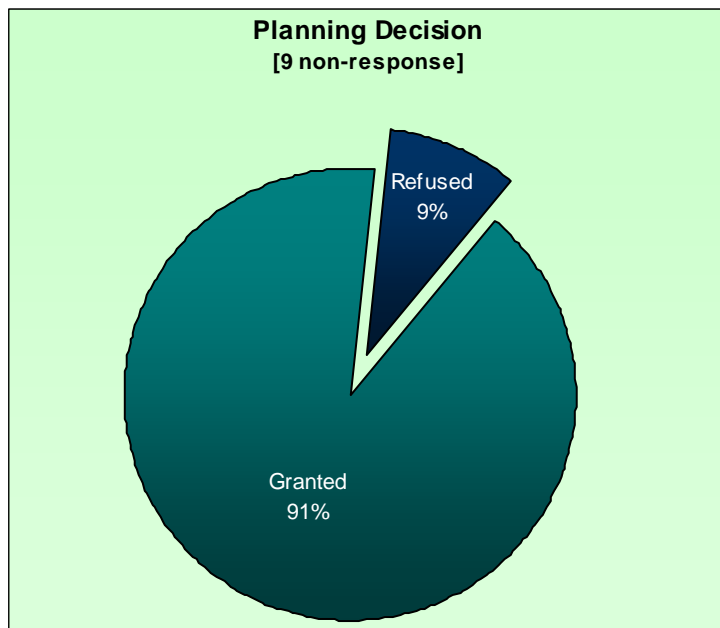
- 75% [244] of applicants obtained information from the Planning Service website or published guidance and information leaflets before submitting a planning application.

## Waiting times to receive decisions



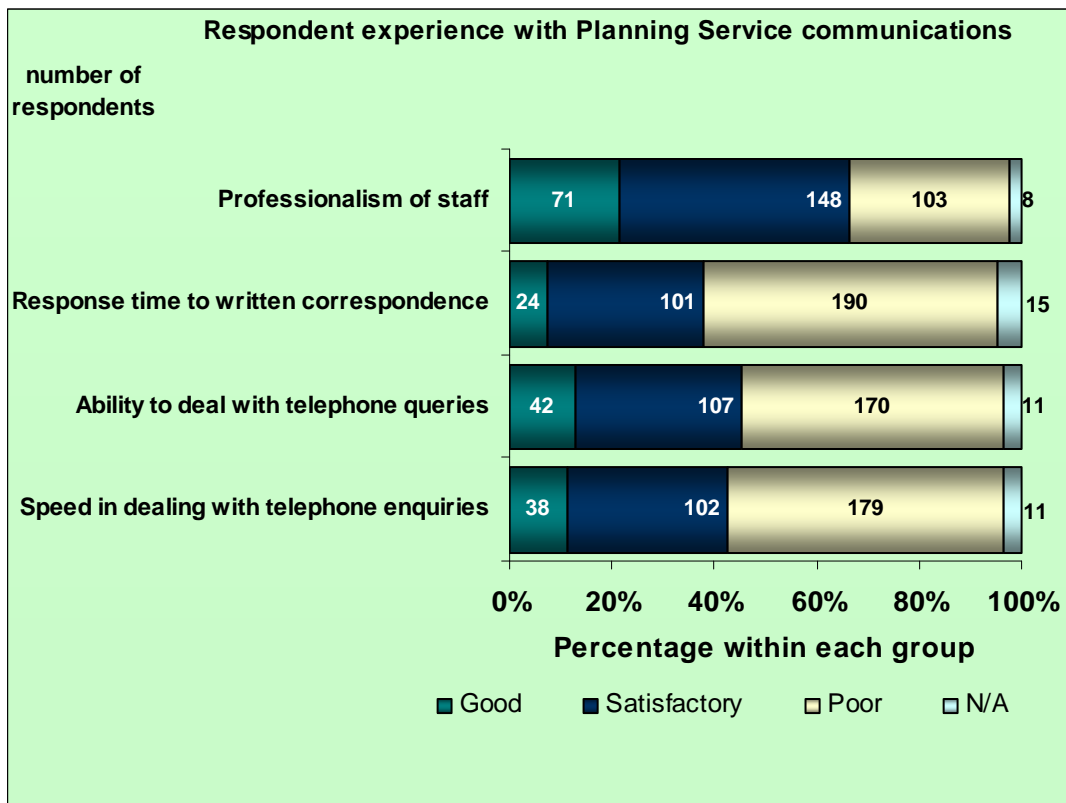
- Just over a third [34%] of respondents received a decision between 4 and 8 months after submitting an application. This is similar to the percentage of all customers who received a decision within this timeframe, during 2006/07.
- However, the proportion of respondents receiving a decision either sooner or later than 4 to 8 months after submitting an application, does not reflect the general distribution of all waiting times for decisions in the year. This should be taken into account when examining satisfaction levels for decision waiting periods.

## Outcome of application



- 91% of respondents obtained a successful outcome to the last planning application submitted. This is slightly higher than the 83% of customers who had applications approved in 2006/07.

## Planning Service Communications

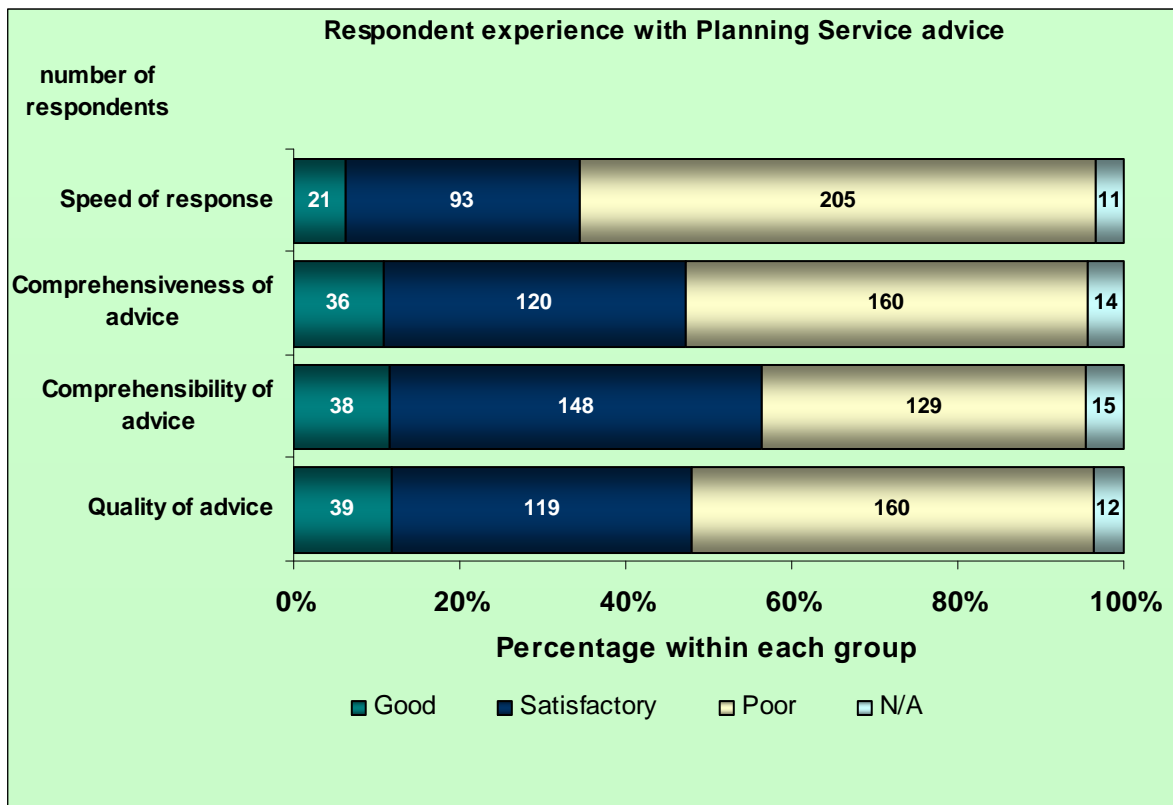


- 42% of respondents believed the speed with which telephone queries were answered was good or satisfactory, while 54% of respondents believed the service was poor. [11 non-response or not applicable]
- Similarly, 45% of respondents rated the ability of Planning Service staff to deal with telephone queries as good or satisfactory, while 51.5% felt the telephone query handling was poor [11 non-response or not applicable]
- 38% of respondents rated the response time for written correspondence as good or satisfactory, while the majority (58%) of respondents felt the response time was poor. [15 non-response or not applicable]
- 66% of respondents rated the professionalism of Planning Service staff as good or satisfactory, while 31% rated the professionalism as poor. [8 non-response or not applicable]

Significance tests were performed on the responses to Planning Service communications against division to see if the perceived level of service differs depending on which division an application was submitted to. For both the response time to written correspondence and professionalism of staff there were no significant differences found. Therefore, the perceived level of service for both written correspondence response times and the professionalism of staff did not differ depending on the division used most often by respondents.

In analysis of both the speed and ability to deal with telephone queries significant differences were found for divisions. However, although the differences between divisions in perceived speed and ability to deal with telephone queries is not due to chance, it is also not very strong, indicating that while there is a measurable difference in the perceived telephone service between divisions, it is likely due to a single division rather than Planning Service wide.

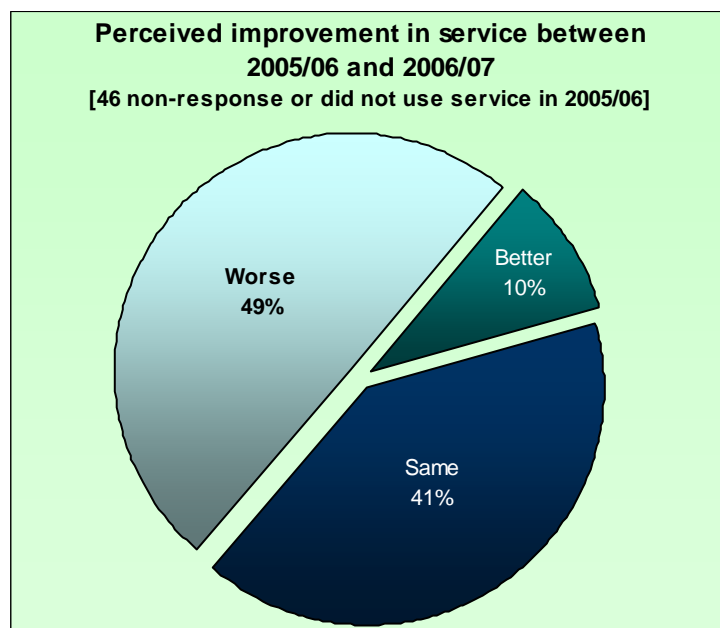
## Planning Service Advice



- When asked about the quality of the response if seeking advice, 48% of respondents felt the quality was good or satisfactory, while just over 48% felt the quality was poor. [12 non-response or not applicable]
- The majority of the respondents felt that the advice given was clear and understandable (56%) while 39% felt the advice was not clear. [15 non-response or not applicable]
- Just over 47% of respondents believed the advice received from Planning Service staff was comprehensive, while 48.5% felt the advice received did not address all the issues raised. [14 non-response or not applicable]
- Almost 35% of respondents rated the speediness of the advice given by Planning Service staff as good or satisfactory, while the majority (62%) rated the speed as poor.[11 non-response or not applicable]

Significance tests were performed on the responses to Planning Service advice against division to see if the perceived aspects of advice differ depending on which division an application was submitted to. For all aspects of advice sought there were no significant differences found between divisions. Therefore, the perceived level of advice given did not differ depending on the division used most often by respondents.

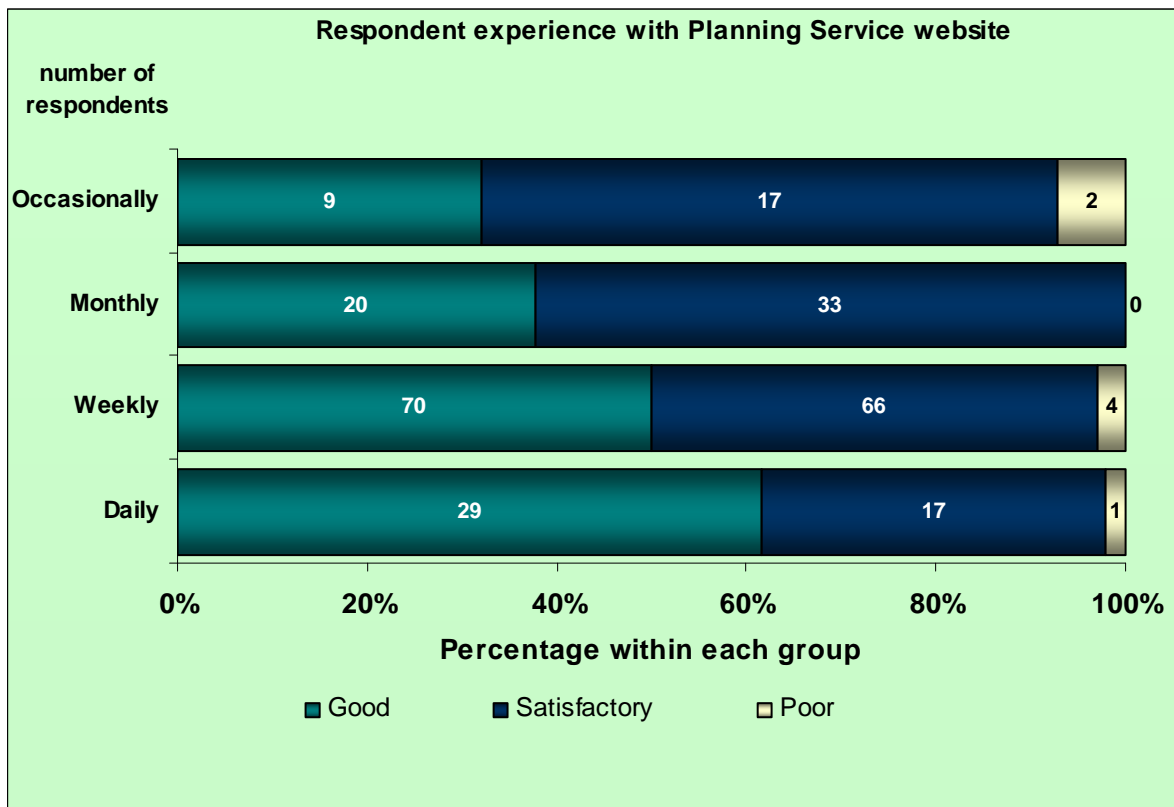
### Improvements in service between 2005/06 and 2006/07



- The majority (88.5%) of respondents used Planning Service in the previous year. 11% had not used the service in the 2005/06 year. [1 non-response]
- Of those respondents who had used the service in the previous year, 10% felt the service had improved, 41% felt the service was about the same and 49% felt the service had got worse when compared with the 2005/06 year.

In analysis of a perceived improvement in the service provided when compared with the previous year, significant differences were found when analysing the results between divisions. However, although the differences in the perceived improvement in services between divisions is not due to chance, it is also not very strong, indicating that while there is a measurable difference between divisions, it is likely due to a single division rather than across Planning Service.

## Website usage



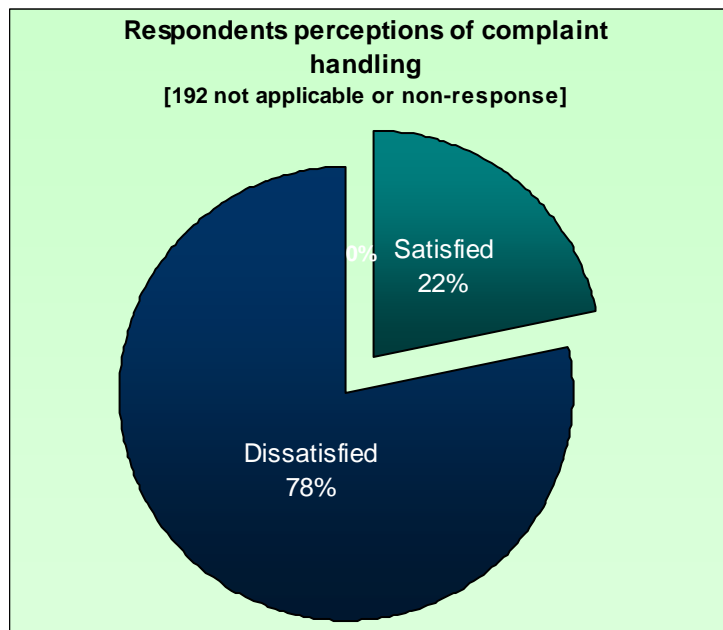
The majority (82%) of respondents used the Planning Service website, while 17% did not use the website. [2 non-response]

Of the respondents who accessed the website almost 70% used the website at least once a week and another 20% accessed the website monthly. There were just over 1 in 10 respondents using the website less frequently. [3 non-response]

The website was rated as good or satisfactory by the overwhelming majority of respondents (97%) with only 2.6% of respondents believing the website was poor. [1 non-response]

There is a significant difference in respondents who used the website most often and rated the website as good than respondents who used the website less frequently. Despite these differences not being due to chance, the relationship between frequency of use and satisfaction level for the website is not strong.

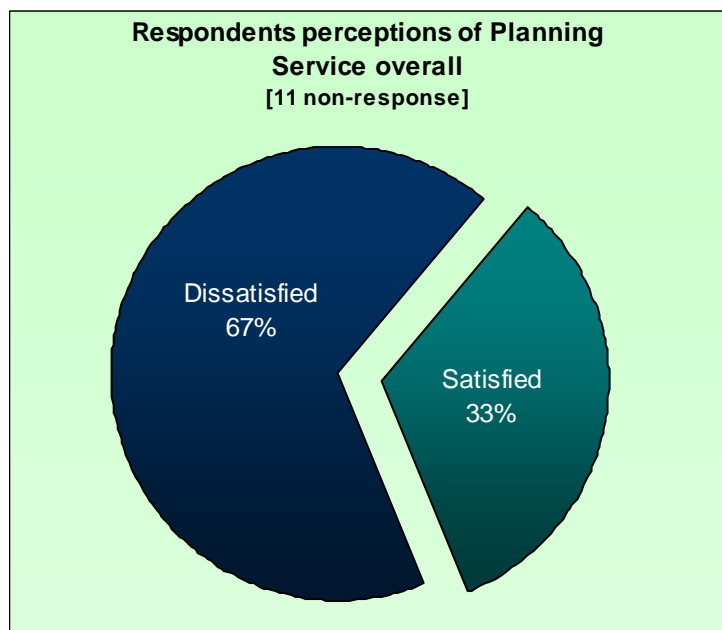
## Complaint Handling



43% of respondents had complained about an aspect of the service provided by Planning Service, while 53% had not complained. [11 non-response]

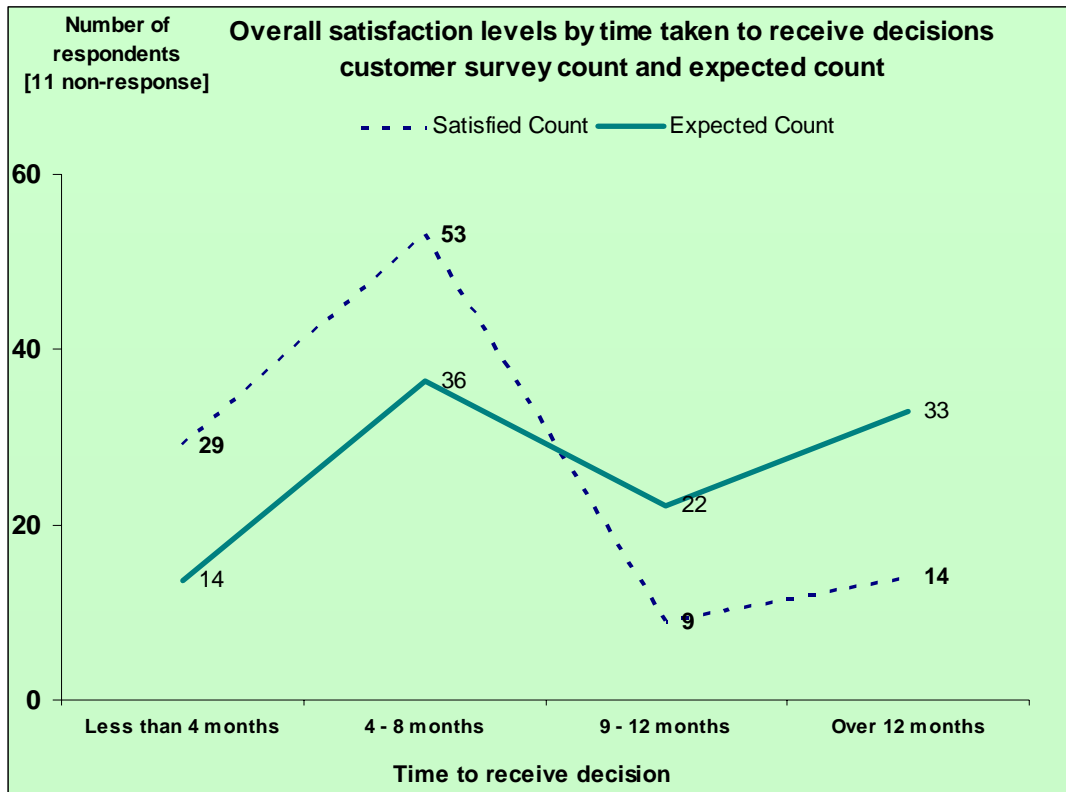
Of the respondents who complained about any aspect of the service provided by Planning Service, 22% felt their complaint was handled satisfactorily, while 78% were dissatisfied with the response to their complaint. [192 not applicable or non-response]

## Overall service provided



A third of respondents [105] were satisfied with the overall service provided by Planning Service, while 67% [214] were not satisfied with the service overall.

Significance tests were performed on the responses to Planning Service overall against division to see if the perceived level of service differs depending on which division an application was submitted to. There were no significant differences found, therefore satisfaction levels overall do not depend on the division used most often by respondents.



However, significant differences in the level of satisfaction were found when the length of time to receive a planning decision was taken into account. Satisfaction levels were highest when the length of time to receive a decision was shortest, reducing to lower satisfaction levels as the length of time taken to receive a decision lengthened.

Further investigation revealed that significant differences in the level of satisfaction were found between applicants and agents for the time taken to receive a decision of between 4 and 8 months. Although not a very strong difference, a higher number of applicants were satisfied with the service provided than anticipated and a lower number of agents were satisfied with the service provided than was expected.

## **Summary of Issues**

Planning Service has considered the analysis of the 2008 survey and identified the following key areas of concern raised by customers:

- The perceived inexperience of planners.
- The inconsistency of planning decisions.
- The speed of the planning process.
- The period of time involved for statutory body consultation.
- The inaccessibility of planners, particularly during pre-application.
- The lack of communication throughout the planning process.

The Agency's Customer Service Action Plan focuses on addressing these priority areas and will be implemented during 2009/2010. The Agency is also considering additional means to obtain customers' views on the service we provide.