

FMB House Builders' Survey 2019

October 2019



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**MASTER
BUILDERS**

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Contents

4	Executive summary	12	Buyer demand
6	Introduction and context	13	Access to finance
8	Respondent profiles and industry structure	16	Small sites and land availability
10	Survey findings	17	Developer contributions and viability
10	Main constraints on supply	17	The planning application process





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Executive summary

The Federation of Master Builders' (FMB) House Builders' Survey aims to build a clearer picture of the constraints facing small and medium-sized (SME) house builders in England. This year's findings show that access to land, the planning system and access to finance remain key structural barriers for SME house builders, however, the last year has seen an easing in these barriers. Less positively, buyer demand has seen a significant drop and is now at a five-year low.

Main constraints on supply

Respondents were asked to identify what they saw as the major barriers to increasing their output of new homes, both currently and looking ahead over the next three years.

- 'Lack of available and viable land' was the most commonly cited barrier to increasing output (43% of respondents) for the fifth year in the row.
- In second place was 'the planning system' (42%) and in third was 'lack of finance to the company' (39%).
- Those reporting a 'shortage of skilled workers' fell from 44% to 26% and this was overtaken by the cost of Section 106 agreements (30%), which rose to fourth place.
- Looking ahead, a 'shortage of skilled workers' remained in third place above 'access to finance to the company' for the second year in a row.

"Lack of available and viable land was the most commonly cited barrier to increasing output for the fifth year in the row"

Buyer demand in market

Respondents were asked to assess the level of buyer demand in the market:

- The average score given for current buyer demand in the housing market (out of 5) was 2.9 and this compared to an anticipated score of 3.1, which respondents gave one year ago.
- The average score given for anticipated future buyer demand in 2020 was 2.75 and 2.96 for 2021

Access to finance

Respondents were asked to assess current lending conditions and the significance of different finance-related issues in restricting their ability to boost output:

- Asked to rate current lending conditions to SMEs for residential property development from 0 to 5, the average score was 2.15; this is up from 2.02 the previous year and is the highest score for this measure since the question was first asked in 2013.
- 70% of respondents reported that lending conditions had stayed the same with 16% stating conditions have improved, and 14% reporting that they have deteriorated.
- 39% of respondents stated they were involved in sites that were stalled for financial reasons; this is down from 47% last year.

- 'Poor loan to asset value ratios' was rated as the most significant financial barrier for the second year running ahead of 'fees charged on new or existing loans'
- The level of concern over loan refusal has risen to the highest level in three years.

Small sites and land availability

Respondents were asked about the availability of small site opportunities:

- 54% reported that the number of small site opportunities are, if anything, decreasing, a third (33%) stated that the situation has not changed and 7% reported that they are increasing
- 26% of respondents said they thought local authorities are taking small sites more seriously



“Only 3% of respondents reported that the speed or service provided by local authority planning departments had improved since they were permitted to increase planning fees by up to 20% in January 2018”

Developer contributions

When asked about the level of developer contributions and development viability, 51% of respondents said that there were sites that they would otherwise be interested in but which they believed would be unviable due to the likely Section 106 (S106), Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) or other obligations. This is down from 62% in 2018.

Planning application process

Respondents were asked to assess the importance of various causes of unnecessary delay and additional cost within the planning application process:

- Out of several different factors, for the fourth consecutive year, respondents rated ‘inadequate resourcing of planning departments’ as the most significant cause of delays in the planning application process.

- Respondents rated ‘excessive information requirements’ as the most significant cause of extra cost in the planning process for the second year in a row.
- Only 3% of respondents reported that the speed or service provided by local authority planning departments had improved since they were permitted to increase planning fees by up to 20% in January 2018. 59% reported they had remained the same and 38% reported they had got worse.



Introduction and context

This survey is now in its eighth successive year, and over these years we have been able to build a comprehensive understanding of the barriers small and medium-sized (SME) house builders face in England and track how this has changed over the best part of a decade. This is the only annual survey to do this.

The story of the decline of SME house builders over the last few decades is now one that is well known. According to the most recent National House Building Council (NHBC) statistics from 2017, the number of new homes built by firms building fewer than 500 units (a standard shorthand for SMEs) was as low as 23% and this hadn't improved on the previous year. The Government's Housing White Paper, published in February

2017, recognised this downward trend and its impact on the wider housing market, and pointed to land, planning, and finance, as the top three barriers (reflecting the results of this report), and recommended several policy interventions to help improve this situation. It is now almost two and a half years since the White Paper and we are now able to start to see what impact some of these interventions are having.

This year's survey indicates that the constraints on supply for SME house builders have eased somewhat, with every single barrier being less widely experienced, or the same, as in 2018. This is very welcome. However, when one looks a bit closer at the details, it is clear fundamental constraints remain, and there is still much

more to be done in certain areas to help SME house builders scale up and meet their potential to help address the house building shortage.

Perhaps the most impressive change over the past eight years is the ability of SME house builders to access finance. In 2013, when respondents were asked to rate lending conditions out of 5, the average score was as low as 0.95. In 2019, this sits at 2.15. While this could still be much higher, this represents significant progress, and this reflects the anecdotal evidence that we have heard that it is now easier to access finance. The challenge now will be addressing the conditions on which finance is lent with high hidden fees, poor loan-to-asset ratios, and burdensome security requirements.



“The Public Accounts Committee recently found that fewer than half of local authorities had an up-to-date local plan”

The ability of SME house builders to find small plots of land to build on continues to be a major barrier, although it has eased slightly over the past year. Recent changes to the National Policy and Planning Framework (NPPF) that mandate local authorities to include provision for small sites in their local plans seem to be filtering through, and when this is combined with the pressure local authorities are under to meet their housing delivery targets, this seems to be bringing more sites to fruition. However, the Public Accounts Committee recently found that fewer than half of local authorities had an up-to-date local plan. It is important that if these policies are to be successful, the Government must continue to monitor this and intervene when local plans are not published, or housing targets are not met.

The poor speed and service of local planning departments across the country is a constant theme of this survey, and unfortunately, despite recent attempts to improve this by increasing planning fees this doesn't seem to have paid dividends. Respondents still report that local authority planning departments are under-resourced and that the speed and service of delivery have mostly stayed the same, if not become worse. Both the Government and the Opposition are looking into this area and we look forward to working with them.

Finally, it is important to place these figures in the context of Brexit. Respondents have reported the lowest buyer demand since 2014 and the majority put this down to a lack of consumer confidence in the market. Many

commented that Brexit uncertainty has meant potential homeowners are holding back. Furthermore, we have seen a sudden jump in the number of respondents reporting loan refusals on last year and this could indicate that lenders are taking a more cautious approach to lending at this time. Whatever happens with Brexit, it is crucial that empowering the SME house building sector is prioritised by the Government and the Opposition over the coming years. Together, we have made some real progress but there is much more to be done to realise the potential of the SME house building sector.



Respondent profiles and industry structure

The House Builders' Survey profile of respondents is reflective of those parts of the FMB membership and wider construction industry that are active in smaller-scale house building. The breakdown of firms by output, between those building one to ten units, those building 11-30 units and those building 31-100 units, is very similar to the proportions of those registered with the NHBC.

The FMB's membership has a diversity of house builders from those building solely as developers

to those building solely as contractors, with many doing both. There is fluidity between these categories and there could be further fluidity as many contractors have expressed an interest in becoming a developer if they had the finance to do so. Traditionally, generalists, contractors and sub-contractors have formed a key source of capacity in the sector.

We have had a larger sample size this year than in previous years, however, the profile is broadly similar. There was a slightly lower

percentage of those building fewer than ten units this year but more of those building 11 - 30. We have also had a slightly larger representation from contractor-only respondents this year, and fewer responses from those who are developers as well as contractors.

For the first time, we included a question on the number of respondents involved in building a new home to the designs and specification of the homeowner. This will allow us to understand the extent to which custom and self-build makes up the SME sector.

Sample

- The survey received 154 responses from SME house building firms.
- All respondents were FMB members in England who list house building as one of their main trades.
- A filter question ensured that all those surveyed had been active in building new homes in the past ten years.

House building output

- 67% of respondents said that this year (2019) they will build between one and ten units; 8% of respondents will build 11 - 30 units; 3% will build 31 - 100; 1% will build more than 100 units and 22% will not build any new homes.

Business models

- 12% of respondent firms build homes only as developers; 55% of respondents build homes only as contractors; and 33% work as both developers and contractors.
- For 66% of respondents, house building is one of just a wide variety of building services they offer. For 26% it is the main or only type of work they will undertake; and for 8%, though they have built homes in the past ten years, they are not currently planning to build new homes.

Site sizes

- The great majority of respondents (79%) tend to concentrate on sites between one and five units; 11% build sites of 11 units or more; and 5% build sites of more than 25 units.



Survey findings



Main constraints on supply

Each year this survey tracks the main barriers on the ability of SME house builders to build new homes, both now and over the next three years. Since 2015, the main barriers (land, planning and finance) have gradually been easing (see Table 2). This year, however, every single barrier listed has seen a fall on the previous year and those reporting 'no constraints'

has increased to its highest level since the survey began at 11%, up markedly from 6% last year and 3% in 2017.

A 'lack of available and viable land' was the most commonly cited constraint (cited by 43% of respondents) for the fifth year in a row. This is also expected to be the top barrier over the next three years, increasing to 52%. It was closely followed by 'the planning system' at 42%, which was also

expected to be the second biggest barrier in the future. Respondents reporting a 'lack of finance to the company' came below planning again at 39%, which is the lowest this has been since the survey began. Improvements in financial conditions/access to finance are predicted to continue, with 33% expecting access to finance to be a barrier over the coming three years. All in all, the indicators point to recent optimism around lending conditions.

Table 1: Q. What would you say are the main constraints, if any, on your ability to build more homes i.) currently and ii.) looking ahead over the next three years?

Constraints	Currently	Over the next three years
Lack of available and viable land	43%	52%
The planning system	42%	43%
Lack of finance to the company	39%	33%
Cost of Section 106 agreements	30%	27%
Shortage of skilled workers	26%	35%
Cost of Community Infrastructure Levy	25%	23%
Restricted mortgage availability	17%	20%
No constraints	11%	10%
Materials shortages	10%	16%
Cost of locally imposed standards	9%	11%
Cost of national regulations	9%	11%

The number of respondents who cited a shortage of skilled workers has seen a dramatic drop this year from a historic high of 44% last year to a new low of 26%. This softening in respondents' perception of the skills shortage is also reflected in the FMB's State of Trade Survey, which has seen those reporting shortages in key trades such as bricklayers, plasterers and carpenters edge downwards. Skills shortages have been overtaken, with the cost of Section 106 (S106) agreements now in third place at 30%, despite there being an exemption for small sites. However, over the next three years, skills shortages are expected to become a major barrier again, with 35% of respondents anticipating this to be the main constraint over the next three years, ahead of access to finance.

There has also been a noticeable drop in the number of respondents citing material shortages from 24% last year to 10% this year, the lowest rate since 2015. Again,

like with skills shortages, this is expected to return as a top barrier over the coming three years.

When broken down by a firm's characteristics (business model and size) the results become more nuanced. For those who are developers only, the barriers remain the same as overall but they are much more pronounced, with 63% reporting barriers on both land and planning. For those acting as both developers and contractors, planning is the biggest barrier, and similarly, it is for those who tend to build more than ten units. The larger house builders also unsurprisingly cite developer contributions as the second (S106) and third (CIL) major barriers. Those who tend to build fewer than ten units a year have the same top three barriers as overall, but they face greater barriers to accessing finance than average.



“Those reporting no constraints has increased to the highest level since the survey began”

Table 2: Q. What would you say are currently the main constraints, if any, on your ability to build more houses? (responses to this question from 2012-2019 surveys)

Constraints	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012
Lack of available and viable land	43%	59%	62%	67%	68%	51%	55%	n/a
The planning system	42%	51%	49%	50%	57%	43%	48%	41%
Lack of finance to the company	39%	46%	54%	50%	62%	62%	60%	72%
Cost of Section 106 agreements	30%	30%	29%	31%	34%	31%	29%	46%
Shortage of skilled workers	26%	44%	42%	39%	27%	n/a	n/a	n/a
Cost of Community Infrastructure Levy	25%	29%	29%	22%	22%	24%	24%	25%
Restricted mortgage availability	17%	29%	21%	33%	47%	35%	42%	56%
No constraints	11%	6%	3%	4%	0%	14%	8%	n/a
Materials shortages	10%	24%	23%	14%	9%	12%	n/a	n/a
Cost of national regulation	9%	15%	14%	17%	22%	12%	19%	24%
Cost of locally imposed standards	9%	13%	16%	17%	19%	12%	17%	21%



“When asked what was behind the fall in demand for new homes, just under half reported it was due to a lack of consumer confidence”

Buyer demand

Respondents’ assessment of buyer demand (out of 5) has fallen steadily each year since 2016 (Fig. 2), however, the last year has seen the steepest decline since 2013. Demand is expected to fall again next year to 2.75, and then pick up slightly in 2021 to 2.96. When asked what was behind this fall in demand just under half (48%) reported it was due to a lack of consumer confidence. Qualitative data in the survey indicates this fall in confidence is due to the uncertainty surrounding Brexit, with some reporting that consumers, particularly at the higher end of the market, are waiting for more certainty in the economy before they commit to buying a new property.

Fig. 1. Q. How would you assess/predict buyer demand in the housing market (0 reflects very low demand and 5 reflects very high demand)?

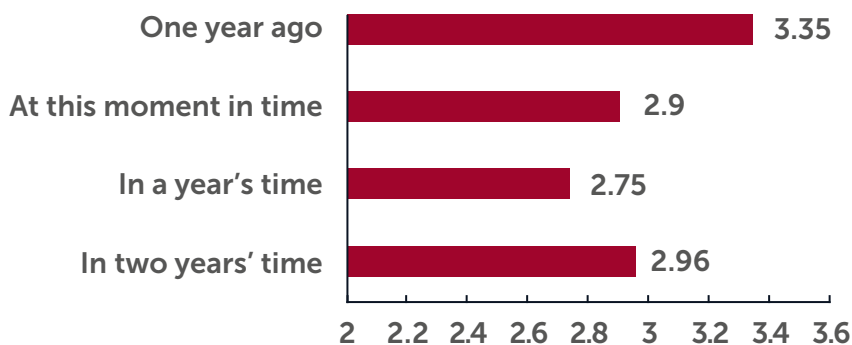
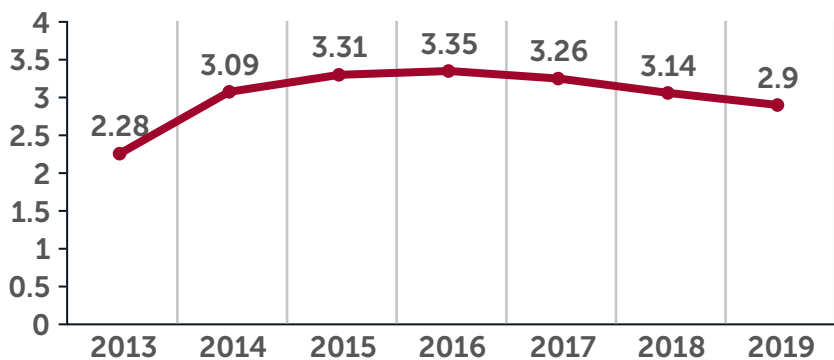


Fig. 2. Q. How would you assess buyer demand in the housing market at this moment in time (out of 5)?



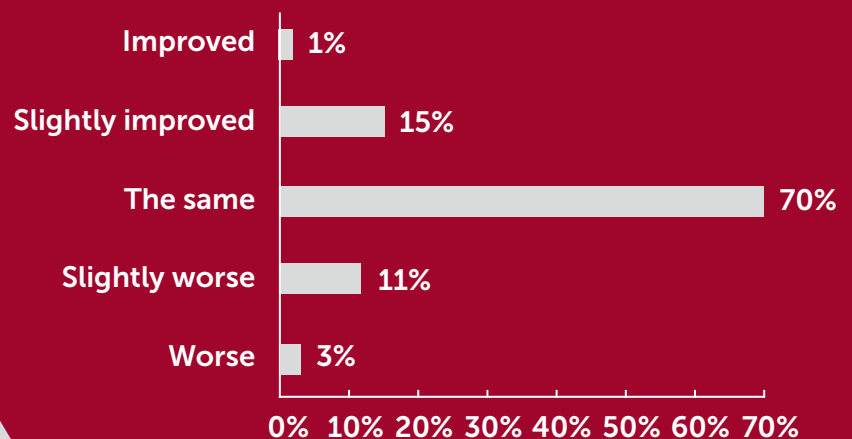
Access to finance

The number of respondents reporting access to finance as a major barrier has been steadily declining over the past five years (Table 3), thanks to improving market conditions, and Government initiatives such as the Home Building Fund. When asked to rate lending conditions to SMEs for residential development from 0 to 5, the average score increased again from 2.02 to 2.15 following last year's marked jump. This score has been rising incrementally each year since its lowest score of 0.95 in 2013.

Table 3: Q. What is your experience of the current lending conditions to SMEs for residential property development (score where 0 reflects very poor conditions and 5 reflects excellent conditions)?

	0	1	2	3	4	5	Average score
2019	10%	20%	26%	35%	9%	1%	2.15
2018	13%	24%	24%	29%	7%	3%	2.02
2017	25%	23%	20%	28%	4%	0%	1.63
2016	18%	24%	24%	26%	8%	1%	1.85
2015	23%	22%	31%	24%	1%	0%	1.59
2014	36%	22%	30%	9%	1%	1%	1.20
2013	41%	30%	22%	7%	0%	0%	0.95

Fig. 3: Q. How do current lending conditions compare to lending conditions to SMEs for residential property development one year ago?



“The number of respondents reporting access to finance as a major barrier has been steadily declining over the past five years”



When asked to compare lending conditions to the previous year, the vast majority (70%) report that there has been no significant change, and 16% indicate that conditions are improving (as opposed to 14% indicating deterioration). This paints a picture of a slow and steady improvement in the respondents' ability to access finance.

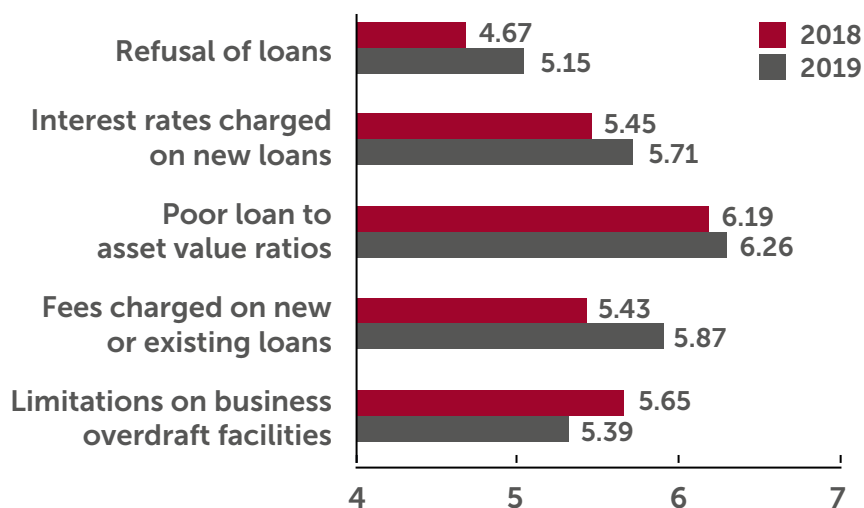
More positive lending conditions can also be gauged by the lower number of respondents reporting that sites have been stalled due to

financial reasons (Fig. 5), which has dropped since the previous year from 47% to 39%.

While this is welcome, barriers to accessing finance remain. When respondents were asked to rate how significant a barrier different finance-related issues are in restricting their ability to increase their output, each issue listed had a higher score than last year apart from 'limitations on business overdraft facilities' (see Fig. 4). For the second year in a row,

the highest level of concern was expressed over 'poor to loan to asset value ratio'. When asked to rate their concern about this issue from 0 to 10, it scored 6.26 compared to 6.19 the previous year. This is not surprising and highlights the fact that while lending conditions may have improved, it is not always on better terms. This continues to create capital barriers for small house builders thinking of starting a new development, or their ability to build more units in the same development.

Fig. 4. Q. How significant are the following finance-related issues in restricting your ability to increase your house building activity (0 being not significant at all and 10 being extremely significant)?



“Lenders could be starting to take a more cautious approach to lending, perhaps due to Brexit uncertainty”

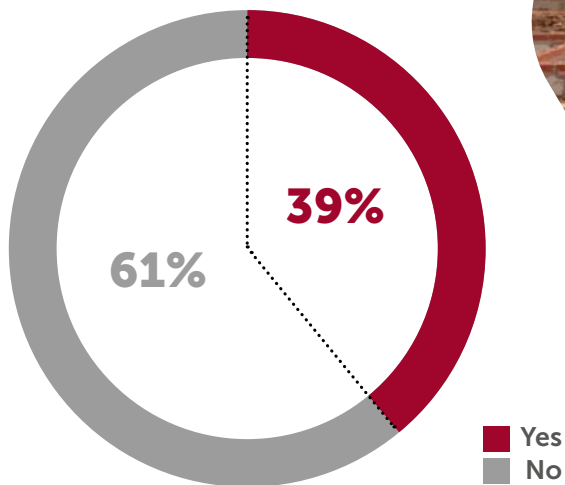


Following this, 'fees charged on new and existing loans' had the next greatest level of concern with a score of 5.87, up from 5.43 last year, and this was followed by 'interest rates charged on loans' at 5.71 again up from its score of 5.45 last year. Anecdotal evidence from respondents indicates that as well as high fees and interest, respondents have faced high security requirements for loans from lenders, adding an extra cost to lending.

Of particular interest this year is the sudden increase in the number of respondents reporting concern with loan refusals. This had been falling steadily over the past few years but increased from 4.67 to 5.15 in the space of 12 months. This indicates that lenders could be starting to take a more cautious approach to lending, perhaps due to Brexit uncertainty. This is also reflected in the higher security requirements reported.

"Of particular interest, this year is the sudden increase in the number of respondents reporting concern with loan refusals"

Fig.5. Are there any sites you are interested in that are stalled for finance reasons other than fundamental non-viability?





Small sites and land availability

A 'lack of available and viable land', which for SME house builders typically means small sites, has been the biggest major barrier for respondents to this survey consistently for over four years. It is now widely recognised by the Government and industry as a significant constraint, if not the main constraint, on the growth of the SME house building sector. As such, it has been the focus of recent Government strategies with several policies in the 2018 NPPF focused

specifically on providing more small sites. This includes the requirement for local authorities to deliver 10% of their homes on sites of one hectare or less.

The number of respondents reporting the 'lack of available and viable land' (43%) is the lowest it has ever been. Furthermore, when asked about the number of small site opportunities, there had been a fall in the number of respondents stating that these are decreasing, down from 62% last year to 54% this year. These signs are encouraging and could indicate that the increased focus

"The cost of Section 106 contributions has now taken over the shortage of skilled workers as the fourth major barrier to SME house builders"

Table 4: Q. On the issue of the availability of opportunities for small site development, which of the following statements do you agree with (please tick all those you agree with)?

	2019	2018
The number of small site opportunities is decreasing	54%	62%
The number of small site opportunities is increasing	7%	11%
The number of small site opportunities has not changed	34%	17%
Small sites are being taken more seriously by planners and local authorities	26%	41%
The process of obtaining planning for small sites seems to be improving	14%	16%

by the Government and local authorities on small sites is starting to filter through to increased availability of sites.

However, there is still much more work to do to break down this barrier. Disappointingly, the number of respondents reporting an increase in small site availability is at a new low of 7%, down on 11% last year (Table 4). Most respondents (34%) indicate that the number of small sites had not changed at all. While last year there were signs that small sites were being taken more seriously by local authorities, with 41% of respondents reporting this in 2018, it has fallen to 26% in 2019. This may indicate that last year's positive result may not be a longer-term trend.

There are signs that SME house builders are becoming more aware of small sites locally, which may explain why finding land is becoming less of a barrier. Many are now using technology to find these plots. Half (50%) of respondents reported using websites such as Rightmove and Zoopla, to find land, which is now higher than both estate agents (46%) and auctions (30%). Therefore, recent digital initiatives

such as Homes England's 'Land Hub' are a step in the right direction in helping SME house builders find plots. However, there is still more work to do to promote this, as currently, only 2% of respondents report using this.

Developer contributions and viability

Developer contributions, such as Section 106 agreements and the CIL, continue to be a constraint on supply for SME house builders (Table 1). The cost of Section 106 contributions has now taken over the shortage of skilled workers as the fourth major barrier to SME house builders, with 30% reporting this. Notwithstanding the exemption for sites with fewer than 10 units. When asked whether respondents had any sites they would otherwise be interested in but believe would be unviable due to likely Section 106, CIL or other obligations, 51% of respondents reported this to be the case. While this is lower than last year's record high of 62%, it is still higher than in 2017 (49%), 2016 (44%) and 2015 (41%).

Respondents commented that some local authorities continue to

be unrealistic in their requirements. Others commented that their local authority didn't seem to have a transparent way of calculating payments and/or are sometimes not open to negotiation.

The planning application process

Disproportionate cost and delays in the planning system for SME house builders have been highlighted by respondents, as in previous years, as one of the major barriers to building more homes. These factors increase the risk to an SME house builder of bringing forward applications and therefore act as a serious blockage. The survey asked respondents to rate factors causing delays in the process of gaining planning permission (Table 5). For the fourth consecutive year, 'inadequate resourcing of planning departments' remains the top cause of delay for SME house builders in the planning process with a score of 4.03. This has increased in the last year from a score of 3.89. This was closely followed by 'inadequate communication by planning departments' with a score of 3.99, which is the highest score this has ever received. This is also very

Table 5: Q. How important would you rate the following as causes of delay in the planning process (score where 0 is completely unimportant and 5 is extremely important)?

Causes of delay	2019	2018	2017
Inadequate resourcing of planning departments	4.03	3.89	3.69
Inadequate communication by planning officers	3.99	3.58	3.55
Delays caused by statutory consultees	3.71	3.24	3.38
The signing off of planning conditions	3.63	3.47	3.57
Signing off of Section 106 agreements	3.58	3.37	3.34
Negotiating Section 106 agreements	3.44	3.47	3.27

much related to the resourcing of planning departments.

In January 2018, planning application fees were increased by 20%, conditional on local planning authorities using this extra income to invest in planning services. This is something the FMB lobbied for and welcomed as we believed it would lead to improvements in the planning system. This is the first survey in which we can see what impact this has had on SME house builders' experience of the planning system. When asked whether they had seen an improvement in the speed and service of their planning

department since the increase in fees, surprisingly, only 3% of respondents reported an improvement. The vast majority reported that services had remained the same (59%).

While it could be the case that many respondents were happy with the services before and this has not changed, 3% of respondents reported higher satisfaction with planning departments, when fees had been increased by 20%, is a disappointing outcome. In fact, 38% of respondents have actually seen the speed and service of their planning departments get worse.

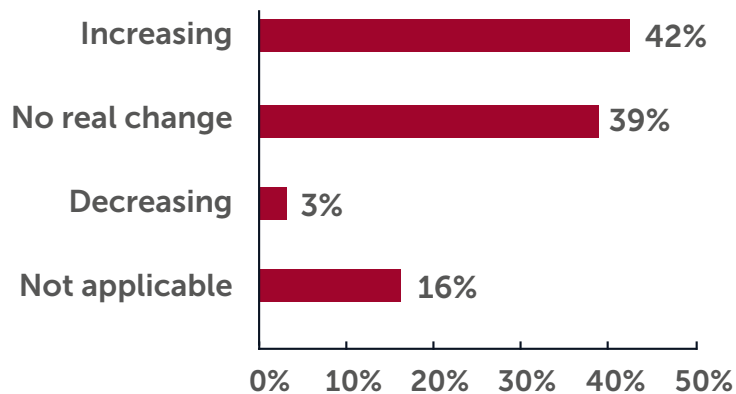


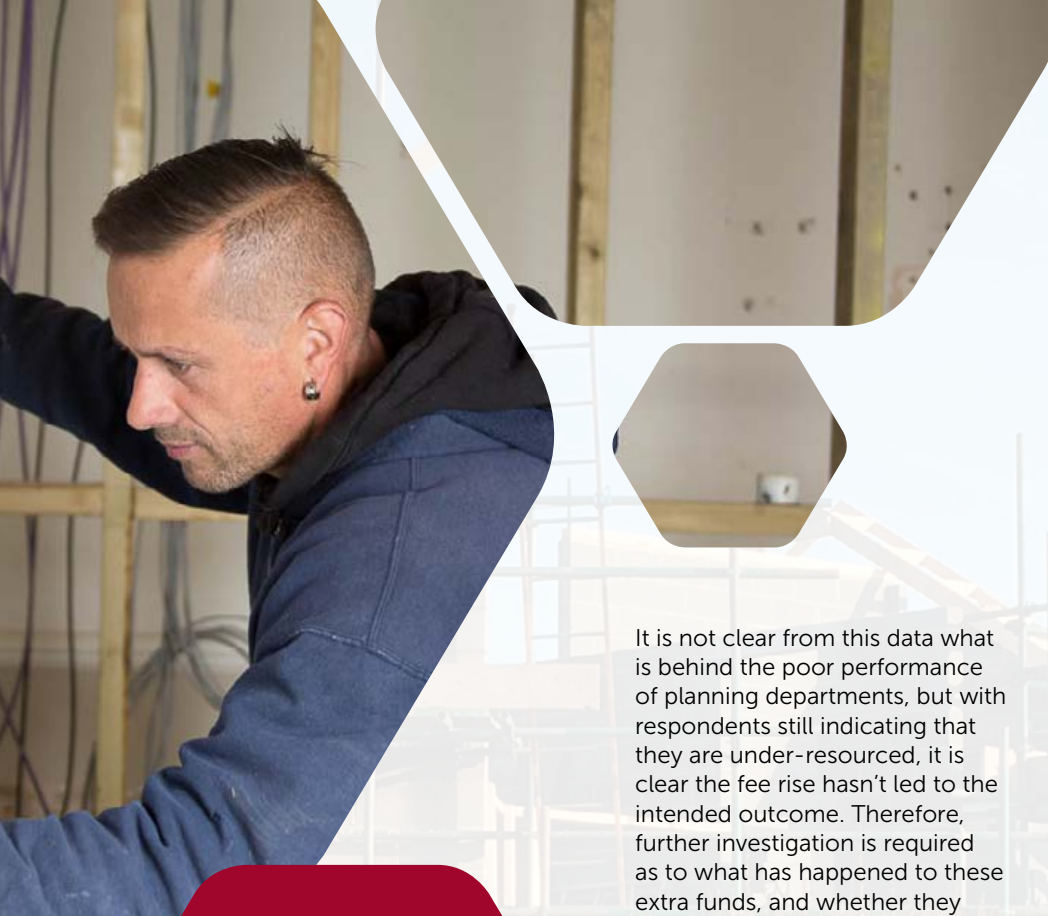
Table 6: Q. How important would you rate the following as causes of additional cost in the planning process (score where 0 is complete unimportant and 5 is extremely important)?

Causes of additional cost	Average score		
	2019	2018	2017
Excessive information requirements	4.19	4.20	3.67
Overall complexity and the cost of consultants required to deal with this	4.02	4.01	3.82
Costs imposed by delays in the system	3.95	4.17	3.57
Fees for pre-application discussions	3.59	3.64	3.39



Fig. 6: Q. Would you say that the burden of information requirements for any given planning application is increasing, decreasing or staying the same?





“For the second year in a row, the top cause for additional cost was ‘excessive information requirements’ with a score of 4.19”

It is not clear from this data what is behind the poor performance of planning departments, but with respondents still indicating that they are under-resourced, it is clear the fee rise hasn't led to the intended outcome. Therefore, further investigation is required as to what has happened to these extra funds, and whether they were sufficient. It is not acceptable for SME house builders to pay more for the same, or an even worse, service. The Government has committed to looking at this issue as part of the 'Accelerated Planning Green Paper'.

Finally, the survey also asked respondents about the most important causes of additional cost in the application process (Table 6). For the second year in a

row, the top cause of additional cost was 'excessive information requirements' with a score of 4.19. Small house builders lack the in-house expertise that larger house builders have so struggle to complete technical reports internally and often have to rely on external consultants, which can be expensive. Despite recent attempts to reduce the burden of information required by planners from house builders, more respondents reported increasing requirements (42%) than those who reported they were staying the same (39%) or improving (3%). This is set to get worse over the coming years with the potential introduction of new requirements for a mandatory net gain in biodiversity.





About the Federation of Master Builders

The Federation of Master Builders (FMB) is the largest trade association in the UK construction industry representing thousands of firms in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Established in 1941 to protect the interests of small and medium-sized (SME) construction firms, the FMB is independent and non-profit making, lobbying for members' interests at both the national and local level. The FMB is a source of knowledge, professional advice and support for its members, providing a range of modern and relevant business building services to help them succeed. The FMB is committed to raising quality in the construction industry and offers a free service to consumers called 'Find a Builder'.

For further information about the FMB, visit www.fmb.org.uk or follow us on Twitter [@fmbuilders](https://twitter.com/fmbuilders).

For further information about the FMB House Builders' Survey 2019, email publicaffairs@fmb.org.uk or call **020 7025 2902**.

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