

Civic Societies and the Planning Process

Part B: Understanding the drivers behind how civic societies engage in planning

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Introduction

This report draws on data collected through a survey questionnaire sent to all Civic Voice member societies with the aim of better understanding the contemporary role that civic societies play in the English planning system. It is a follow up to Part A, which was published in February 2022 (see Maidment & Chettiparamb, 2022).

Our overall research questions are:

1. To what extent do civic societies engage with place stewardship and place leadership, and how?
2. What challenges and opportunities do they currently encounter in fulfilling the above roles?

In Part A we sought to develop an overall picture of how civic societies in England currently work with the planning system. Key conclusions from Part A were around the significant time and energy that civic societies put into engaging with the planning system, in the context of their varying resources and capacity, variable relationships with Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) and the institutional memory they hold.

In this report, Part B, we aim to go into more detail through cross-tabulations between different questions, to try and understand the drivers behind how societies engage in the planning system – which are the key factors that influence the breadth and depth of this engagement? By doing so, we will help to build a more nuanced picture of how societies engage, leading to more nuanced recommendations for policy and future action. Where appropriate we have highlighted links back to the conclusions of the Part A report.

It is again important to acknowledge that the data presented here is based on how civic societies perceive and report their activities, possibly with some positive bias in this respect. However, we hope that this report will complement Part A, as part of the evidence base for how civic societies, in their diverse forms, occupy some of the interstitial space between the wider public and the formal planning system.

We divide the resulting analysis into three parts:

1. **Understanding Civic Societies:** This first part seeks to understand how the organisation and activities of civic societies themselves shape their engagement with the planning system.
2. **Engagement in Local Plans Compared to Individual Planning Applications:** This second part compares how civic societies engage in different parts of the planning system.
3. **Policies Relevant to Civic Societies:** This looks at cross-tabulations that suggest how civic societies might prioritise their future activities.

Following this introduction, we present our methodology. The results from the cross-tabulations are then presented under the three parts detailed above. Each part concludes with a summary of the key findings. Following the discussion of the data, our final part presents the overall conclusions and implications for policy.

Methodology

This Part B report on civic societies and the planning process explores correlations across the survey data reported in our Part A report (Maidment & Chettiparamb, 2022). Both reports draw upon the same data set and a more detailed description of the original survey methodology can be found in the Part A report.

The questionnaire was prepared by a research team at the Department of Real Estate and Planning at the University of Reading and distributed by Civic Voice to all 232 of their members via an e-newsletter. The survey asked societies 24 questions in total, 21 of which addressed the following themes:

- **Introductory questions:** These questions addressed the broad set of activities that societies were involved with in relation to the built environment and any recent changes that they perceive to this role. The set of three questions aimed to set the wider context for more specific questions on civic societies' involvement with the planning system.
- **Involvement in the planning system:** These questions asked societies for details of their current involvement with the planning system – both individual planning decisions and the development of Local Plans.
- **Relationship with the wider community:** These questions sought to understand the nature and role of community engagement in civic societies' own workings as well as their relationship with other organisations in maintaining place quality.
- **Concluding questions:** The final set of four out of 21 questions (19%) encouraged societies to reflect on their role and the extent of their success in influencing the planning system.

The survey was opened for responses on 15 September 2021 and closed on 15 December 2021. At this point 58 responses had been received. The survey has generated a substantial volume of both quantitative and qualitative data that gives useful insights into how civic societies engage with the English planning system.

Analysis using cross-tabulations

As noted, this report picks up where Part A left off, by using cross-tabulations to develop a more sophisticated analysis of the relationships between the results for different questions. Cross-tabulations involve looking for statistical correlations between the answers to the survey questions which generated quantitative data, in order to consider whether there are any causal relationships between different factors. However, there is a degree of subjectivity and judgement involved in, first selecting which data to cross-tabulate and, second in drawing out implications from the data. The following two parts present the results of the chosen cross-tabulations and our interpretation of those results.

Part 1: Understanding Civic Societies

In this part we try to understand what variables can be associated with civic societies' level of activity within the planning system and explore the possible implications of such correlations.

The level of civic society activity in the planning system was cross-tabulated with the themes that civic societies engage with, the quality of relationship with the LPA, the number of individual planning decisions civic societies engage in and the number of ways in which civic societies engage with LPAs. The final section summarises our findings.

Does the level of activity in the planning system relate to the themes that civic societies are engaged with?

When reporting their engagement in the planning system, civic societies were categorised into 'not active', 'active' and 'very active' based upon their response to the question: 'Overall, what proportion of your society's work would you say is about working with the formal planning system?' Societies that ticked 0 to 40% were classified as 'not active', 40 to 60% as 'active' and 60 to more than 80% as 'very active'. The planning themes that civic societies in each category were involved in were then probed. Figures 1-3, below, summarise our cross-tabulations, each relating to a different level of engagement in planning. In relation to the planning themes that civic societies in each category were involved with, 'no involvement' indicates civic societies that rated their involvement as 0 or 1 on an activity scale from 0 to 5, 'medium involvement' indicates civic societies that rated their involvement as 2 or 3 and 'high involvement' indicates civic societies that rated their involvement as 4 or 5.

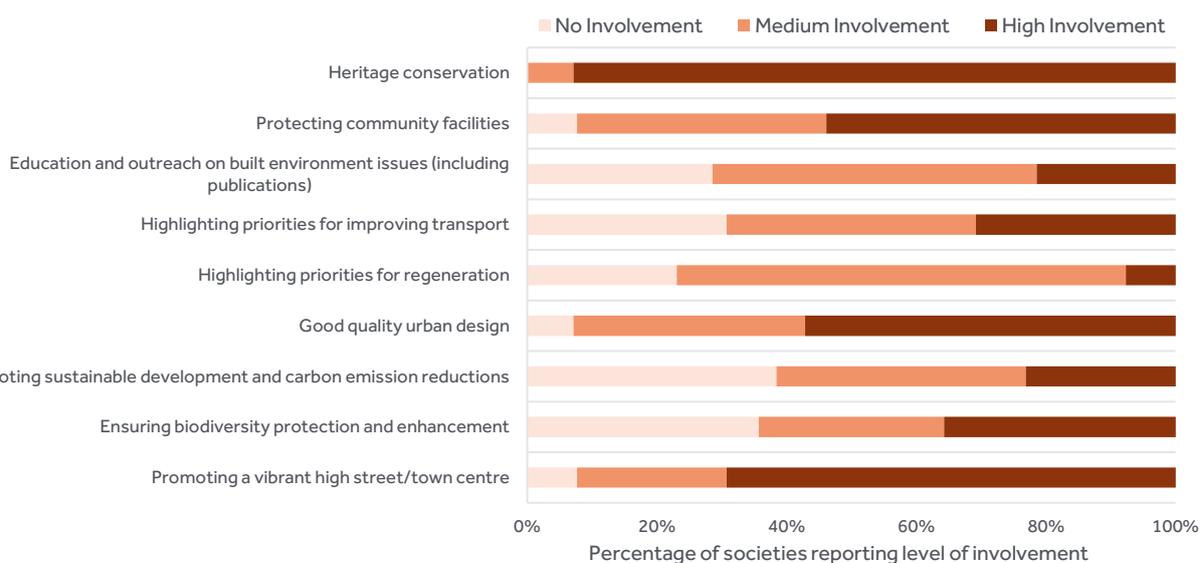


Figure 1: Level of involvement with planning themes of societies 'not active' within the formal system

The graph above shows that around 90% or more of 'not active' societies seem to still show 'high' or 'medium' involvement' in:

- heritage conservation
- promoting a vibrant high street/town centre
- good quality urban design
- protecting community facilities

Around 20% or more of the 'not active' societies were not involved at all in:

- promoting sustainable development and carbon emission reductions
- ensuring biodiversity protection and enhancement
- highlighting priorities for improving transport
- highlighting priorities for regeneration
- education and outreach on built environment issues

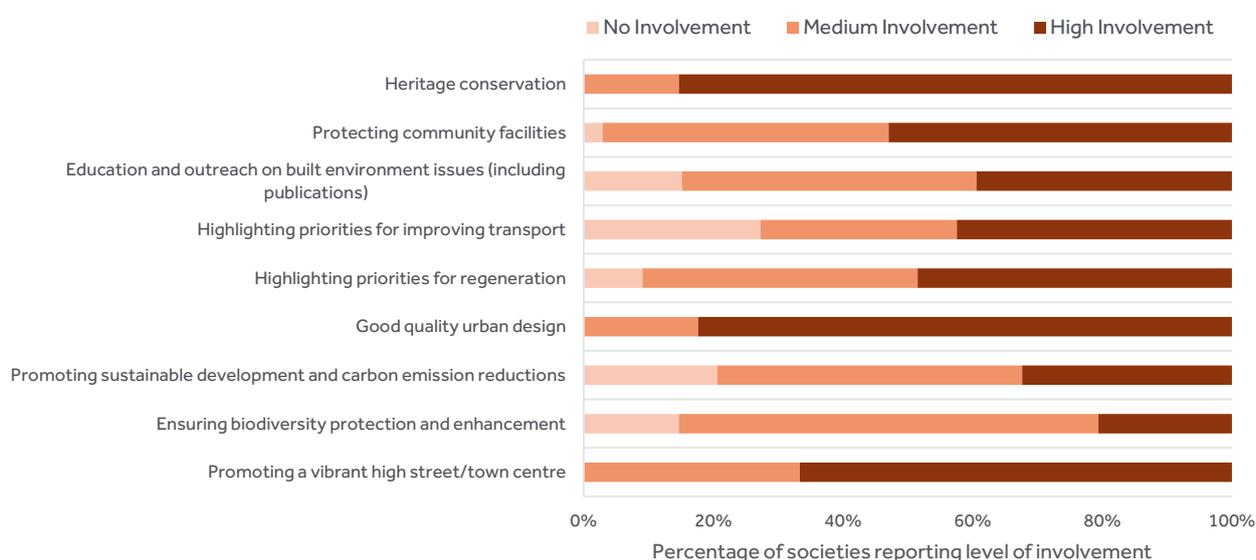


Figure 2: Level of involvement with planning themes of societies 'active' within the formal system

The graph above shows that around 90% or more of the 'active' societies were showing either 'high' or 'medium' involvement in:

- heritage conservation
- protecting community facilities
- highlighting priorities for regeneration
- good quality urban design
- promoting a vibrant high street/town centre

No 'active' civic societies reported 'no involvement' in:

- heritage conservation
- promoting a vibrant high street/town centre
- good quality urban design

More than 20% of the 'active' civic societies were not involved in:

- highlighting priorities for improving transport
- promoting sustainable development and carbon emission reductions

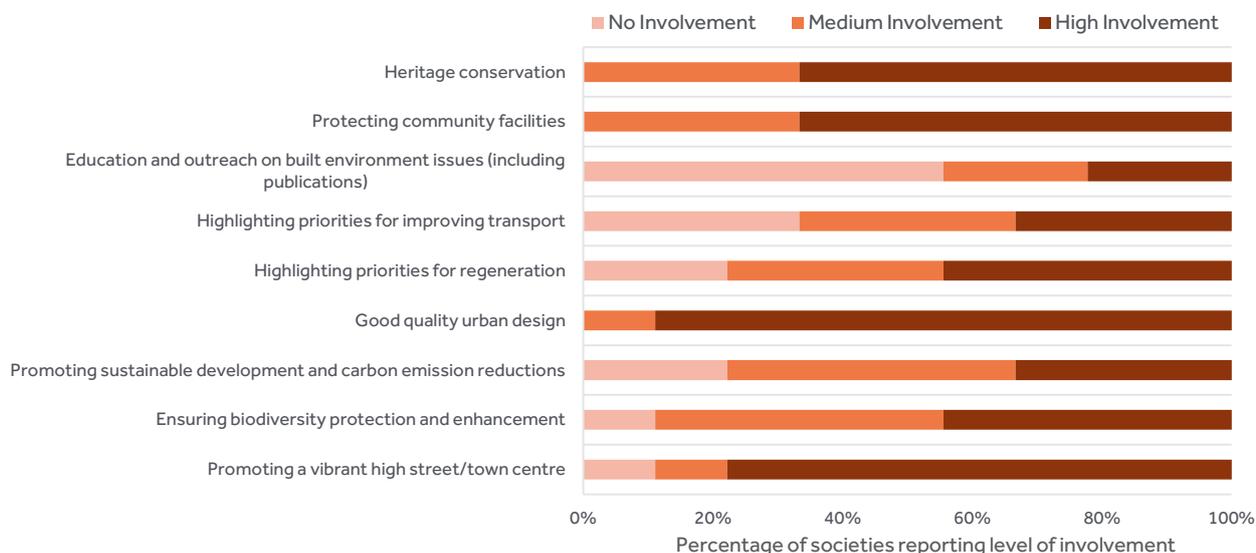


Figure 3: Level of involvement with planning themes of societies 'very active' within the formal system

The graph above shows that around 90% or more of the 'active' societies were showing either 'high' or 'medium' involvement in:

- heritage conservation
- protecting community facilities
- good quality urban design
- ensuring biodiversity protection and enhancement
- promoting a vibrant high street/town centre

All the 'very active' civic societies were showing either 'high' or 'medium' involvement in:

- heritage conservation
- protecting community facilities
- good quality urban design

More than 20% of the 'very active' societies were not involved in:

- education and outreach on built environment issues
- highlighting priorities for improving transport
- highlighting priorities for regeneration
- promoting sustainable development and carbon emission reductions

The above cross-tabulations suggest the following:

Most civic societies, including those categorised as 'not active' are still showing either 'high' or 'medium' involvement in heritage conservation, promoting good quality urban design,

promoting a vibrant high street/town centre and protecting community facilities. These four themes consistently rank very high on civic society agendas regardless of their levels of activity within the formal planning system.

Civic societies in the middle range of activity tend to spread themselves over more themes than the 'not active' or 'very active' civic societies, suggesting that the 'very active' societies are more focused and selective in their involvement.

Does the level of activity in different themes influence the quality of the relationship with the LPA?

In this section we explore how the level of activity in particular themes correlates with the quality of the relationship that the civic societies have with the LPA. In other words, we want to know whether the themes in which civic societies are active vary with the quality of relationship they have with the LPA. Civic societies were categorised based on their response to the following question: 'How involved is your civic society with the following?' 'No involvement' indicates civic societies that rated their involvement as 0 or 1 on an activity scale from 0 to 5, 'medium involvement' indicates civic societies that rated their involvement as 2 or 3 and 'high involvement' indicates civic societies that rated their involvement as 4 or 5. Civic societies were also asked to rate their relationship with the planning system on a scale from 1 to 5. Those who rated their relationship as 1 or 2 were classified as having a 'poor' relationship. Those who rated the relationship as 3 were classified as having a 'neutral' relationship and those who rated the relationship as 4 or 5 were classified as having a 'good' relationship. Figures 4 to 6 below summarise these explorations.

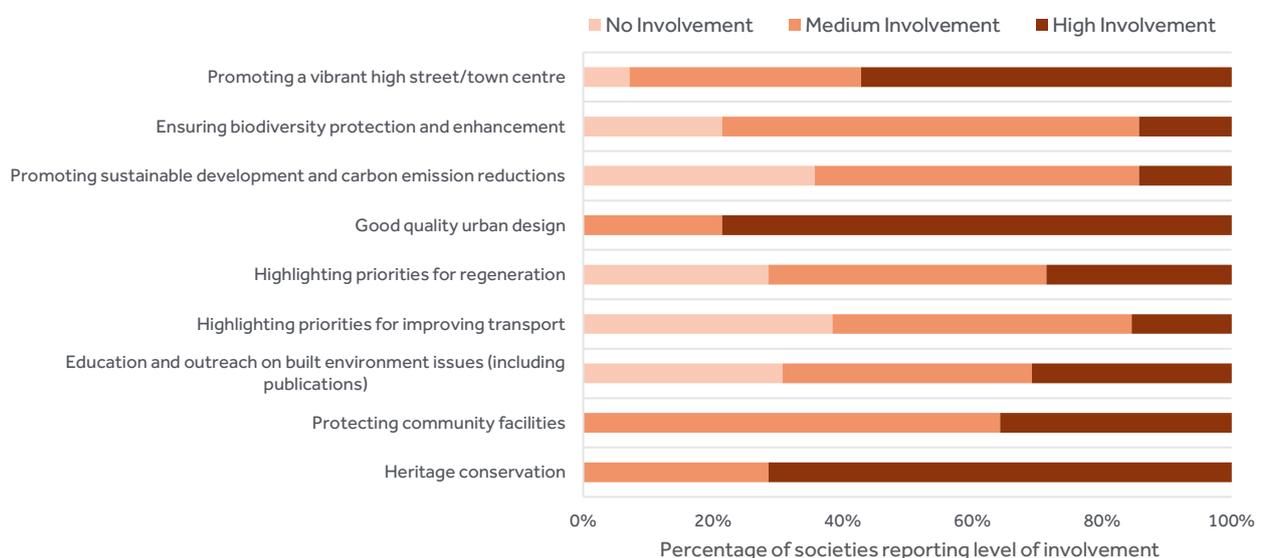


Figure 4: Level of involvement in various themes of civic societies who rated their relationship with the LPA as 'poor'

Even if their relationship with the LPA was weighted as 'poor', most civic societies were still working across all themes to a greater or lesser extent. All civic societies stated that they had either 'medium' or 'high' involvement in:

- heritage conservation

- good quality urban design
- protecting community facilities

The themes that showed the least amount of activity still showed more than 60% of civic societies stating that they had either 'medium' or 'high' involvement in:

- promoting sustainable development and carbon emission reductions
- highlighting priorities for improving transport

Nearly 60% of civic societies also reported promoting a vibrant high street/town centre.

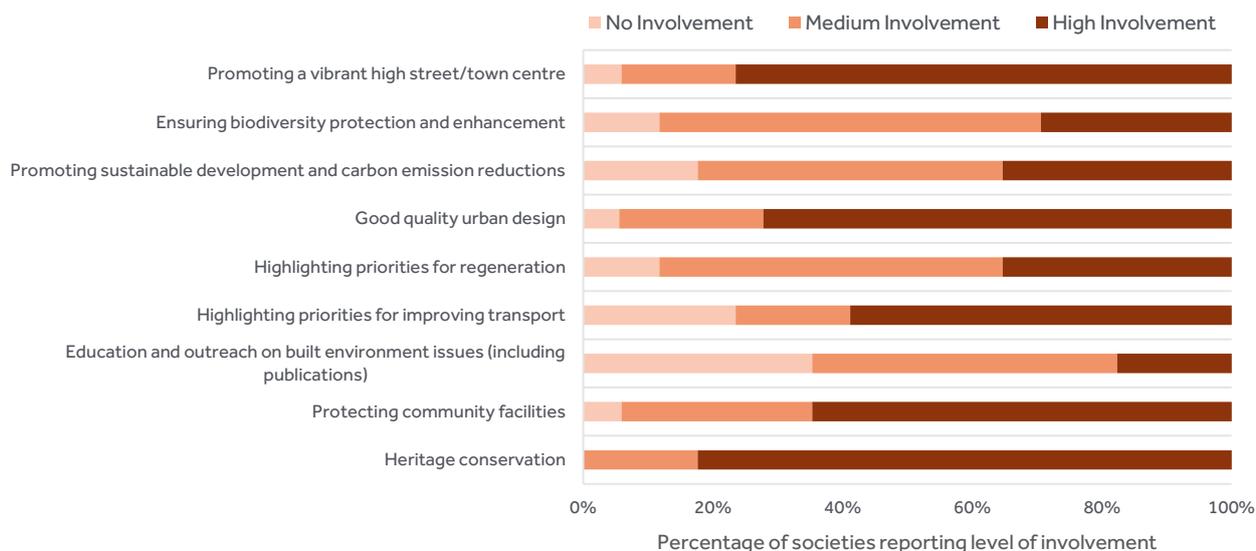


Figure 5: Level of involvement in various themes of civic societies who rated their relationship with the LPA as 'neutral'

Among civic societies that rated their relationship with the LPA as neutral, 60% or above stated that they had 'high' involvement in:

- heritage conservation
- protecting community facilities
- good quality urban design
- promoting a vibrant high street/town centre

Nearly 60% of civic societies in this category reported 'Highlighting priorities for improving transport' as a theme that they were highly involved with. The thematic areas where all civic societies were involved to a 'medium' or 'high' level were:

- heritage conservation

The themes that showed the least amount of activity still showed more than 60% of civic societies stating that their involvement was either at a 'medium' or 'high' level. The least involvement (just over 60% had a 'medium' or 'high' involvement) was in:

- education and outreach on built environment issues

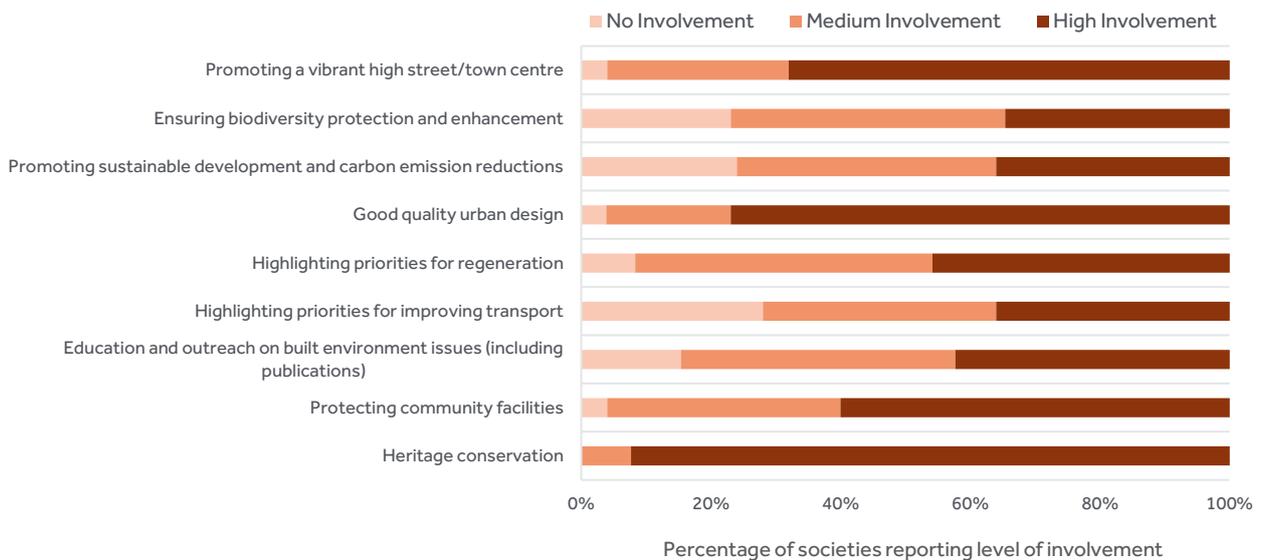


Figure 6: Level of involvement in various themes of civic societies who rated their relationship with the LPA as 'good'

Among civic societies that rated their relationship with the LPA as good, 60% or above stated that their involvement was 'high' in:

- heritage conservation
- good quality urban design
- promoting a vibrant high street/town centre

Nearly 60% of civic societies in this category reported 'Protecting community facilities' also as a theme that they were highly involved with. The only theme where all civic societies were involved to a 'medium' or 'high' level was:

- heritage conservation

The themes that showed the least amount of activity still showed more than 70% of civic societies stating that their involvement was either 'medium' or 'high'. The least involvement (just over 70%) was in:

- highlighting priorities for improving transport
- promoting sustainable development and carbon emission reductions
- ensuring biodiversity protection and enhancement

The above cross-tabulations suggest that heritage conservation is a popular theme of civic society engagement, and all civic societies are engaged with the theme to a greater or lesser extent regardless of the nature of the relationship with the LPA. Civic societies that rated their relationship with the LPA as 'poor' and 'good' were similar in the themes of lesser activity when compared to those that rated their relationship as 'neutral'.

Civic societies that rated their relationship with the LPA as 'poor' showed fewer thematic areas in which they were 'very involved'. The civic societies that rated their relationship with the LPA as 'neutral' showed more thematic areas in which they were 'very involved'.

Does the level of activity in the planning system relate to the number of individual planning decisions that societies are dealing with?

In this section we explore whether the level of activity in the planning system that the civic societies report correlates with the number of individual planning applications that the civic societies are dealing with, as opposed to other types of activity. Civic societies dealing with 0 to 20 planning decisions in a year were classified as dealing with a 'small' number of applications, 21 to 60 were classified as 'medium' and 61 and above were classified as 'large'. Civic societies were categorised into 'not active', 'active' and 'very active' based upon their response to the following question: 'Overall, what proportion of your society's work would you say is about working with the formal planning system?' Societies that ticked 0 to 40% were classified as 'not active', 40 to 60% as 'active' and 60 to more than 80% as 'very active'.

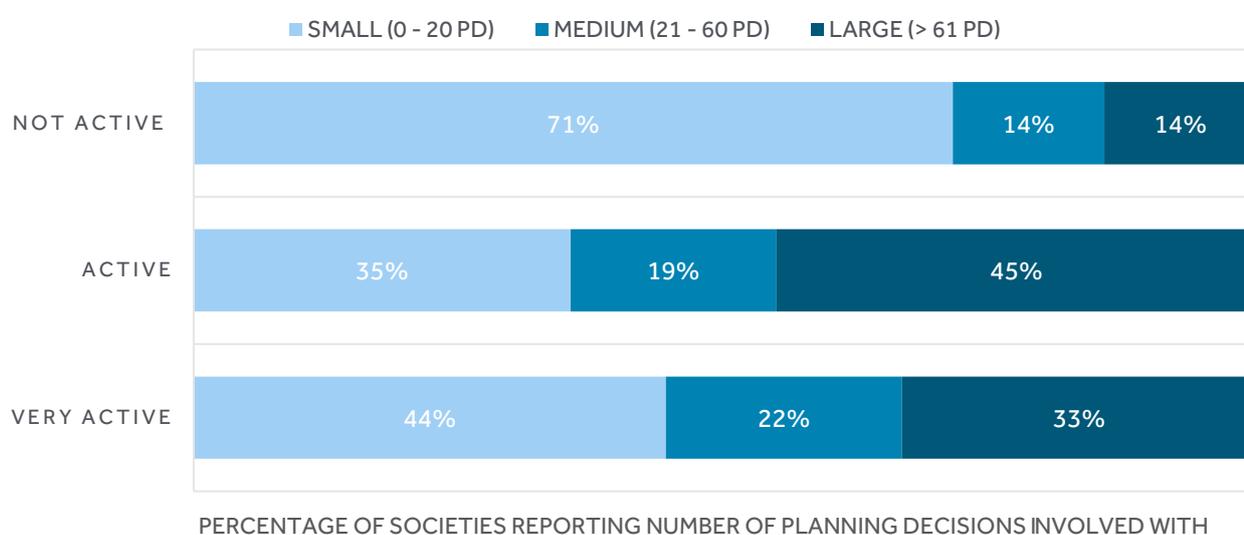


Figure 7: Volume of planning decisions (PD) civic societies engage with, in a year, by level of engagement with the planning system

Figure 7 shows that the 'active' civic societies engaged with the largest volume of planning decisions. 45% of this group of civic societies were handling 'large' volumes of planning decisions and 19% were handling 'medium' volumes. The 'very active' societies handled fewer planning decisions per year than the 'active' civic societies. 33% of the 'very active' group were handling 'large' volumes of planning applications and 22% were handling 'medium' volumes.

44% of the group who saw themselves as 'very active' handled 'small' volumes of planning applications while the corresponding percentage for the civic societies that saw themselves as just 'active' was 35%.

Within the groups that saw themselves as not actively engaged with the planning system, 14% were still handling 'large' volumes of planning applications and another 14% were still handling 'medium' volumes.

The data also suggests that the civic societies who saw themselves as 'active' or 'very active' were more polarised in terms of the number of planning applications they were engaged in.

Thus only 19% of civic societies in the 'active' category were involved in 'medium' volumes of planning decisions. The corresponding percentage for the 'very active' category was 22%.

The percentages above indicate that involvement with planning applications, though an important part of the overall portfolio of civic societies, only forms part of their activity portfolio. Thus, handling high volumes of planning applications does not necessarily mean high levels of engagement with the LPA, and vice versa. Nevertheless, the high polarisation with respect to number of planning applications handled in the 'active' and 'very active' societies again suggests that civic societies are intentionally or unintentionally making decisions to prioritise either high levels of involvement in planning decisions or low levels of involvement in planning decisions.

In addition to the variable size and capacity of civic societies, this data might indicate locational variations in the number of planning applications available for civic societies to engage with, even though they are actively engaged with the planning system. There are also some civic societies focused on a large volume of planning applications even if they consider themselves to be not actively engaged with the formal planning system. This is potentially linked to how engagement with the planning system fits within a wider portfolio of activities. In turn, this may relate to the diversity in societies' capacity and priorities highlighted by the Part A report (Maidment & Chettiparamb, 2022).

It is worth noting that, since the data for this cross-tabulation was drawn from civic societies recording how they viewed themselves, there could also be variations in perceptions of how civic societies, or those who filled in the questionnaire on behalf of a civic society, viewed themselves.

Does the level of activity in the planning system relate to the number of ways in which societies try to influence individual planning proposals?

This section explores if the level of activity in the planning system correlates with the number of ways in which civic societies try to influence specific development proposals. We probe for the diversity of ways that civic societies employ to campaign/advocate for their views. 'Less diverse ways' indicates 1 to 3 ways, 'diverse ways' indicates 4 to 6 ways and 'most diverse ways' indicates 7 to 9 ways. This was correlated to the level of the civic society's activity with the LPA. Civic societies were categorised into 'not active', 'active' and 'very active' based upon their response to the following question: 'Overall, what proportion of your society's work would you say is about working with the formal planning system?' Societies that ticked 0 to 40% were classified as 'not active', 40 to 60% as 'active' and 60 to more than 80% as 'very active'.

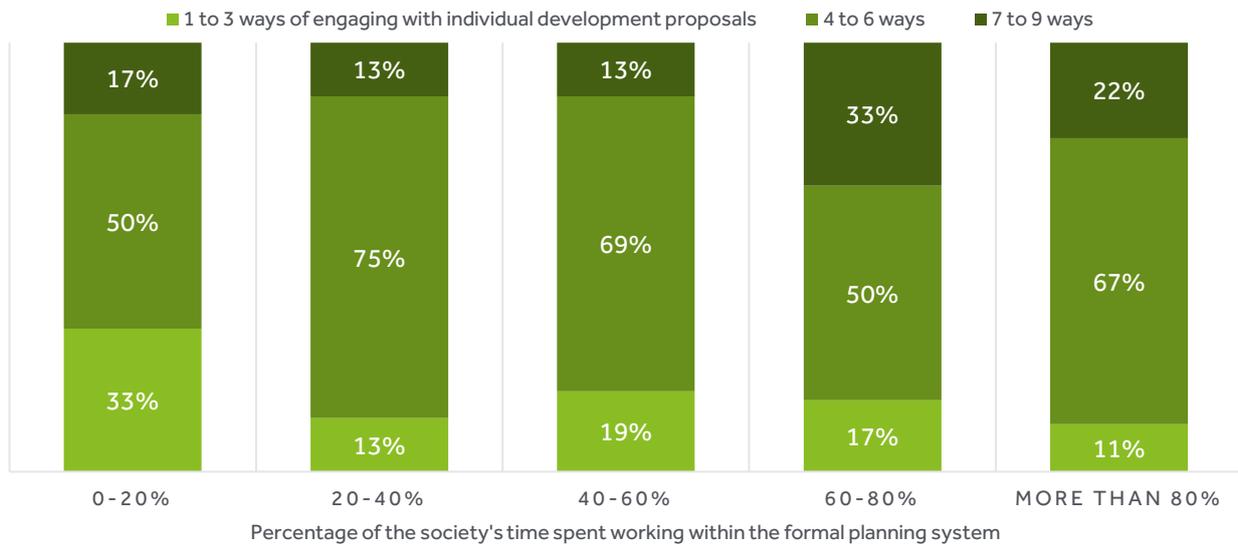


Figure 8: The level of civic societies' activity with the formal planning system by how many ways they try to influence development proposals

Figure 8 shows that civic societies are generally using 4 to 6 ways to engage with the planning system regardless of their level of involvement with the planning system. For societies who report that up to 20% of their work is in the planning, around one third of these are engaging with individual proposals in only a few ways (1 to 3), such that there seems to be some relationship between a lower level of activity in the planning system and less diversity in modes of engagement. It is worth noting, however, that even among the least active civic societies, around 67% are using 4 or more ways of engaging with the LPA on development proposals.

Does the level of activity in the planning system relate to the number of ways in which societies try to influence the Local Plan?

This section considers whether the proportion of societies' work in the planning system correlates with their depth of engagement with the Local Plan, indicated by the number of ways that they engage with this. We probe for the diversity of ways that civic societies employ for influencing the Local Plan. 'Less diverse ways' indicates 1 to 3 ways, 'diverse ways' indicates 4 or 5 ways and 'most diverse ways' indicates 6 or 7 ways. This was correlated to the level of the civic society's activity within the formal planning system. Civic societies were categorised into 'not active', 'active' and 'very active' based upon their response to the following question: 'Overall, what proportion of your society's work would you say is about working with the formal planning system?' Societies that ticked 0 to 40% were classified as 'not active', 40 to 60% as 'active' and 60 to more than 80% as 'very active'. This is the same categorisation used in earlier parts of the report.

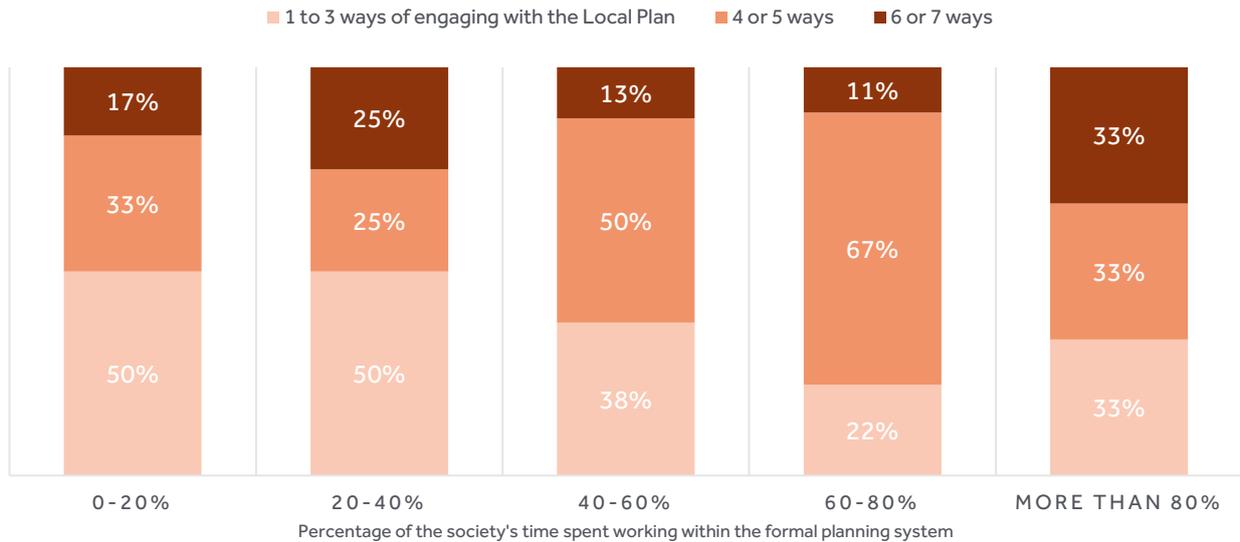


Figure 9: The level of civic societies' involvement with the formal planning system by how many ways they get involved with the Local Plan process

The overall picture is that civic societies engage with the Local Plan in fewer ways than with individual planning applications, perhaps not surprising given the relatively few ways to engage. This is most marked for societies where 0 to 20% and 20 to 40% of their work is in the planning system, where 50% of these engaged in 1 to 3 ways, compared to 33% and 13% falling into this category for individual proposals. This also links to key messages from the Part A report (Maidment & Chettiparamb, 2022), which showed that civic societies find the Local Plan process more abstract and difficult to engage with.

At the other end of the scale are civic societies for whom 60 to 80% of their work is in the planning system. They engage with the Local Plan in the greatest variety of ways, with 78% engaging in either 4 or 5 ways or 6 or 7 ways. In contrast, in the 'More than 80%' category the picture is more polarised, with a third (33%) of these engaging in 6 or 7 ways (more than any other category) but where another third engage in only 1 to 3 ways. This perhaps suggests that other factors, for example purpose of engagement, capacity and expertise, may be more influential in determining depth of engagement with the Local Plan.

Does the number of individual planning proposals engaged with relate to the number of ways in which civic societies try to influence individual planning proposals?

In this section we explore if the number of ways in which civic societies engage with an individual planning application correlates with the number of individual planning applications that the civic societies engage with. In other words, do civic societies that use multiple ways to engage with applications also engage with a greater number of planning applications. It is worth remembering here the conclusion from Figure 8 that spending a greater proportion of time working in the planning system does not necessarily relate to the number of applications engaged with (and vice versa).

As in the previous question, those that engaged in 1 to 3 ways were classified as 'less diverse ways', those that engaged in 4 to 6 ways were classified as 'diverse ways' and those that used 7 to 9 methods of engagement with proposals were classified as 'most diverse ways'. Also, as previously, civic societies dealing with 0 to 20 planning decisions in a year were classified as 'small', 21 to 60 were classified as 'medium' and 61 and above were classified as 'large'.

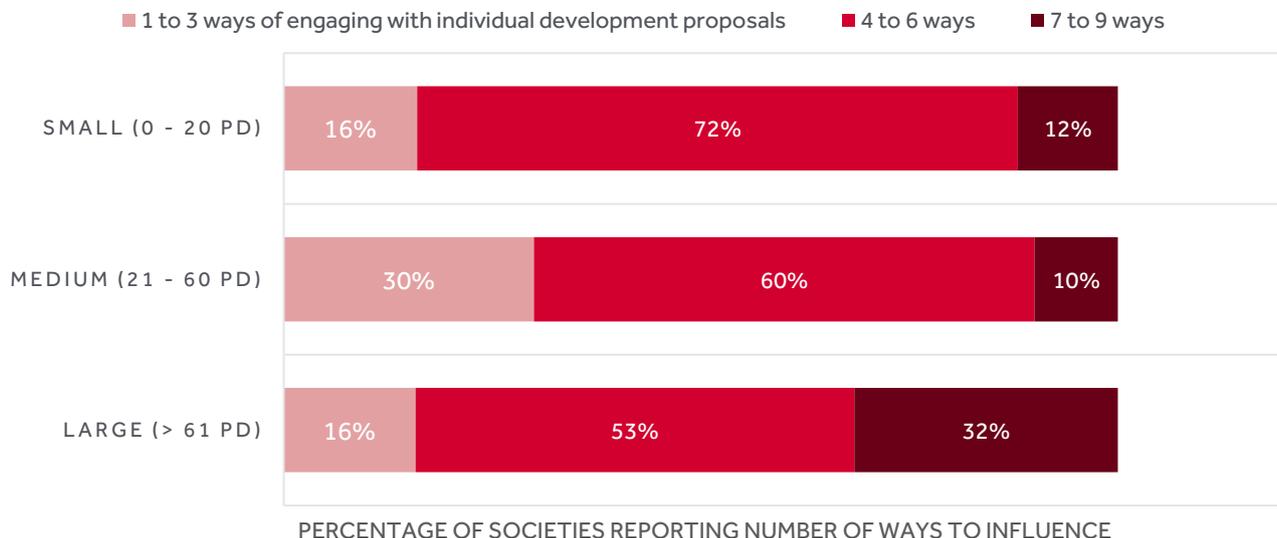


Figure 10: The number of ways in which specific development proposals are influenced against volume of planning decisions in the last 12 months

32% of those working with 'large' volumes were working in 7 to 9 ways compared with 10% for the 'medium' range and 12% for the 'small' range. Across all volumes of planning decisions, most civic societies were engaging in 4 to 9 ways. There were more (30%) civic societies working in 1 to 3 ways (the 'least diverse ways' category) in the 'medium' range of volumes of planning applications than in the 'small' or 'large' range (16% for both).

The civic societies that are engaged with 'large' volumes of planning decisions are working in more ways, with 32% of these engaging in the most diverse ways. This suggests that the expertise developed through dealing with a large number of applications may be linked to breadth/depth of engagement.

However, those dealing with a 'medium' level of applications seem to be using the most limited number of ways to influence planning decisions, with only 10% of these engaging in 7 to 9 ways and 30% (more than those dealing with either a 'small' or 'large' number of applications) engaging in only 1 to 3 ways.

Thus, while civic societies dealing with substantially large volumes of planning applications are employing a greater number of ways of engagement, those in the medium and small categories are employing fewer ways, with the societies dealing with medium volumes being least diverse in the number of ways of engagement. This suggests that the number of ways to engage persists when civic societies are engaging in small and medium volumes. When the volume of applications continues to increase, however, civic societies seem to further diversify ways of engagement.

Part 2: Engagement in Local Plans Compared to Individual Planning Applications

Taking the two different aspects of the planning system, this part of the report compares how civic societies engage relatively in each.

The aim of this part is to consider whether civic societies find it relatively easier to engage with individual planning applications or the process of preparing a Local Plan. These different parts of the planning system have different aims that require societies to draw on different knowledge and experiences. In particular, the Part A report (Maidment & Chettiparamb, 2022) noted that civic societies often found Local Plan processes too abstract and more difficult to engage with.

What is the difference between civic society engagement in Local Plans vis-à-vis individual planning applications?

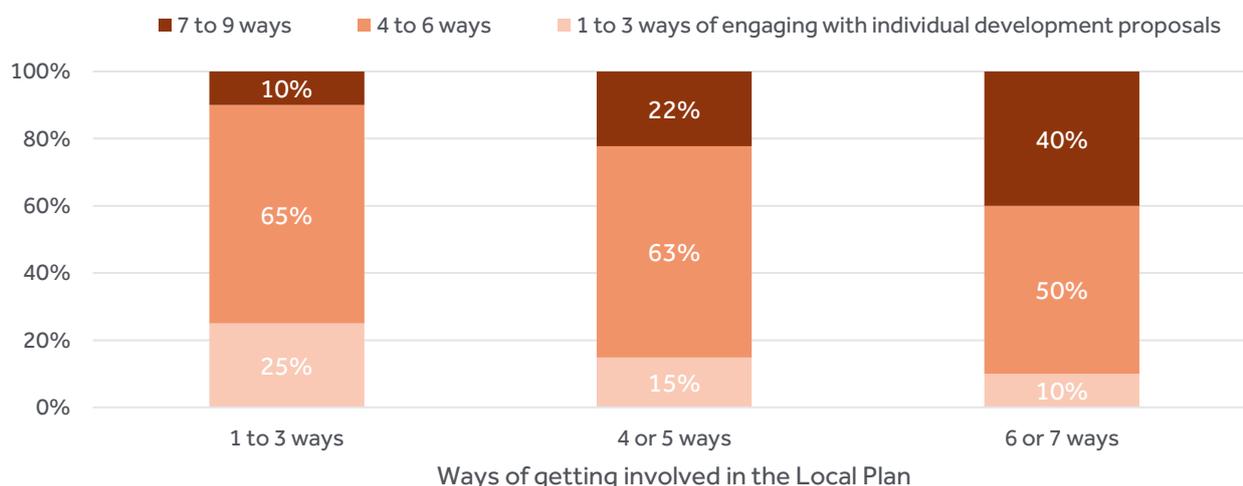


Figure 11: Level of engagement with the Local Plan linked to ways of influencing specific development proposals

The questionnaire asked societies about the range of ways they engaged with both individual planning applications and the Local Plan. For individual applications, these ranged from making comments on planning applications and taking legal action; for Local Plans there were fewer ways to engage, from making written comments, to holding consultation events and speaking to the media. Cross-tabulating the number of ways in which civic societies engage gives an indication of their relative depth of involvement in each part of the system.

The resulting picture, as presented in Figure 11, shows that 25% of civic societies who are less involved in Local Plans are also involved in only a few ways in individual planning applications. At the other end of the scale, 40% of societies who are involved in Local Plans in a greater number of ways are also involved in individual planning applications in more ways.

Overall, engaging with one part of the system in a variety of ways is correlated to a similar depth of engagement in the other.

Conversely, 10% of civic societies who use a wide variety of mechanisms to engage in Local Plans, use only a few ways to engage in individual planning applications. The opposite is true for 10% of the societies who engage deeply with individual applications, but only engage in 1 to 3 ways with the Local Plan.

That civic societies who engage deeply with individual applications engage only in limited ways with the Local Plan is, perhaps, to be expected, given the greater variety of actions that can be taken to engage with individual planning applications, including some extremes such as taking legal action. However, the fact that some civic societies who use a wide variety of mechanisms to engage in Local Plans, use only a few ways to engage in individual planning applications is more surprising. Given the knowledge of mechanisms used in the Local Plan engagement, the reason for lower means of engagement in individual planning applications is unclear.

Does the number of individual planning proposals engaged with relate to the number of ways in which societies try to influence Local Plans?

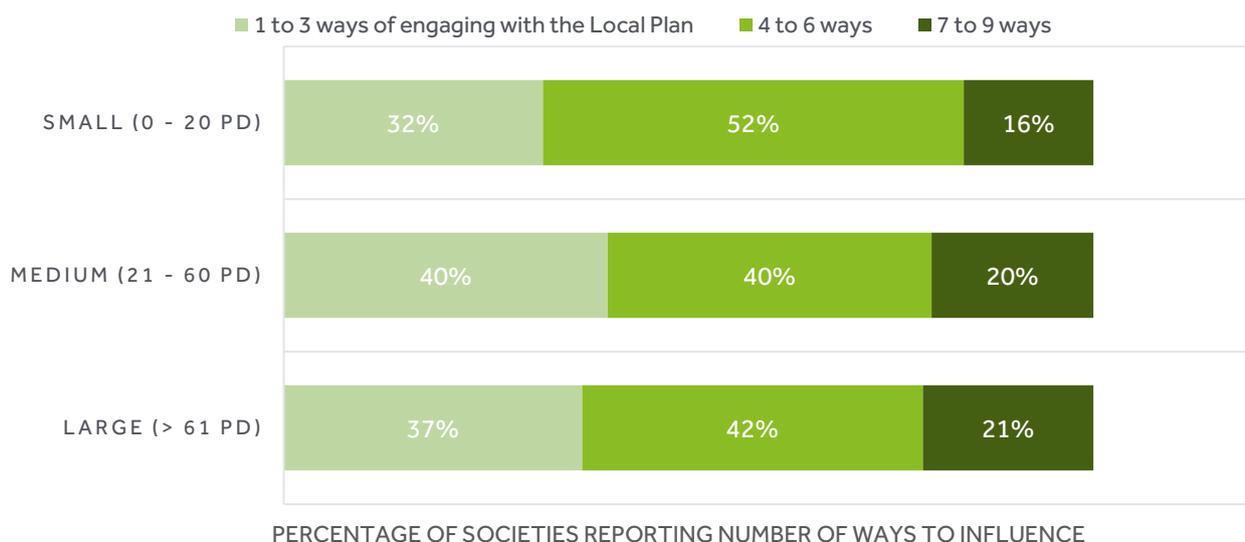


Figure 12: Number of ways societies get involved in the Local Plan process linked to volume of planning decisions (PD) in the last 12 months

Figure 10 showed that societies dealing with a large volume of planning applications demonstrate an understanding of the system by engaging in a notably greater variety of ways with individual proposals. However, for the same group of societies, Figure 12 shows that this does not translate to engaging with the Local Plan in a variety of ways. This could indicate a choice by societies to focus on individual proposals rather than the Local Plan.

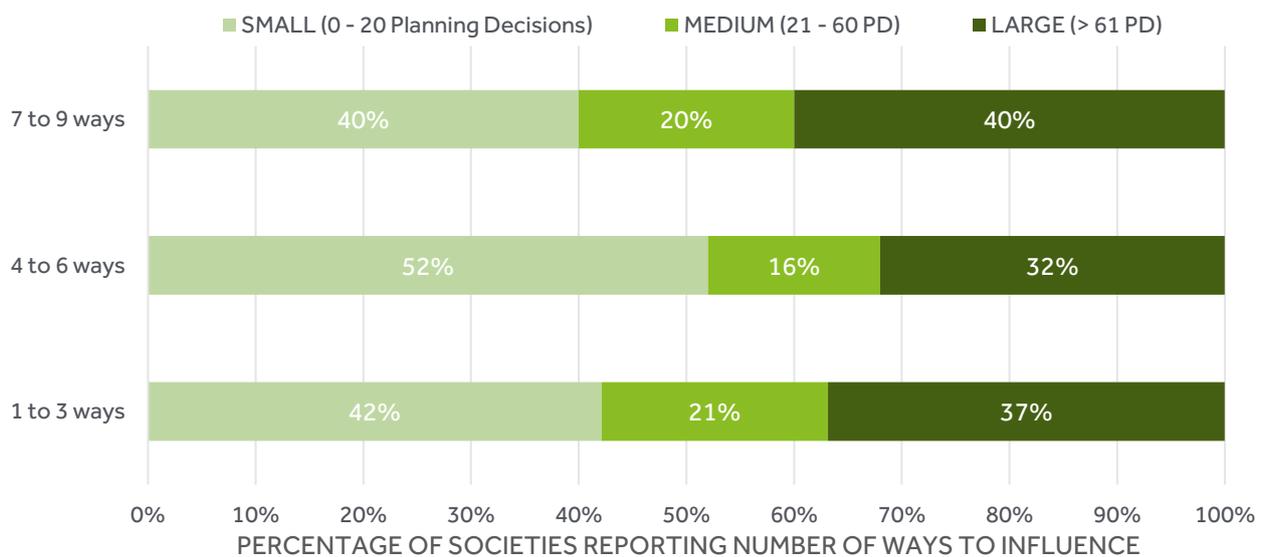


Figure 13: Volume of planning decisions in the last 12 months linked to number of ways societies get involved in the Local Plan process

Figure 13 is similar to Figure 12, but reverses the X and Y axes, in order to examine whether the number of ways which civic societies engage with the Local Plan might influence the volume of planning applications that societies engage with. However, there does not appear to be a strong relationship between the two.

Part 3: Policies Relevant to Civic Societies

This part presents the results of cross-tabulations with possible implications for how civic societies should prioritise their activities moving forwards.

The data addresses key questions around how the work of societies in particular themes and activities shapes their engagement with communities and LPAs. The results allow civic societies to make informed choices about what they want to achieve and how this might influence their engagement with others.

Does more work with the planning system make it easier for civic societies to engage with their local community?

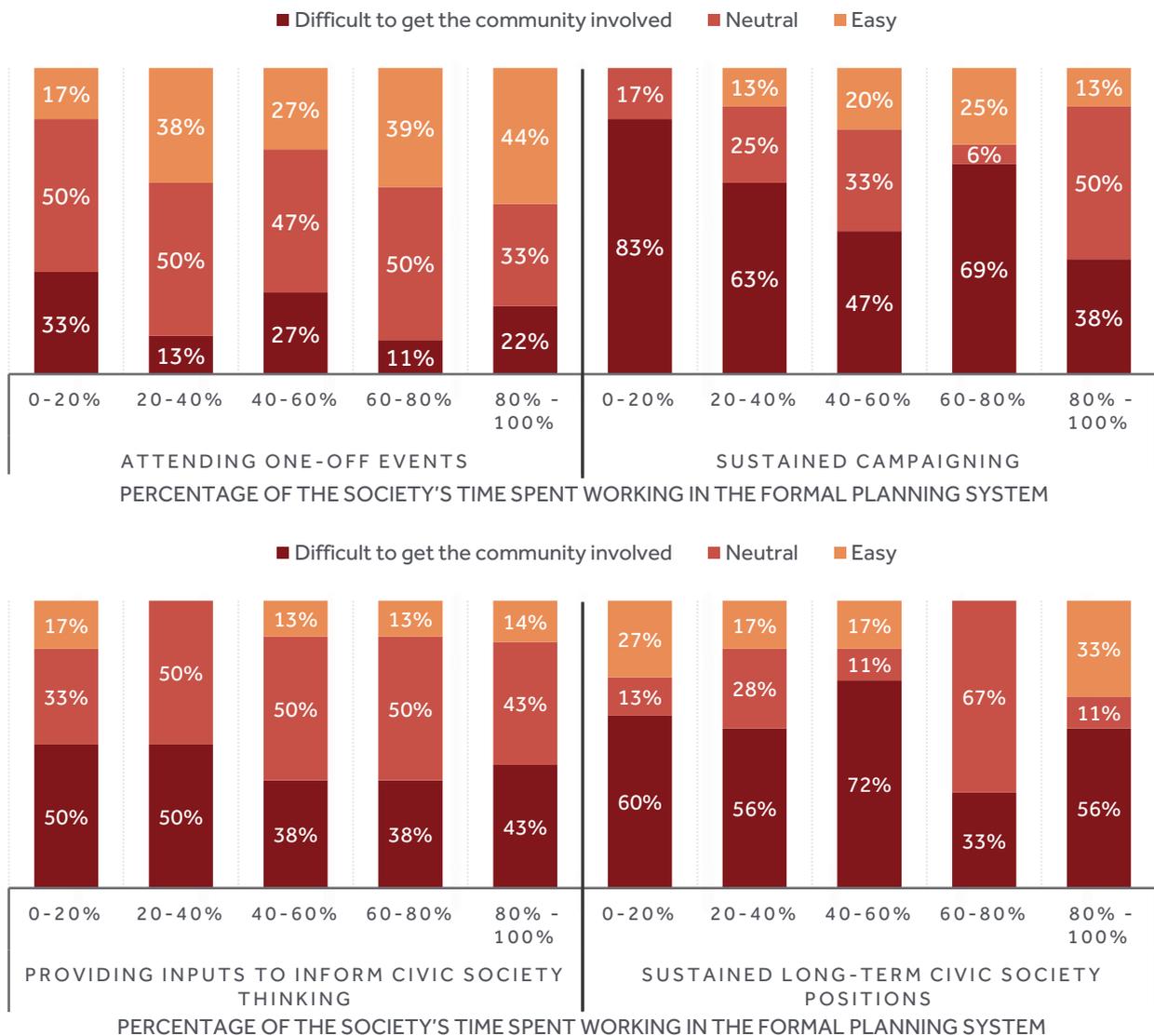


Figure 14: Percentage of the society's time spent working in the formal planning system linked to ability to get members of the community involved

Part A report (Maidment & Chettiparamb, 2022) concluded that civic societies find it difficult to engage their communities in sustained campaigning and in long-term positions. In Figure

14, we probed further to examine if the time spent working in the planning system has any effect on the ability to engage with communities in different ways. In particular, attracting sustained inputs and long-term commitments from the local community are difficult regardless of engagement with the planning system. However, engagement with the planning system does seem to have some influence on how easy it is for civic societies to engage their communities in one-off events and in sustained campaigning.

- When societies spend 80% - 100% of their time working with the planning system, 44% of them find it easy to engage their communities in one-off events. This is to be compared with civic societies who spend less than 20% of their time working with the planning system. Only 17% of this latter group find it easy to engage communities in one-off events.
- The corollary of the above is also true. When societies spend 80% - 100% of their time working with the planning system, only 22% of them find it difficult to engage their communities in one-off events. This is to be compared with civic societies who spend less than 20% of their time working with the planning system. 33% of this group find it harder to engage with the planning system.

The ease for engaging with communities in one-off events when civic societies are involved with the planning system extends also to the ease for involving communities in sustained campaigning. Generally it is easier to involve communities in one-off events than in sustained campaigning. However, when societies spend 80% - 100% of their time working with the planning system, at least 13% of them find it easy to engage their communities in sustained campaigning. This is to be compared with civic societies who spend less than 20% of their time working with the planning system. None in this category found it easy to engage with communities in sustained campaigning.

This pattern of more involvement in the planning system leading to ease of engagement with communities in one-off events and sustained campaigning gets disrupted however in the case of involvement of communities in informing civic society activities and in assuming long-term civic society positions.

- Civic societies that had 20-40% engagement with the planning system (the second lowest) seem to perceive most difficulty in getting the community to provide inputs into civic society thinking.
- Civic societies that had 60-80% engagement with the planning system (the second highest) seem to perceive most difficulty in getting the community to volunteer for long-term civic society positions.

The above variations could be more indicative of civic societies perceptions viz-a-viz their aspirations and intentions.

Overall then, though there is a lack of a clear pattern across all categories of community engagement, but there is a pattern of more engagement with planning systems leading to easier engagement with communities in one-off events and in sustained campaigning. These types of community engagement are probably issue-based, where a good knowledge of the

planning systems probably helps. When it comes to inputting into civic society thinking or assuming civic society positions, civic society knowledge of the planning system on its own does not necessarily help. Experiences of civic societies in the latter kinds of community engagement are more varied possibly reflective of civic society perceptions against their aspirations.

Does involvement in more planning decisions make it easier for civic societies to engage with their local community?

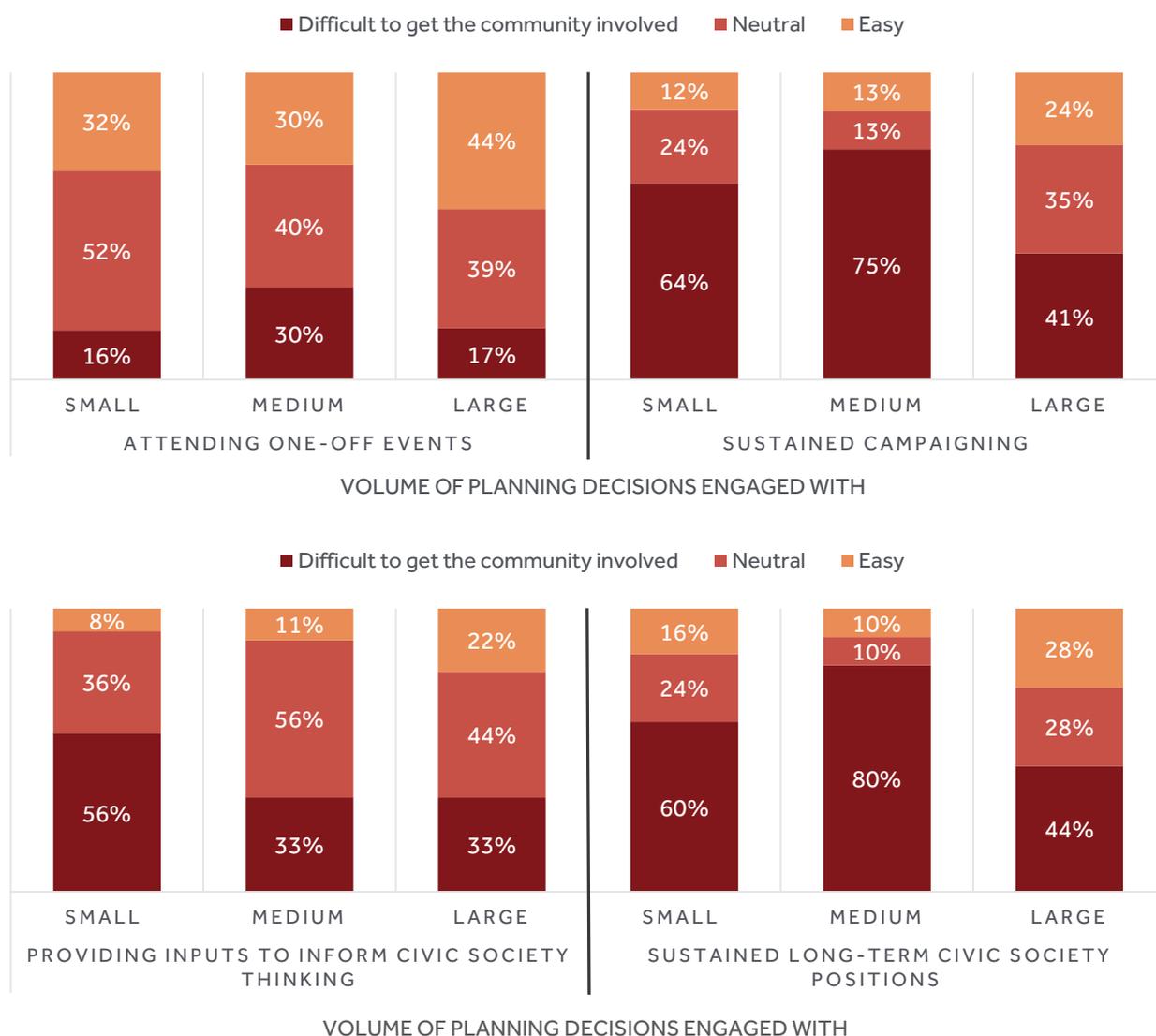


Figure 15: Volume of planning decisions involved in the last 12 months linked to ability to get members of the community involved

This cross-tabulation is a slight variation on that presented in Figure 14. It substitutes the proportion of time that civic societies spend in the planning system for the volume of planning applications they get involved with, as an alternative measure of societies' level of planning activity. These are categorised into 'small' (0 to 20 individual proposals), 'medium' (21 to 60 individual proposals) and 'large' (engaged with more than 60 individual proposals in the last 12 months). It is therefore unsurprising that the results here follow the same general pattern, albeit in a slightly less pronounced fashion in some areas.

Within each area of involvement it seems to be easier to get the community involved if there is a lot of work on planning decisions, and that applies to one-off events, securing inputs from individual members of the community to inform civic society thinking and getting individual members to contribute to sustained campaigning or to serve in long-term civic society positions. However, there are some particular contrasts and similarities within Figure 14 that are worth commenting on:

- In all cases of community engagement, except in the case of community engagement for providing inputs into civic society thinking, the 'medium' group (21-60 individual proposals in the last 12 months) seem to find it more difficult to engage with the community. As stated earlier, varying priorities and ambitions amongst civic societies and the resulting perceptions might be the driver for the mixed perceptions here.
- In place of the 'medium' group, it was the 'small' group that were handling 20 or less planning applications a year who found it the most difficult to engage with the community for providing inputs into civic society thinking. This is reasonable as commenting on planning applications is a very focused way for communities to provide their insights to civic societies and if less of these were occurring the inputs from the community into civic society thinking would also be low.

Overall, this tells a story that civic societies find easier to secure engagement from the local community in external facing events such as one-off events and sustained campaigning on an issue. It is more difficult to get involvement in more internal facing matters such as civic society thinking or civic society offices.

Does the level of activity in different themes influence how easy civic societies find it to involve the communities in different ways?

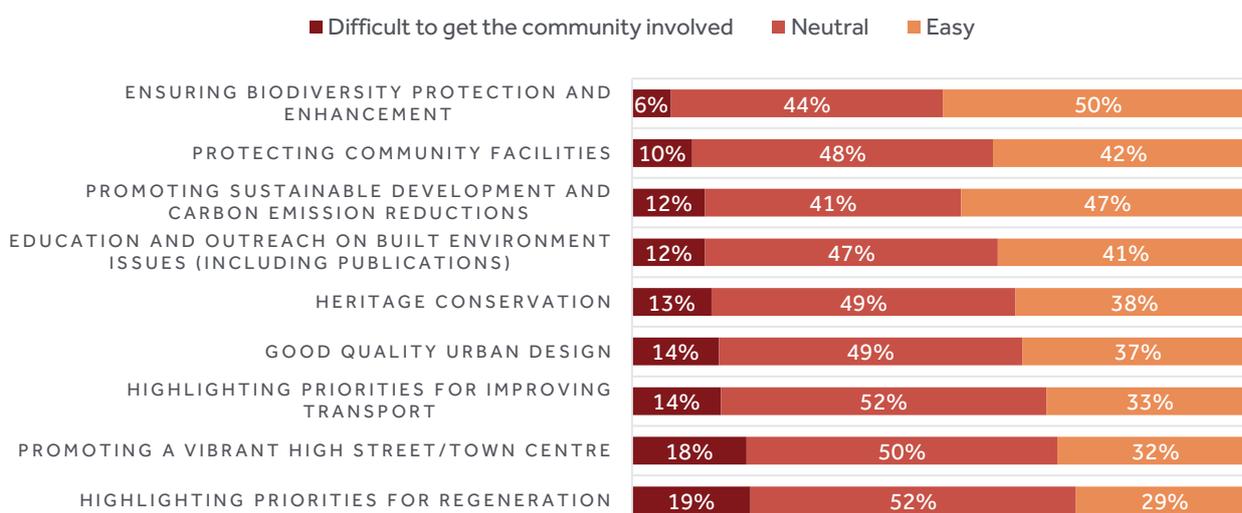


Figure 16: Themes in which societies are 'very active' and the ease with which they get community members to attend one-off events.

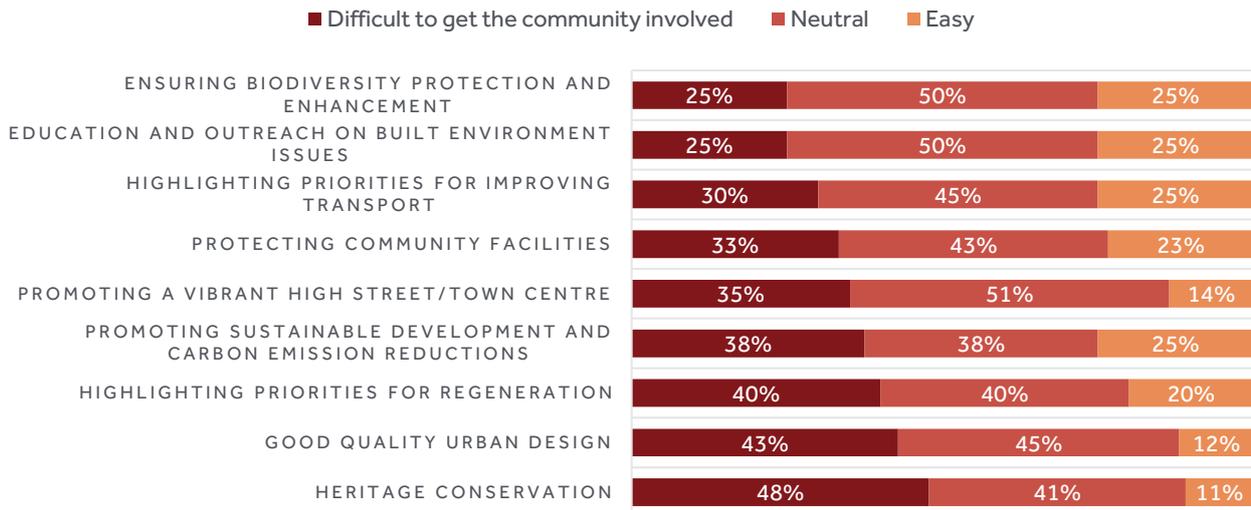


Figure 17: Themes in which societies are 'very active' and the ease with which they get community members to provide inputs to inform civic society thinking.

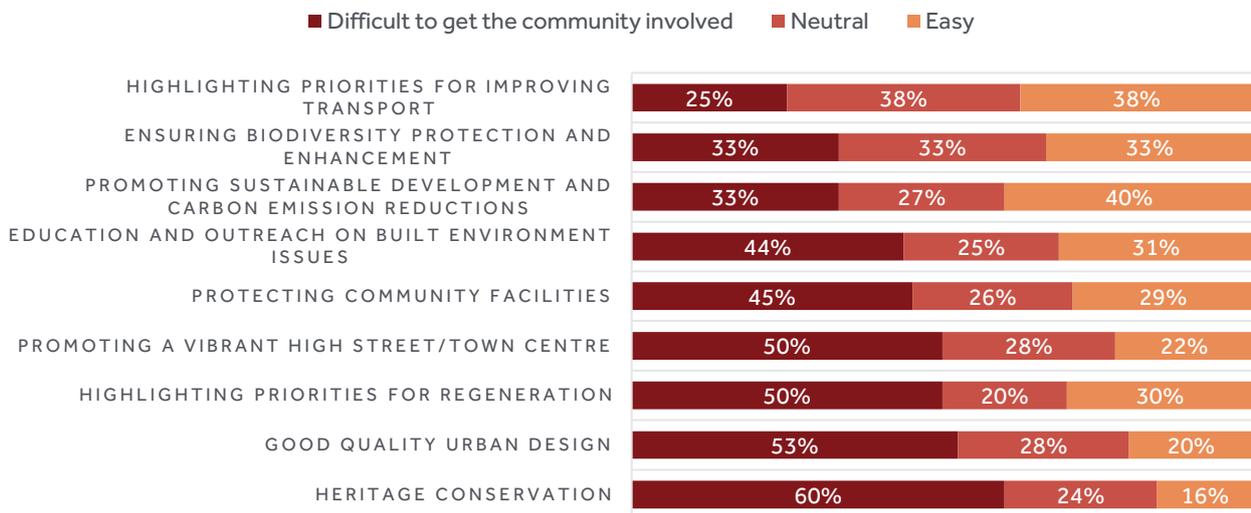


Figure 18: Themes in which societies are 'very active' and the ease with which they get community members involved in sustained campaigning.

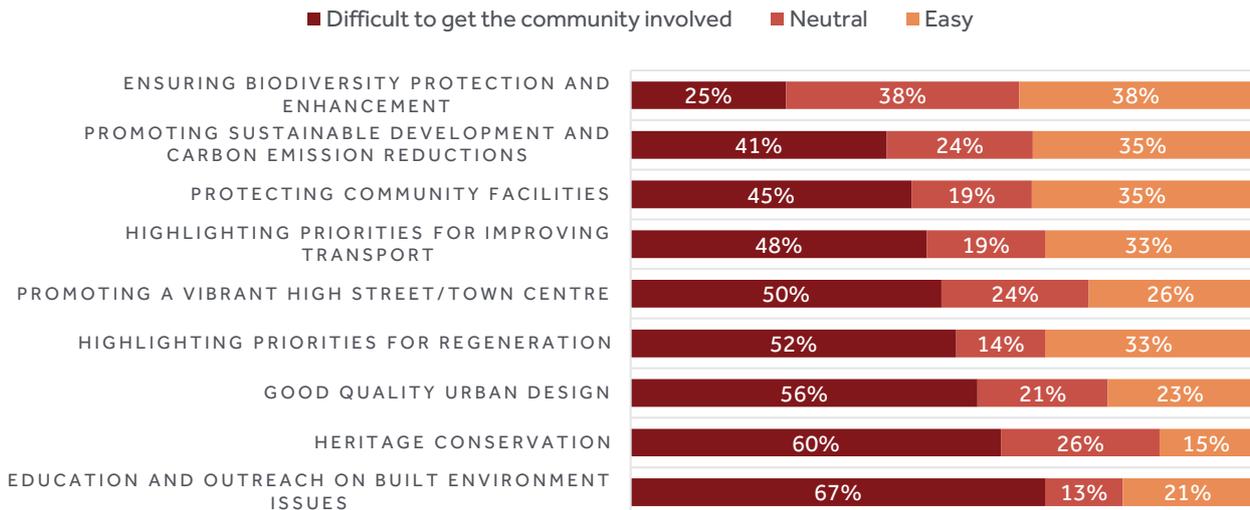


Figure 19: Themes in which societies are 'very active' and the ease with which they get community members involved in sustained long-term civic society positions.

Building on the previous discussion of how societies' level of engagement with the formal planning system is linked to depth of community engagement, Figures 16-19 places this in the context of other themes with which societies are engaged ('very active').

These are separated into different figures, to reflect that the themes are presented in the order by which they appear to drive their influence on different levels of community engagement, such that the figures are not directly comparable. However, taken together, they do highlight some tentative trends:

- Civic societies engaging with biodiversity generally find it less difficult to engage communities across the board, from one-off events to recruiting members into long-term society positions. This might indicate that those engaged in biodiversity make a more sustained commitment.
- Civic society activities centred on promoting sustainable development also stand out as potentially driving deeper forms of engagement from the community:
 - 40% of 'very active' societies in this theme described engaging communities in sustained campaigning as 'easy'.
 - 35% of 'very active' societies in this theme described engaging the community in long-term civic society positions as 'easy'.
 - 47% of 'very active' societies in this theme also described getting the community involved in one-off events as 'easy'.
- Conversely, even though civic societies are perhaps best known for their work on heritage conservation, the most active societies in this area find it more difficult to engage communities in any more sustained commitments beyond one-off events. This could be because they are doing more work in this area, increasing their perception of how difficult it is to engage the community.

Taken together, these results start to suggest that societies who are moving into contemporary environmental issues around sustainability and biodiversity are finding it slightly easier to engage with their communities in greater depth.

Do societies working more with the planning system have good relationships with their LPAs?

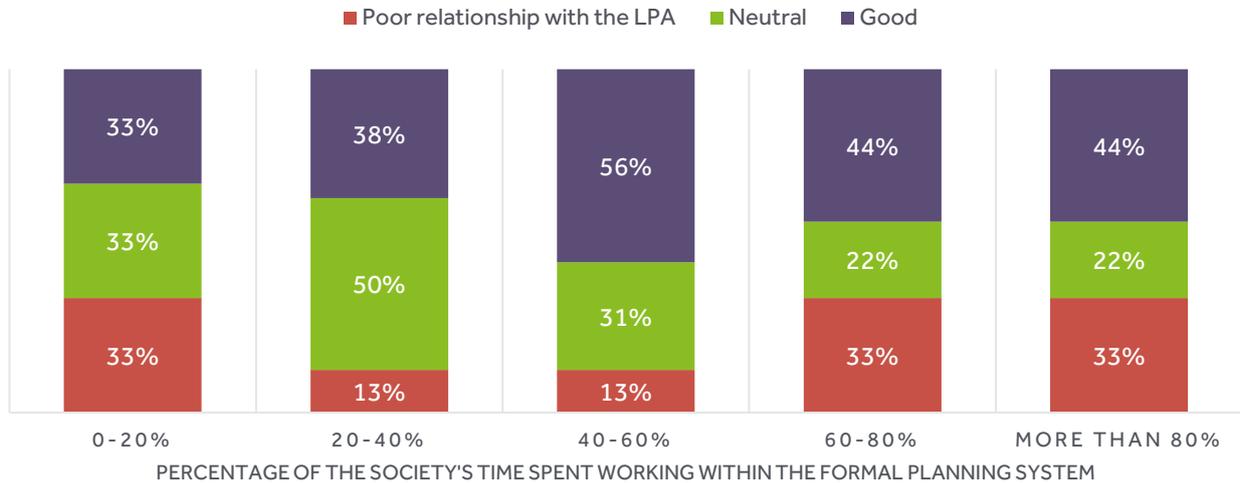


Figure 20: Quality of relationship with LPA linked to time working in the planning system

Figure 20 shows that civic societies who spend 40 to 60% of their time on planning seem to have better relationships with LPAs. Conversely, those spending less than 20% of their time working in the planning system and those spending more than 60% of their time working in the planning system seemed to have poorer relationships, with a third of societies in each of these categories reporting a 'poor' relationship.

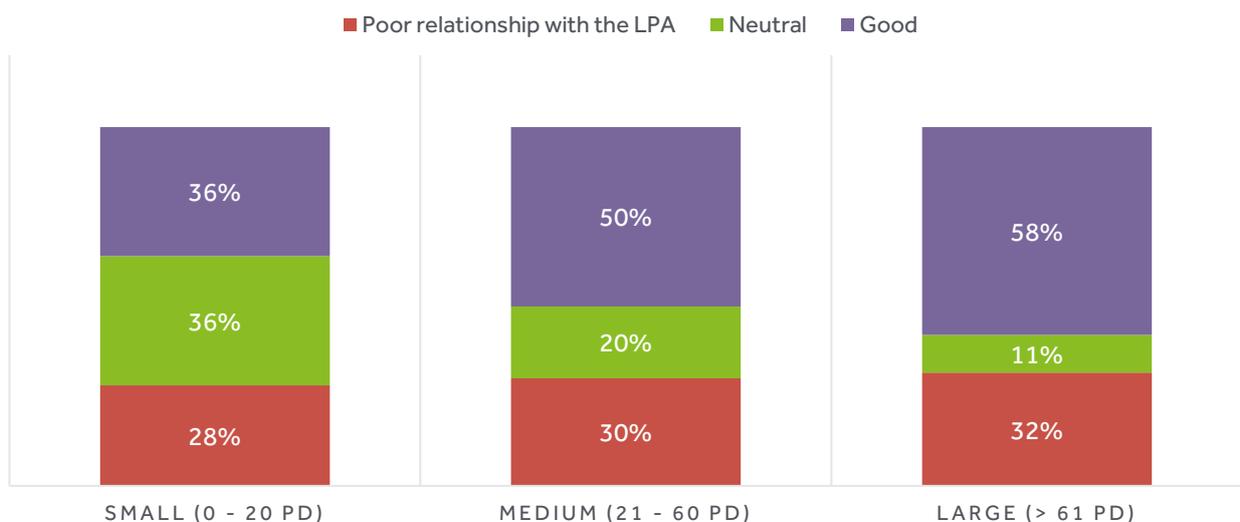


Figure 21: Quality of relationship with LPA linked to volume of planning applications in the last 12 months

Figure 21 maps the quality of the relationship against the number of applications engaged with in the last 12 months. This shows a slightly different picture. As the number of planning applications dealt with increases, the quality of the relationships seem to get more polarised, in the sense that there are more civic societies that report a 'poor' or 'good' relationship than a 'neutral' relationship. The increased polarisation for civic societies engaging with a large number of applications is consistent with the polarisation in civic societies spending more than 60% of their time working in the planning system (Figure 20). This suggests that, when dealing with more planning applications, relationships with the LPA tend to get either more constructive or obstructive.

Do societies who engage in more technical ways also engage more effectively in other ways?

A small subset of seven societies reported that they engage in the 'purchase of land' and 'taking legal action' as part of their engagement with individual planning applications. These are highly technical mechanisms, requiring access to specialist skills and knowledge. It was considered relevant to explore whether this depth of engagement had an impact in other ways for this small group of societies.

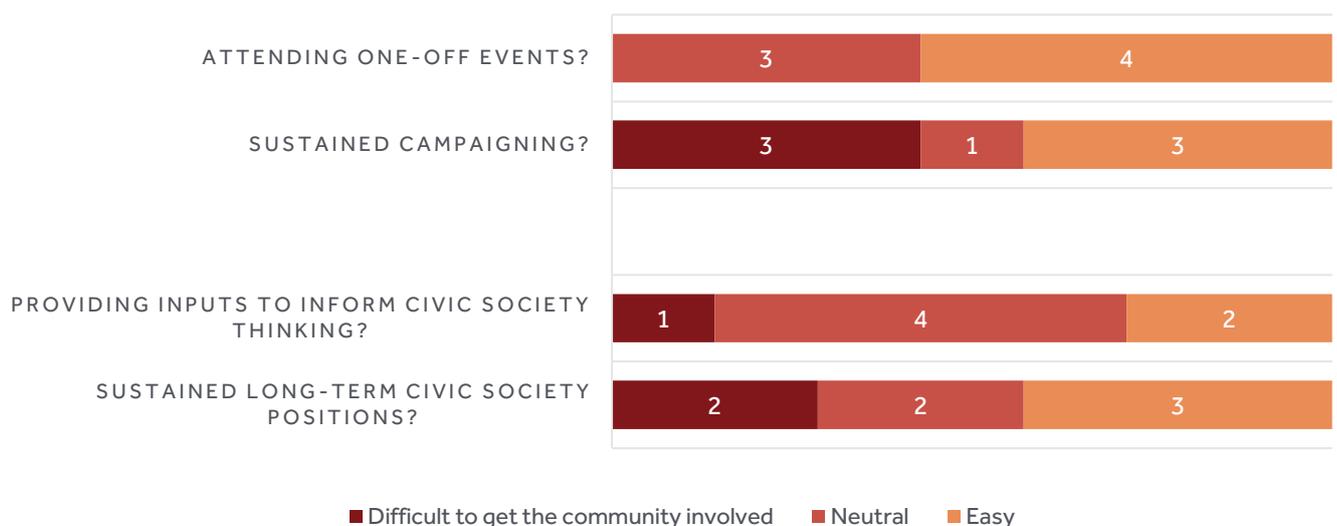


Figure 22: Societies using more advanced/technical mechanisms and the difficulty for them to get members of the community involved

Overall, this picture is comparable to that for all societies, as illustrated earlier by Figures 14 and 15. Although the subset of societies addressed in Figure 22, above, is very small, it does suggest that societies engaging in more technical ways also find it easier to engage the community, with most of the seven societies selecting either 'neutral' or 'easy' for all four modes of engagement. They too are however finding it hard to engage with communities in sustained campaigning and in long-term involvement through civic society positions. However, this should be treated tentatively as other cross-tabulations found no clear

indication that these societies spend a greater proportion of their time working in planning, or engage with Local Plans in a greater variety of ways.

Does a good relationship with the LPA aid community engagement?

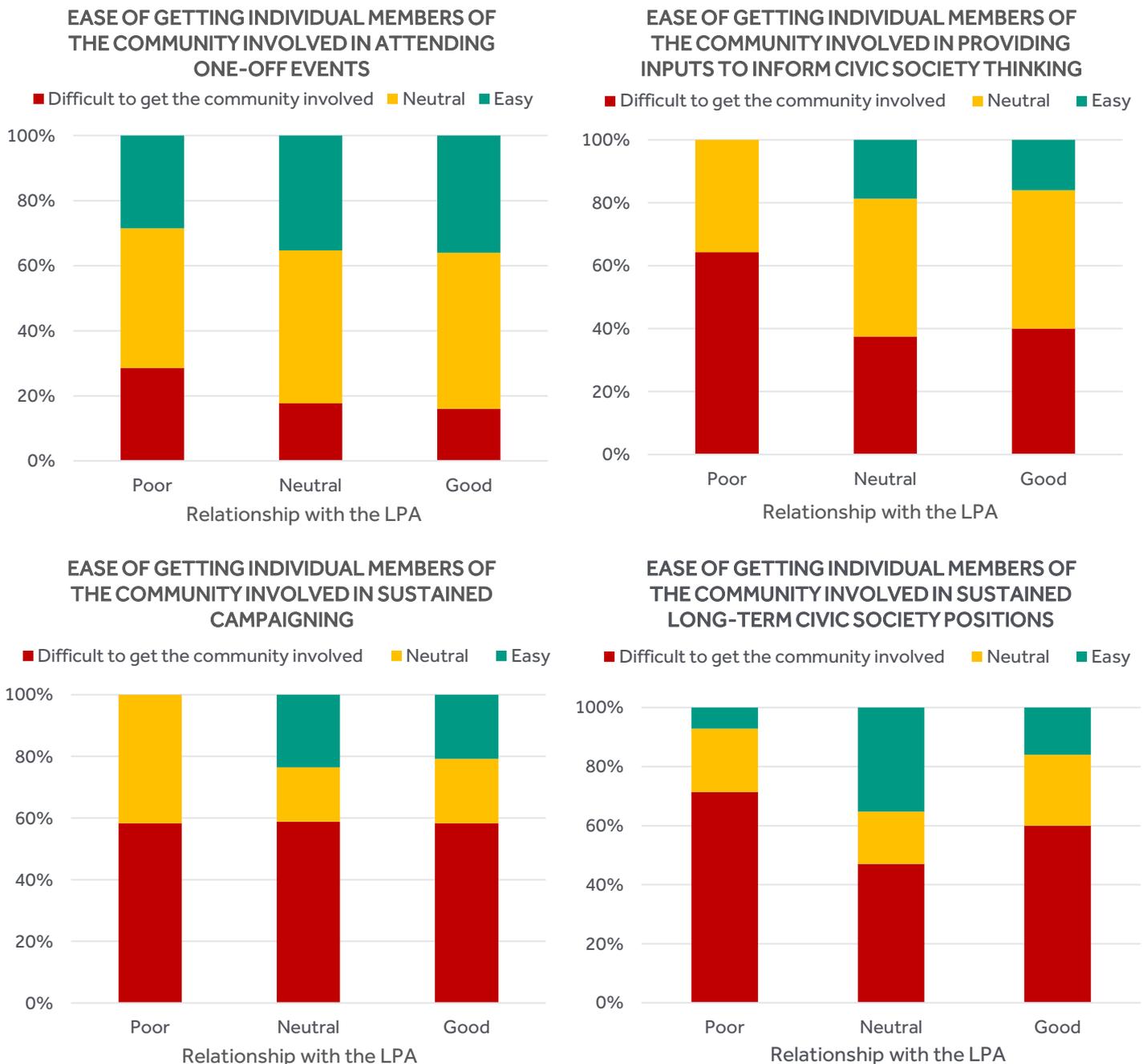


Figure 23: Quality of the relationship with LPA linked to ease of involving community members

The quality of relationship with the LPA seem to have no obvious impact on the ease or difficulty in engaging the community in one-off events, though those civic societies that have a good relationship with the LPA seem to find it marginally easier.

In securing community inputs in sustained campaigning and in informing civic society thinking, none of the societies that had a poor relationship with the LPA found it easy. There was no significant difference in the ease of these types of community engagement between civic societies that had a 'neutral' or 'good' relationship, though securing community engagement in sustained campaigning was harder for all civic societies.

More civic societies with a 'neutral' relationship with LPAs found it easy to get community members involved in sustained long-term civic society positions. The split within the 'neutral' category of civic societies between those who found it 'difficult' and 'easy' to get community members involved in sustained long-term positions is more even.

From Figure 23, there are no clear patterns that suggest LPA relationship is a strong factor in whether societies are able to engage with their communities, suggesting that a society's engagement with the LPA is not a particular factor in whether community members choose to engage with the society or not. For some categories (one-off events, inputs into civic society thinking and sustained campaigning) a better relationship with the LPA correlates weakly with greater ease of community engagement, but a neutral relationship with the LPA appears to be more helpful in engaging community members in long-term civic society positions.

Part 4: Policy Implications and Recommendations

Civic society involvement in planning activities

The results show that, regardless of their level of activity in the planning system or their relationship with the LPA, there is a set of activities that civic societies identify with closely. Notably, heritage conservation, promoting good quality urban design, promoting a vibrant high street/town centre and protecting community facilities remain a core focus of civic societies. This suggests that civic societies, even when their level of activity in the planning system is low, still identify strongly with these themes. This is highly consistent with the civic movement's history. Any policy change with respect to the place of civic societies in the planning system will need to acknowledge and leverage the self-identification that civic societies might have with respect to the above themes. However, civic societies might want to reflect on whether they need to diversify more to gain better 'cross-generational' credibility from the wider society to counter the current lack of diversity in membership.

It was also seen that civic societies in the middle range of activity tend to spread themselves over more themes than the 'not active' or 'active' societies, suggesting two types of civic society: those that are more focused (for example, those that spend most of the time working in the planning system) and those that are more broad-based. The former might be a result of reduced capacity (where the society is overall inactive) or a well-defined purpose (where the society is overall very active). This suggests that attempts to build the capacity of civic societies need to follow a twin-pronged approach. Very active civic societies might have enough financial resources to be involved in focused activities, but not enough staff or know-how to diversify. On the other hand, financial resources, staff and know-how may be needed for the civic societies that are not active.

Policy implications and recommendations

Civic societies

- Need to diversify into contemporary issues to gain cross-generational credibility
- Some civic societies may benefit from additional financial resources, while others may need wider support

Planning system

- Need to leverage self-identification with legacy concerns with heritage

Civic society relationships with LPAs

A similar pattern can be seen in the relationship between civic societies and their LPAs, where the greatest proportion of 'good' relationships is linked to planning being only up to 60% of civic societies' work, i.e. where planning is part of a range of civic society activities.

Heritage conservation and good quality urban design are popular themes of civic society engagement, and all civic societies that perceived themselves as having a 'good' and 'poor' relationship with the LPA are engaged with these themes to a 'medium' or 'high' level. This reinforces the previous argument that civic societies identify primarily with these purposes. It also highlights that civic societies may have significant expertise in matters relating to these issues and can help when such expertise is needed by planning authorities whilst making planning decisions, but is not readily available.

70% of civic societies that perceived themselves as having a 'good' relationship with the LPA and 60% of civic societies that perceived themselves as having a 'poor' relationship with the LPA had a 'medium to 'high' involvement in 'promoting sustainable development and carbon emission reductions' and in 'highlighting priorities for improving transport'. 'Ensuring biodiversity protection and enhancement' was also reported as an area of involvement by 70% of civic societies and 'promoting a vibrant high street /town centre' was reported as an area of involvement by 60% of civic societies that perceived themselves as having a 'good' relationship with the LPA. 'Promoting a vibrant high street/town centre' was reported as an area of activity by around 60% of civic societies that perceived themselves as having a 'poor' relationship with the LPA. Though these four topics - promoting sustainable development and carbon emission reductions; highlighting priorities for improving transport; ensuring biodiversity protection and enhancement; promoting a vibrant high street/town centre - are less popular there is still considerable interest amongst civic societies in these issues. There is therefore a potential for these issues to emerge as more central issues in the future.

Civic societies that rated their relationship with the LPA as 'poor' and 'good' were similar in areas of lesser activity when compared to those that rated their relationship as 'neutral', suggesting that these themes are not very popular for civic societies. Generally, these are transport and environment/biodiversity related activities.

The civic societies that had a 'neutral' relationship, on the other hand, were involved in a more diverse range of issues including transport and environment/biodiversity issues. The themes that showed the least amount of activity still showed more than 60% of civic societies that perceived themselves as having a 'neutral' relationship with the LPA stating that their involvement was either at a 'medium' or 'high' level. The least involved theme for this group was 'education and outreach on built environment issues', but still just over 60% of civic societies in the group still reported 'medium' or 'high' involvement with it.

Given the higher diversity of themes that civic societies that perceived themselves as having a 'neutral' relationship with the LPA report when compared to those civic societies that perceive themselves as having a 'good' or 'poor' relationship with the LPA, it could be suggested that the quality of relationship with the LPA might have a bearing on the willingness to venture too far away from traditional concerns of civic societies. Poor relations could mean a higher risk avoidance and thus a reluctance to commence activities in new areas. Equally, good relations might mean a higher perceived risk of jeopardising existing close relationships and thus a reluctance to commence new areas of activities. As stated

previously, there could also be other factors such as resources or capacity that may be driving both the relationship with the LPA and the number of themes that civic societies engage in.

Civic societies are currently upholding the idea of a 'critical friend' to describe their relationships with the planning system. Perhaps more work can be done on how this concept can be promoted and operationalised in practice. Any change to the planning system to accommodate civic society activity more strongly, on the other hand, must try to facilitate and promote greater diversification of civic society activities, for they are probably the voluntary organisation that engages most with the built environment.

Policy implications and recommendations

Civic societies

- More support needed to understand how to fulfil critical friend role
- Civic societies need to strategically decide on the volume of planning decisions to engage with

Planning system

- Those involved in planning could solicit and facilitate civic society engagement in a wider range of activities

Intensity of activity with the planning system and civic society volume of work

In considering whether the level of activity with the planning system relate to the number of individual decisions that societies are dealing with, within the group that saw themselves as not actively engaged with the planning system, 71% were only handling small volumes of planning applications. However, 14% were still handling 'large' volumes of planning applications and another 14% were still handling 'medium' volumes.

Conversely for those civic societies that were 'active' or 'very active', a substantial number of civic societies were still involved in handling 'small' volumes (35% and 44% respectively) and 'large' volumes (45% and 33% respectively). There were fewer civic societies handling 'medium' volumes of planning applications in both these instances thus presenting a more polarised pattern/

It is to be noted here that, though involvement with planning applications is an important part of the overall portfolio of activities for civic societies, it is only one part of the portfolio. Handling high volumes of planning applications does not necessarily mean high levels of engagement with the LPA and vice versa.

From Part A of this report, we know that civic societies are substantially involved in campaigning, promoting and creating a strong sense of place through other means, besides just involvement in planning applications. This accounts for the variety of responses here. A strong role in place stewardship for civic societies is thus suggested. A high level of

polarisation in the 'active' and 'very active' societies, with most societies being either weakly involved or highly involved with the planning system, suggests that civic societies are intentionally or unintentionally making decisions to prioritise one way or the other. This role of civic societies in promoting a sense of place also needs to be acknowledged by the planning system. Civic societies in turn might want to strategically reflect upon the balance of their engagement with planning applications and place stewardship to proactively position themselves. vis-à-vis involvement in planning decisions.

Breadth vs depth of engagement with individual planning applications and Local Plans

We explored the extent to which the level of activity with the planning system translates on to the number of ways societies try to influence individual planning proposals and Local Plans. In general, the analysis shows that societies use 4-6 ways to engage with individual planning proposals and Local Plans. This suggests a high level of commitment of civic societies in engaging with LPAs on planning decisions. It also suggests that in general civic societies possess considerable lobbying and campaigning skills to influence planning decisions.

The analysis suggests that there is some correlation between the volume of applications and the diversity of engagement, though this is not always positive or negative. Taking a simple comparison between societies engaging with small numbers of applications and those engaging with large numbers, it is those dealing with large numbers where there is a notable shift towards engaging in a greater diversity of ways. However, those dealing with a 'medium' number of applications are generally engaging in fewer ways than societies in the 'small' and 'large' categories.

Indeed, it is worth noting that this tells a slightly different story to the proportion of time that civic societies spend in the planning system. Spending a medium to high proportion of time working with planning, among a range of activities, seems to promote depth of engagement, whereas working with a medium number of individual proposals seems to have the opposite effect.

Civic societies in this range may therefore need the most support. In addition, the analysis suggests that civic societies engaging with large volumes of planning decisions may hold considerable expertise in terms of ways of engagement, suggesting possibilities for peer learning. Further, this could also suggest that low volumes or engagement in planning decisions may be due to capacity issues – not knowing, or not being able to engage in diverse ways – which then points to less incentive to engage with high volumes. Consequently, the analysis points to civic societies needing to find a careful balance between depth and breadth, including not engaging in planning at the expense of other activities. Where the capacity is not available to effectively engage with a range of activities it may be more beneficial for civic societies to engage in depth with the applications that are likely to have the greatest impact on the places and place qualities that they seek to conserve.

Policy implications and recommendations

Civic societies

- More strategic approach to selecting applications to engage with where capacity is limited

Planning system

- Implications for ensuring that all forms of engagement are appropriately taken into account in decision-making

Local plans vs individual planning applications

The key message from looking at how civic society engagement varies between plan-making and individual proposals is that engagement in plan making is, to a large extent, reflected in engagement in individual proposals. Only a small percentage of civic societies (around 10%) who use a wide variety of mechanisms to engage in Local Plans, use few ways to engage with individual planning applications. Similarly, only 10% of the societies who engage in few ways with Local Plans engage in many ways with individual planning applications.

Though tentative, there is some suggestion here that planning should continue to be something that civic societies engage with as part of a portfolio of activities and themes, rather than being their predominant focus. In common with other questions, engaging with a large number of applications seems to help with positive engagement with the LPA (if not always), possibly through developing greater expertise in this. However, the relationship is not strong enough to suggest that civic societies should be any more focused on individual proposals than they already are.

That civic societies who engage deeply with individual applications engage only in limited ways with the Local Plan is, perhaps, to be expected, given the greater variety of actions that can be taken to engage with individual planning applications, including some extremes such as taking legal action. However, the fact that some civic societies who use a wide variety of mechanisms to engage in Local Plans, use only a few ways to engage in individual planning applications is more surprising. Given the knowledge of mechanisms used in the Local Plan engagement, the reason for lower means of engagement in individual planning applications is unclear.

One explanation would be that civic societies that are working intensively with the planning system but using fewer ways to engage with individual planning applications are prioritising Local Plan preparation and thus devoting more time and resources to this over responding to individual planning applications. Consequently, they would require less diverse ways of mobilisation. However, this could also indicate a knowledge or capacity gap wherein civic societies working more on Local Plans are relatively less sure of the diverse ways in which they can engage with individual planning applications or they have resource issues that make responding to individual planning applications more difficult. This could be compounded by contextual factors such as the relationship with the LPA.

The analysis also suggests that societies engage in relatively less depth with the Local Plan, which is consistent with conclusions from the Part A report (Maidment & Chettiparamb, 2022), regarding the Local Plan being difficult to engage with. In turn, there may also be a recommendation here around helping civic societies to understand the importance of the Local Plan – if the Local Plan can be influenced, this sets the context for decisions on individual applications. Similarly, the Part A report highlighted the role that many civic societies play in Neighbourhood Planning, which also leads to policies with statutory force – engaging more extensively with neighbourhood planning efforts is another mechanism through which civic societies can have an influence on decision-making from an early stage.

This can also be linked to the need to ensure civic societies are making the most of limited capacity to engage effectively and facilitating this through sharing of best practice and targeted training. In particular, there needs to be sharing of best practice between societies focused on the most effective forms of engagement with the Local Plan.

Policy implications and recommendations

Civic societies

- More systematic sharing of best practice around which mechanisms are most successful in influencing outcomes from the planning system?
- Particular focus on sharing of learning on how to engage effectively with Local Plans and neighbourhood plans, including which actors to engage with

Planning system

- Need to consider how to make the Local Plan process more accessible to voluntary groups
- Name civic societies as a key stakeholder in the neighbourhood plan process, alongside other local voluntary groups

The role of different themes in promoting community engagement

Civic societies generally find it easier to engage with communities in one-off events and in sustained campaigning when they are actively involved with the planning system, though it is generally easier to mobilise communities in one-off events. These types of community engagement are probably issue-based, where a good knowledge of the planning systems probably helps. The question of whether civic societies could fairly be expected to engage with and involve the local community is intertwined with broader debates about the nature of participation in the planning system. Even where societies are very active in the planning system they still find it very difficult to involve the wider community in providing inputs to inform civic society thinking, and to recruit members of the community into long-term positions in societies. When it comes to inputting into civic society thinking or assuming civic society positions, civic society knowledge of the planning system on its own may not necessarily help. Experiences of civic societies in the latter kinds of community engagement are more varied possibly reflective of civic society perceptions against their aspirations. –

building on the Part A report, there remains a question about what do societies need to do to change this?

For civic societies, engagement in individual planning proposals does appear to be somewhat effective as a focus for engaging the community, particularly through one-off events. This does suggest that planning issues can be a useful focus for more limited types of engagement, but not deeper engagement.

Instead, for those societies wishing to engage with their communities on a more sustained basis, the analysis suggests that effort spent engaging in contemporary environmental issues around sustainability and biodiversity shows some signs of being effective at promoting deeper community engagement. However, careful thinking would need to be undertaken on how engaging with communities could also be used to encourage a wider range of inputs into civic society thinking when working specifically with the planning system.

Though tentative, there is some suggestion here that planning should continue to be something that civic societies engage with as part of a portfolio of activities and themes, rather than being their predominant focus. In common with other questions, engaging with a large number of applications seems to help with positive engagement with the LPA (if not always), possibly through developing greater expertise in this. However, the relationship is not strong enough to suggest that civic societies should be any more focused on individual proposals than they already are.

Policy implications and recommendations

Civic societies

- Civic societies' diversification into contemporary built environment issues, for example climate change and biodiversity, as a mechanism for encouraging deeper community involvement

Planning system

- Recognition of where civic societies have made efforts to engage communities in their responses to both Local Plans and individual proposals

Conclusions and Final Thoughts

This report has highlighted that it is not necessarily the case that civic societies engaging in planning have a strong relationship with their LPA. If anything, there is some evidence that stronger relationships occur when planning is part of a wider portfolio of themes and activities that civic societies engage with. Similarly there are multiple factors influencing the breadth and depth of societies' engagement with planning. Spending a lot of time in the planning system or engaging with a lot of individual applications is not necessarily a strong predictor of depth of engagement with the community,

This would signal that civic societies with a stronger relationship with communities and have a broader place-based knowledge are better placed to leverage this and use it to form stronger relationships with the LPA. Indeed, if there is one overall message, it is about the need for civic societies to find a balance of activities that strengthen their community/place quality facing activities, rather than engaging in planning at the expense of all else. While planning can be helpful to civic societies looking to engage with their communities, it is other issues that appear key to deepening this engagement.

To strengthen this community/place quality interface, civic societies will need to strategically think about evolving themselves to broaden their reach in terms of themes that are relevant across communities.

References

Maidment, C & Chettiparamb, A (2022) Civic societies and the planning process: Exploring the role of local civic societies in the English planning system. Henley Business School, Reading. [Accessed 12 August 2025] <https://www.henley.ac.uk/news/2022/civic-societies-and-the-planning-process>