



# HOUSEBUILDERS REPORT 2024

---

# CONTENTS

## INTRODUCTION

Foreword

**Claire Waring, Wright Hassall**

3

## INTERVIEWS

The Deeley way: a heritage 85 years in the making

**Eleanor Deeley, The Deeley Group**

6

Discussing the future of the built environment sector

**Elle Cass, SLR Consulting**

10

The highs and lows of working in the planning sector

**Sian Griffiths, RCA Regeneration**

14

How do we attract more women into the construction industry?

**Sophie Horgan, Horgan Homes and Horgan Commercial**

18

How do we fix our broken planning system?

**Rebecca Mushing, Wright Hassall**

22





# FOREWORD



Few topics are as regularly in national conversations as the UK's housing market. Rising and falling house prices, the difficulties faced by young people getting onto the property ladder, the state of the rental market, the shortage in housing stock and the need for – and opposition to – increased development activity: on any given day, you are as likely to find one or several of these issues featured in the broadsheets and tabloids as you are the latest political scandal or celebrity gossip.

Being the object of routine public scrutiny in a highly politicised industry is one of many challenges housebuilders face.

Yet this is nothing new in a country where the aspiration towards homeownership is indelible in the social contract.

Of all the obstacles that developers are currently facing, the one that vexes housebuilders across all regions the most continues to be the planning regime, resulting in massive delays that have a powerful negative impact on business. If they cannot build houses, it logically follows that they cannot sell them, either.

Another major cause for concern is the high building costs resulting from the shortage of materials, which is driving up prices. Housebuilders continue to struggle to source critical products such as bricks, blocks and cement, and the supply bottlenecks create year-on-year price rises. As, of course, is the steep rise in inflation.

The third significant hurdle developers face is the need for more skilled labour as demand continues to outstrip supply. A recent study conducted by recruitment specialist Search Consultancy found that 83% of businesses in the construction sector feel the strain from a lack of skilled workers – a problem that the UK's exit from the European Union has done nothing to alleviate.

In addition to these problems, land cost is becoming a grave cause for concern, especially for small to medium-sized house builders.

Unlike the major national developers, who have a much bigger war chest and can therefore still afford to snap up large parcels of valuable land, SME-scale house builders are being

outcompeted on their home turf and are having to look ever further afield for affordable, yet still attractive, development sites.

Although some of these obstacles have been many years in the making – especially in terms of the long-standing problems surrounding the planning regime and the acute housing shortage – the Coronavirus pandemic and resulting materials and labour shortages have all certainly turned up the pressure massively, and the situation has really come to a head today. As a result, housing and land development have become real hot-button issues.

With larger-scale housing developments in particular, NIMBYism and politics are never far away, with the promotion or obstruction of housing developments often serving the political interests of the local, regional or national powers that be.

Another highly politicised factor in housebuilding is meeting the Government's demands in terms of sustainability and Net Zero targets.

Developers must adapt how they work to comply with stringent new regulations such as the Future Homes Standard, which will be introduced in 2025 and demands that new builds are "future-proofed with low carbon heating and world-leading levels of energy efficiency".

On top of these supply-side issues, housing-development activity is also overshadowed on the demand side by the general uncertainty and caution that pervade the wider housing market. Owing to the sharp rise in interest rates and the removal from the sale of hundreds of mortgage products over the past year, there is an alarming lack of confidence in the strength of the purchaser market over the coming months. As a result, many developers have been applying the brakes as they sit back and wait for healthier sales rates.

This is a very understandable reaction in a sector that requires hefty cash outlay that is only recouped and turned into profit once the final plots of the respective development are sold – not many businesses can afford to have their debit column far outpace their credit column for very extended periods without feeling the pain and bleeding confidence. Developers are, therefore, suitably nervous, which is having a ripple effect throughout the industry: caution is contagious.

In our Housebuilders Campaign, we explore the problems and concerns of this sector outlined above in conversation with five regional developers. In doing so, we highlight some of the champions of this industry and discuss the innovative approaches they are taking to alleviate some of the sector's biggest headaches. I hope you find it as interesting and informative as we did.

## **CLAIRE WARING**

**Partner, Wright Hassall**

# HOUSEBUILDERS REPORT 2024





# THE DEELEY WAY: A HERITAGE 85 YEARS IN THE MAKING



**ELEANOR DEELEY**

Joint Managing Director, The Deeley Group

**“When times are good, companies expand across different geographies. But we’ve decided to stick with our geography, where we know we deliver well and enjoy our work with repeat clients.”**

*When you first meet Eleanor Deeley – whose name you may be familiar with from the Wake Up To Money and the Today programmes on BBC Radio – you might be expecting somebody who can talk with confidence and expertise about the effects on the housing sector of the macroeconomic decisions made by the Government and the Bank of England.*

*And you would be right, of course. But you also meet someone who is far from plastic corporate: Eleanor is a warm, balanced and rounded individual who is more than willing to bring all of herself to the family business, The Deeley Group, which she jointly manages with her father, Peter. She also cares deeply about the local community, giving up her time to serve on the board of trustees for the University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire (UHCW) Charity.*

*We were lucky enough to chat with Eleanor about some of the issues currently affecting the construction industry and about what it means to her to help manage the fortunes of such a well-respected, regionally rooted family business.*

**You are very much a Midlands-based company – have you ever been tempted to expand into other parts of the country?**

“When I first joined, we had many discussions about whether to pursue organic growth within the business or to expand geographically. When times are good, companies expand across different geographies. But we’ve decided to stick with our geography, where we know we deliver well and enjoy our work with repeat clients. We’ve seen a number of construction companies adopt a strategy of geographic expansion, only to have to retreat again when the conditions get tough.

“By remaining local and continuing to deepen our relationships with our established client base, we only get better at what we do. Many of our clients have a standard product – so over time, you learn exactly what the requirements are and how to meet them, which in turn makes you more efficient. Which is great for us, and our clients: they know that if we say we can deliver a project, we are always true to our word, unlike other contractors who have let them down in the past.

“It also comes down to risk management: our adopted strategy of serving our regional clients means we play to our strengths, which minimises our exposure to factors beyond our control. This simply wouldn’t be possible in the same way if we expanded into different regions and loosened the reins on our oversight mechanisms.”

**Is the Deeley Group taking active steps to make the company, including its supply chains, greener and more sustainable?**

“Yes, we are, though it’s extremely challenging. We hold ourselves to very high standards and never want to feel that we’re engaging in mere greenwashing. We have a very clear target of achieving Net Zero Carbon status by 2036.

“In the pandemic year 2020-2021, we achieved Carbon Neutral status through offsetting measures, which we have since decided lacks certain transparency and isn’t

as immediate in terms of reducing our environmental impact – unlike, say, our partnership with Octopus Electric Vehicles, with whom we have entered into a new, cost-effective electric vehicle leasing scheme.

“We have also set up a working group across the business dedicated to achieving our green goals. It’s something that people throughout the company feel very passionate about, especially the younger generation, which is great. And it’s proving a powerful recruitment tool, as people value our commitment in this area and specifically join because they want to change and improve things – and we want them to change and improve us.

“Yet it has to be said that it’s hard for this industry, in general, to be green. And while I am hugely passionate about making our industry greener, people will always be the most important thing: providing them with adequate homes that meet their needs. The notion among certain Government ministers that all housing should be beautiful doesn’t always serve the needs on the ground. In most instances, a family with three children would prefer an extra 200 square feet of space to live in than a house that fulfils certain aesthetic notions.

“It sometimes seems that there is a real disconnect between the right policy for meeting people’s fundamental human needs and the right policy to meet the Government’s Net Zero checklist. You cannot build a greener society that isn’t also a more humane society offering more homes, more employment opportunities, more schools, and better healthcare access. The two need to go hand in hand.”

**It’s interesting you touch on family – the Deeley Group is a family business, and I wonder if you would like your children to follow in your footsteps?**

“That’s a really tough question. This has always been my dream job, and have worked my entire life to have the right skills, choosing different points of my career to ensure I had the necessary experience.

“Working here is so special to me. But there’s a weight of responsibility that comes with it that isn’t like any other job – because there is such a wealth of emotion bound up with it. You have

seen the investment and sacrifices made over the years.

“So yes, I would love there to be another generation of Deeley’s running the company. But I would be very upfront with them about the impact and the sacrifices involved and would want them to choose it freely.

“First, though, I want them to go out into the world and do whatever they choose and only consider joining the business later on if they really have the desire and the aptitude for it. You have to be good at this work and earn the respect of others to be able to do it. That takes life experience.

“Then there’s the nepotism thing, which has always concerned me: I had previously always worked in a corporate world where nepotism didn’t exist, and so when I joined the family business, I worried about how people would view me – was I up to the job or was I only here because of my family connections?

“In the end, what surprised me was that people were delighted because they could see the business continuing into the future. My father and I are different, but we share the same ethos and values of integrity, partnership and community. The Deeley Way. He embodies those values. I have the loveliest dad in the world.

“This business has been around for 85 years and is rooted in this community. Eighty-five years of building a trusted and respected brand. There’s a lot of love and emotion and attachment there. People do things for us that they wouldn’t do for other companies. That stems from our integrity, from deciding to do the right thing rather than taking the last pound.”

***And with that, our time is up. I leave seriously impressed by Eleanor, not just for her profound insights into the construction sector but also for her warmth and the love she so clearly bears for the family business and all the people that work within it. Jointly managing it is a heavy responsibility but one she clearly relishes.***

**Find out more about The Deeley Group at [deeley.co.uk](http://deeley.co.uk).**



# HOUSEBUILDERS REPORT 2024





# DISCUSSING THE FUTURE OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT SECTOR



**ELLE CASS**

Head of Strategic Built Environment  
Growth, SLR Consulting

**“I am an absolute planning anorak. I love it.”**

*On her journey to becoming the Head of Strategic Built Environment Growth at SLR Consulting, Elle Cass has worn many different professional hats. This has given her a broad perspective on the industry she loves so much and the many complex problems it faces. In her interview with us, she discusses how an interest in art and advertising eventually led her into the world of planning and the things she would change about that world if she had a magic wand.*

**You were initially considering a career in advertising. How did the shift to wanting to work in the property and planning sector come about?**

“I have always been artistic and had an interest in the design side of marketing and advertising. So at the tender age of 14, I wrote to the top advertising agencies in London to see if they would let me do my work experience placement with them. BSB Dorland was one of two agencies that replied and agreed to take me.

“I think they were a little surprised, to say the least, when I turned up: they'd been expecting a graduate, not a 14-year-old schoolgirl. Nevertheless, I was allowed to work there over the course of three summers, a truly formative and brilliant experience.

"However, when I went to university in the early Nineties, the UK was hit by the recession, and I saw that the advertising sector can be quite volatile and unpredictable, even for those at the top of their game – was this really the right career for me, I wondered?"

"My undergraduate degree was in Geography, as I had always been interested in human geography: the interplay between politics, sociology and geography. A module on planning opened my eyes to the possibilities of a career in this field, as I was fascinated by how the built environment and how we develop it can change people's lives."

"And so when I graduated, I took a postgraduate course in Town and Regional Planning at the University of Sheffield. The rest, as they say, is history."

### **What is it that you love the most about your job?**

"I am an absolute planning anorak. I really love it! One of the things I enjoy the most is the mental gymnastics that working in this field puts you through on a daily basis, with completely different problems to solve. The legal side of it, really burrowing down into the details to find the right solution, is hugely mentally stimulating and rewarding to me."

"The other thing I love is meeting and working with such a diverse range of people all over the UK and Ireland, while dealing with many different kinds of development. This is a huge privilege, as it's easy to get pigeonholed into one specific area within planning, something that has never happened to me throughout my career. I have a lot of autonomy, thanks to SLR Consulting; the company is all about letting its people spread their wings and take their career in the direction they want – obviously within the bounds of commercial considerations."

### **Is the planning system working? And if not, what one thing would you do to bring immediate improvements if you had a magic wand?**

"Emphatically no, it isn't: it isn't delivering the types of development we need in the locations that we need them. The first thing I

would address is the urgent need for more resources within the planning system at the planning-officer level. At the same time, I would want to ensure the influx of new planning officers has a much better economic understanding of the impact that development has and of outcomes."

"We also need to build greater trust between the private and public sectors so that people don't keep assuming others are trying to pull the wool over their eyes. Ultimately, most planners are trying to achieve the same thing, regardless of who pays their wage."

"Thirdly, and this is perhaps somewhat controversial: although I am a huge advocate of democracy, I do feel that planning decisions should be made by people with technical training and a clear understanding of material planning considerations."

"Lastly – and this will never happen, but I'm using my magic wand here – the politics needs to be taken out of the planning process because this is one of the biggest hurdles that prevents the system from delivering."

### **What does the future of the built environment sector look like?**

"At this point in time, who can tell? It all depends on whether we have a change in Government at the next general election. What I do know is that we need the right emphasis on policy (particularly strategic cross authority policy), together with more funding."

"The system is restricted by things like the Greenbelt – something that I know is highly controversial and which I have written about elsewhere – and constructs that were created many decades ago to address very different challenges which are no longer relevant to today's realities and the ways we deliver the development we so urgently need."

"This goes hand in hand with a major skills shortage (not just in terms of planners): even if we were to deliver planning permissions for the hundreds of thousands of homes needed each year to combat the housing shortfall, we couldn't actually physically deliver the properties because there aren't enough skilled tradespeople to build them. The relentless focus over the past two to three decades on the supposed superiority of a university

education means that we have failed to encourage enough young people to pursue the necessary vocational training.

“And then there’s the impact of Brexit – regardless of how people voted in the referendum, it is a fact that our departure from the European Union means that we have drastically reduced our supply of skilled workers from abroad. This has had a catastrophic effect not just on the construction industry but also on the hospitality, tourism and leisure sectors, all of which are on their knees due to labour shortages.

“For all these reasons, I think we have a golden opportunity for change if only we can loosen and properly recourse the planning system. We need a comprehensive review of Greenbelt policy to see if it is truly the best way to manage growth; a review which could be informed by the many fantastic professionals in the sustainability sector working to weave new development into enhanced blue and green infrastructure and public space to deliver really successful built-environment outcomes without harming the environment.

“But first, we need a much more flexible, fast and proactive system that delivers housing and other developments much more quickly, supported by policies addressing the skills shortage in the short, medium and long term. By necessity, that will have to include letting skilled foreign workers enter the UK until we can fill the current gap in homegrown training. Along the way, we also need to change young people’s and wider society’s mindset as to what these jobs look like and who can do them – I would love to see many more women working in the trades.

“Lastly – and this is a controversial opinion – I think we need to go back to council housing; that is to say, housing delivered by the Government or Councils, as the last time we had a national housing construction programme was also the only period in modern history when we built housing anywhere near the levels we’re talking about and need.

“Between 1946 and 1960, almost 2 million new council houses were built. That is a scale of construction that simply cannot be met by the private sector alone – and certainly not just by the top ten developers. It would require many more regional SMEs, many of whom never recovered from the global financial crisis of 2008.

“So the challenges faced by the planning sector and society, in general, are vast, but we have no choice but to tackle them in a concerted, holistic and joined-up way if we are ever to solve the country’s housing crisis. And we need to, urgently.”

***We could have happily spent all day talking to Elle, who is as clear-sighted in her vision of the problems facing the planning and development sector as she is about fixing them. Thank you for your time, Elle!***

**Find out more about SLR Consulting at [slrconsulting.com](http://slrconsulting.com).**

# HOUSEBUILDERS REPORT 2024





# THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF WORKING IN THE PLANNING SECTOR



**SIAN GRIFFITHS**  
Director, RCA Regeneration

**“We need to speak up: the lack of affordable housing, and the worsening situation in terms of affordability, is a real crisis.”**

*We can think of few better advocates for the development industry than Sian Griffiths, Director at RCA Regeneration.*

*Catch her on LinkedIn, and you'll see straight away her passion for the sector and get a slice of the humour that keeps her sane in an industry that can sometimes drive a person crazy. Her team often battle through long appeal processes to get the planning permission needed to bring affordable housing to an area or transform a derelict building into something useful. Here she shares with us the joys and frustrations of working in the sector.*

## **How did you get started in planning?**

“I started off studying Pharmacy at university before realising I absolutely hated it. At the time, I was renting a room from a town planner who was able to talk animatedly about geography, the socio-economic makeup of different towns, the environment, politics and commercial matters, history and heritage. It opened my eyes to what an amazing and well-rounded education a career in planning could provide, inspiring me to change course and university and embark on a different career path.”

"Ever since, this is how I 'sell' a career in planning. You certainly won't get to play God with the built environment because our powers in this regard are minimal. But what we do get to do is influence – not like someone on TikTok, but in a much more real and permanent sense. That's always been very tantalising to me."

**Do you think the planning system is currently working, and if not, what would you like to see change?**

"It's absolutely not working. It's not fit for purpose. It's got far worse than I ever thought it could. First and foremost, we need cultural change. We as a society need to shift away from the idea that investing and building new homes is a bad thing. Many people have this notion that we are carpeting over the countryside, which is simply not the case."

"I think a few 'offenders' have made it very difficult for the public to be sympathetic to developers, doing things like knocking down well loved buildings; cutting down protected trees or building a really shoddy product. It drives me mad! It's a real shame because we collectively need to see building new homes as a good thing: 'how brilliant that someone is coming in and investing in new homes; this means lots of young people and families are going to move into the area and spend their money locally' – this is how we should regard it. Instead, we have an entrenched attitude of negativity, unfortunately often reinforced by people of a certain age and generation who have paid off their mortgages after presiding over enormous equity growth."

"Anyone who looks at my LinkedIn posts won't be surprised by my feelings on this, though I do always try and leaven them with a healthy dose of humour."

"But as an industry, we can be poor at getting our voices heard properly and almost accept objection as a normal part of our professional lives, but it wasn't always like this. We need to speak up and reach those that can and will support new homes: the lack of affordable housing, and the worsening situation in terms of affordability, is a real crisis for young people and people with little money, and the situation is simply not being taken seriously enough by the

current Government. Maybe because those in housing need aren't their voters."

**"You have been described as "a breath of fresh air in planning" – what traits do you think you possess that make you successful in this industry?"**

"It's become a bit of a cliché, but first and foremost, you have to be passionate to succeed in this business, and I certainly am. I really like to take on a project and make it 'my baby'. To me, that's quite powerful. And I love the teamwork working with loads of different specialists, pulling things together and sitting in the driving seat."

"I simply don't see another way of doing what is essentially advocacy work: sticking up for something, for what I believe is right, and becoming emboldened to go in and defend my position. That's impossible to do convincingly if you're not passionate about it."

**How do you deal with the frustrations that arise from working in this industry?**

"Well, for starters, I quite like wine! But seriously, what actually helps is that these frustrations are shared among many professionals like me, and discussing it with them is very cathartic and helpful. My fellow directors and I will sit together, have a good old rant about whatever's happened, and then try to find a way through it."

"The thing is: our clients don't want us to be any less passionate, or to care any less. They want us to take full ownership of whatever it is we are doing on their behalf, to drive it and argue for it sometimes until we're blue in the face. They want fighters: proactive and relentless. So while the frustration remains, every time we win something, it makes it all worthwhile."

"In our office, we have pictures on the wall of developments that we are really proud of, where people have created homes and memories for families and little children. And that's why we do it. Going back to visit sites that we have had to fight for is particularly satisfying – seeing the places we helped to create being loved by the people who call it home."

**RCA managed to overcome a lot of issues and secure planning and development on sites that had previously been refused or**

## **had backlash – what’s your proudest project in the last 12 months?**

“Most recently, we managed to obtain reserved matters consent for 620 units on behalf of Countryside which is great as it delivers much needed big sites that provide a good source of longer term housing choice in an area where house prices are really high. That was a brilliant example of working well with a local authority who were great to deal with, if quite under-resourced.

“However, some of our biggest wins recently have been via appeal, unfortunately, and I have to say that these are often some of the most satisfying. In one particular instance, we managed to triumph in the face of a truly vindictive local authority and a recalcitrant, intransigent case officer who had a real ‘no’ attitude to every single aspect of the process, which was a shame.

“We came out victorious at the end of a two-day hearing, and it really was a particularly gratifying outcome. Of course, as with every win, the team did our customary victory dance in the office.”

“However, it shouldn’t really be like this. There are great officers out there that we work with well, and need more support to be able to do their jobs. We have a lot of respect for the majority of planning officers doing their jobs which are often poorly paid (for what they do).”

## **What does the future look like for the housing sector?**

“I feel like we are currently in a bit of a no-man’s land at the moment, and I don’t think we will see any tangible change or progress this side of a general election. There seems to be a lot of delay to the emerging NPPF, the Lords have voted against the nutrient neutrality amendment to the LURB, its all unknowns at the moment. No wonder lots of local authorities are putting the breaks on their local plan reviews, despite having a statutory duty to prepare one.”

“Ultimately, whatever happens, we really need a huge cultural shift in attitudes towards building new affordable and market housing. Many of those members of the public resisting new housing development need to recognise the scale of the crisis we are facing and in some cases stop scapegoating young people as feckless spendthrifts – the fact is that the proportion of median income to median house price is higher than it has ever been, pricing an entire generation out of home ownership. This simply has to change.”

## **You give an annual lecture to the BSc Geography undergraduates at the University of Worcester and are clearly very driven to get young people into the industry. What’s your message to them?**

“I ask them, ‘What motivates, what interests you?’ I then tell them about the myriad professions and career options in planning and urban design, surveying and development viability (I wear two hats as a planner and surveyor). Ultimately, I try and convey my love of what I do. It’s a really ‘complete’ education and its brilliant. It’s such a worthwhile profession to go into, and I wouldn’t do anything else.”

***Despite the many problems confronting the sector, you can’t help but feel hopeful for its future as long as there are people as passionate, proactive and committed as Sian working in it. Thank you for your time, Sian!***

**Find out more about RCA Regeneration at [rcaregeneration.co.uk](http://rcaregeneration.co.uk).**



# HOUSEBUILDERS REPORT 2024





## HOW DO WE ATTRACT MORE WOMEN INTO THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY?



### SOPHIE HORGAN

Director, Horgan Homes and Horgan Commercial

**“This is a fantastic industry, but the sad truth is that we still need to work harder than our male counterparts to reach the same level and gain the same recognition.”**

*Sophie Horgan has been the Director of the family business, Horgan Homes, for 16 years. She is a trailblazer and role model with a truly inspirational philosophy: she only builds homes that she would want to live in. In our interview, she tells us what needs to happen to make construction a more attractive career for women and why new-build homes often have a poor reputation.*

**What has it been like to work in the family business?**

“Like in any business, it can be both rewarding and extremely challenging. One thing’s for sure, the sense of pride as well as of jeopardy feels greater when it’s your family name and brand above the front door. It’s all very emotive and personal, precisely because we are a family business.

“It’s certainly amazing to see how far Horgan Homes has come from its grassroots – my father started out as a bricklayer and ground contractor before moving into housebuilding when he founded the company, so we really started out from scratch.

"I'd like to think that I've helped enhance the business and drive it forward since I joined. And there definitely is a great sense of pride and achievement in seeing the company grow and receive a lot of recognition from industry peers."

### **What is it like to be a woman working in construction?**

"Things have certainly changed since I started out. There were occasions when men would make comments to me which would definitely be regarded as politically incorrect, if not harassment. The attitude was, 'well, you're a woman wearing make-up, coming onto a building site: what do you expect?' And you'd say nothing, because you didn't want to rock the boat, and needed to keep the men onside. I used to find it very hard to deal with in my younger years.

"I do think we still have a long way to go. But we do now at least see more women working in construction, and helping to slowly change attitudes on building sites and in boardrooms, where the sexism is less confrontational, but therefore all the harder to deal with in some ways, precisely because of how subtle it is. But there are some amazing trailblazers out there – women like Eleanor Deeley, of Deeley Group – who are setting the standards for women in construction."

### **What would your advice be to young women considering a career in construction?**

"I would say that it's a fantastic industry and go for it! We need more women in the sector and be realistic, you are going to have to work harder than your male counterparts to reach the same level and gain the same recognition. That can be tough to deal with, but I would still not let it put you off, because I love this industry and I never stop learning something new each day.

"There are always problems, but every problem has a solution and you get out of life what you put in. We certainly need more women coming into construction as quantity surveyors, plumbers, bricklayers, the whole eclectic mix of trades, each of which has great opportunity paths."

### **What is needed to help women thrive in the industry?**

"Times are changing and I do hope that young girls consider this as a challenging yet also hugely rewarding career – however, it would be great if more were done to promote this in schools, to break down the gendered roles when it comes to the trades and make it more about what girls and boys enjoy doing.

"Too much prestige is still given to academic subjects, and the emphasis is still very much on going to university, with manual vocations still treated as being somehow lesser, despite the income opportunities often being far greater. We have a huge skills shortage at the moment, and the Government needs to do much more at grassroots level to attract people of both sexes into the trades.

"Years ago, I got approached by a local village primary school to go along and show our equipment to the children. What I found interesting was that straight away the boys really took to it but the girls weren't interested. They'd ask questions, but they were a lot more reserved. Considering how young they were, around seven or eight, there was already that telling difference. So I do think there needs to be much more of a drive in schools to help young people find a career path that is suited to them."

### **What is in your mind when looking at building homes for the future?**

"It starts from the moment we look at land. We will only buy sites that I have personally visited, stood on and asked myself the question, 'Can I see myself living here?'. I have to believe in the product, I have to believe in the area, I have to believe in what we are providing to the future residents. It's a deeply personal thing for me.

"We get heavily involved in the design, and I spend hours and hours with the architects, thrashing out every last detail. And on the marketing front too, I bring everyone together – including the interior designer and structural engineer – to ensure we have absolutely the right design for the area that we are going to build in: something that is a little bit different, but still sympathetic to and in keeping with the environment of that area. Again, that is hugely important to me.

"We are not the kind of developer to build a standardised, paint-by-the-numbers house. Every site we take on has its own unique character, its own type of house chosen on its merits for that particular development. Horgan Homes is not aspiring to be the next Taylor Wimpey or Persimmon - what sets us apart from every other house-builder out there is that we create beautiful houses for people to ultimately call their home and live in. Something that isn't just a box. I want character, I want individuality. We want green credentials, we want EPCA going forward. And that's very much where we are going as a business."

**New-build houses come in for bad press. How do you overcome the negative stereotypes?**

"It's difficult, because bad news will always travel faster than good news. But I think it boils down to building a product that you ultimately believe in. And if you are building something that not only meets but actually exceeds planning regulation approval, that is a good starting point. But you also have to go on that journey with the purchaser from the very outset, from the moment they come to look at the property.

"This is why the whole snagging procedure and the customer care side of the business is so vitally important. Because it's one thing to sell a property, but quite another thing if you don't follow that up with excellent customer service and support. This is what ultimately leads to a bad reputation and is, sadly, where some of the bigger names in the industry fall down. It takes a life-time to build your reputation, and only five minutes to destroy it.

"To me, it's about so much more than just building houses and making a profit. I want to leave a legacy, I want to create houses that people are proud to live in, to call a home. And from a sustainability point of view, from a moral point of view, we have an obligation here as an industry. We're putting up permanent structures – they need to stand the test of time. It's a duty of care that I take very seriously.

"One of the ways we look to combat negativity is by literally opening our doors to experts who judge us on our quality. We've just won the 'What House Best Small Housebuilder Award' and we make sure we shout about it because we're flying the flag not just for new builds, but for housebuilding in the UK and of course, women in construction too."

***If there were more Sophie Horgans in the world, we have no doubt that the housing crisis in this country would soon be a thing of the past. Thank you for sharing your thoughts with us, Sophie!***

**Find out more about Horgan Homes and Horgan Commercial at [horganhomes.co.uk](http://horganhomes.co.uk).**

HOUSEBUILDERS REPORT 2024





# HOW DO WE FIX OUR BROKEN PLANNING SYSTEM?



**REBECCA MUSHING**  
Associate, Wright Hassall

*Rebecca Mushing, a specialist planning lawyer here at Wright Hassall, has spent much of her career in the trenches, dealing with every aspect of UK jurisprudence as it applies to the nation's planning system. In our interview with her, Rebecca shares her insights into the inherent problems of the current system, the potential solutions, and what it has been like to work on the country's biggest, and perhaps most controversial infrastructure project.*

## **Is the planning system currently working? If not, what needs to change?**

"No, it definitely isn't working for anybody at the moment – not for councils, developers, and certainly not for people out on the street who desperately want a home in the middle of a housing crisis. It is too slow and can be too politicised and emotional.

"The problem essentially boils down to severe understaffing within councils. In the main, those people working in the planning department are doing a great job, but there simply aren't enough of them, not enough bodies on the ground, to deal with the wealth of demand.

"This is creating a problematic situation for small developers in particular because they aren't always able to absorb the costs they incur due to the long delays in obtaining their permissions. And then, to add to their woes, the market is so dynamic and volatile that by the time developers do have their permissions in hand, the scheme they originally put forward may no longer be commercially viable or

warranted, putting them right back at square one.

### **What could make the planning system better?**

“What immediately springs to mind is the thing that everyone asks for money. Money needs to be poured into council teams to get suitably qualified people on the ground, from planning officers right through to legal personnel. These teams need to be adequately resourced so that they can get on with the crucial task of properly reviewing applications.

“This problem of under-resourcing is exacerbated by the fact that the Government is constantly tinkering with the planning system. We have seen the introduction of a plethora of different requirements and regulations, none of which has resulted in a better system.

“One such example is the Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) duty introduced on 12 February this year. While it goes without saying that everyone thinks this kind of environmental legislation is a great idea in principle, as we all want to protect our country's flora and fauna, the extra pressure it places on the already-overstretched council teams is only going to make things worse in the absence of any additional funding and staffing with suitably qualified people.

“It often feels like the Government introduces these changes almost on a whim without ever really considering how they are to be resourced or managed, leaving it to the industry to deal with it as best as possible.

“And while the Government did increase planning application fees last year, it missed an opportunity to ringfence this within Council budgets so that the additional revenue is put towards dealing with the backlog of planning applications. Cash-strapped Councils that are struggling to cope with the cost of social care, homelessness and other services are now more likely to funnel any additional monies into shoring up these other critical areas.”

### **Developers aren't just battling with the council; it's the public, too, isn't it? What can be helped?**

“Educating the public on how the system actually works on the ground is vital. When a large housing development gets underway down the road from them, all the public sees is a fat cat developer throwing up loads of houses and ruining their green spaces, increasing traffic, and putting pressure on their local facilities such as healthcare, schools and so on.

“Often, the public doesn't understand that these developments are all subject to Section 106 agreements. Developers are essentially obligated to put money towards roads, schools, the local NHS trust GPs, and more. They hand over the money but don't have any power to determine what is spent or how. So these developments do provide benefits to the local community, but a collective effort involving the Government, Councils and developers themselves is needed to communicate this more effectively to the public.

“However, this situation is made more complicated by just how politically charged the planning process is. Ward members and councillors who perhaps have no immediate reason to object to a development proposal put in front of them will often come under pressure from their constituents to take a stand, and what may well be a perfectly suitable development then ends up getting appealed.

“Vast sums of taxpayers' money subsequently get swallowed up in the long, drawn-out process of appeal and counter-appeal, all because the system is ultimately back to front.”

### **What are the demands that you foresee over the next 12 to 24 months?**

“The overwhelming demand is, first and foremost, for certainty. Developers want to see the new Government of whatever stripe settle in and then stop all the U-turning and actually follow through with various policy changes.

“This will give the industry's stakeholders the solid foundations they need for proper decision-making, allow for more investment to flow and give everyone that much-needed clarity about the direction of travel for the coming years.”

### **You have recently been involved in HS2-related work – what has this been like?**

“It's been eye-opening, to say the least. Through

my work, I come into contact both with stakeholders who are in favour of HS2 and who are now impacted by the cancellation of the Manchester phase of the project, as well as with those individuals whose properties are affected, either having had their land taken from them during Phase One or still awaiting the lifting of the safeguarding restrictions placed on their property for the now-cancelled Phase Two.

“This can be extremely emotional, with farms that have been owned by the same family for generations having either already been bought up by the Government or still having the sword of Damocles hanging over them in the form of a potential compulsory purchase.

“I have had phone conversations with people who are in tears at either the reality or the strong possibility of losing this precious family heritage. Many of them have been left in limbo for over a decade, and some of them still haven't received all of their compensation money. The situation is highly stressful to these poor people, with the strain of it taking its toll on their mental and physical health – my heart goes out to them.”

***Rebecca is another great example of the fact that, despite its many problems, the planning sector attracts some incredibly talented, caring and hard-working people. Thanks for sharing, Rebecca!***



## CONTACT US

A huge thank you to everyone who took the time to talk to us as part of our Housebuilders Campaign.

If you would like to find out more about this report or contact our team with a question, please get in touch.

**Claire Waring**

[claire.waring@wrightshassall.co.uk](mailto:claire.waring@wrightshassall.co.uk)

+44 7867 393496

**Rebecca Mushing**

[rebecca.mushing@wrightshassall.co.uk](mailto:rebecca.mushing@wrightshassall.co.uk)

+44 7876 884094

[wrightshassall.co.uk](http://wrightshassall.co.uk)