

# New evidence reveals planning authority bias towards large housebuilders

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New insight from [Searchland](#) and City Sanctuary reveals that large residential developments of 50+ units are far more likely to gain planning approval than smaller schemes, marking a blow for SME developers in what is now being called a 'wakeup call for policymakers' and clear evidence of 'structural bias'.

Using Searchland's internal planning data records\*, City Sanctuary has crunched planning stats from every London borough between 2019-2024 and found that large residential schemes are heavily preferred among planning authorities.

Between 2019-2024, 81% of London planning submissions for schemes of 50+ units were approved by local planning authorities.

In contrast, only 69% of schemes of between 20-49 units gained consent, and as schemes get smaller, the chance of planning success also gets smaller.

Submissions for schemes of between 10-19 units were approved at a rate of 62%, and the smallest schemes of just 5-9 units had the worst success rate with just 54% of submissions gaining consent.

And it's not just permissions that appear to favour large developments, because they also benefit from a faster application processing time.

Schemes of 50+ units were processed at an average rate of six days per unit, while schemes of 20-49 units were processed at a rate of 10 days per unit.

And while it took an average of 19 days to process submissions for 10-19 units, the smallest schemes (5-9

units) endured a staggeringly sluggish timeframe of 31 days per unit.

Co-founder of Searchland, Hugh Gibbs, commented:

"We believe passionately in the power of data. Not only can it provide invaluable insight on all aspects of planning and property, but it can also reveal answers to the most important questions, such as, what needs to be done in order to facilitate the increased rate of housebuilding so desperately required in this country?"

And while the answer to that is, of course, complex and wide-ranging, this piece of analysis reveals that one answer is surely to look more favourably on SME developers rather than focussing purely on the efforts of a handful of huge housebuilders?

Yes, the larger housebuilders can deliver homes at a much faster rate, but they're also uninterested in utilising the tens of thousands of smaller plots of land that also need to be utilised if the government is going to get anywhere close to achieving its ambitious housebuilding targets. We are, therefore, encouraged by [the government's recent announcement that SMEs will benefit from 'simpler rules and faster decisions' from planning committees](#), but it remains to be seen if this is delivered."

City Sanctuary commented:

"If you're an SME developer delivering, you're playing the game on hard mode compared to larger developers. This isn't a level playing field. It's structural bias. These results are a wake-up call for policymakers, planners and anyone who wants to diversify housing delivery:

If, as a nation, we want to break the overdependency on volume housebuilders for our housing delivery, SMEs need planning policy that fits their delivery model, not one reverse-engineered for volume housebuilders. SMEs are not just boutique distractions. They are the creative, local, adaptive arm of our delivery system.

We are making a call for structural equity so that smaller players can compete without being structurally penalised for wishing to stay small or local."

Data tables and sources

- \*[All planning data sourced from Searchland](#).
- [Full data tables can be viewed online, here](#).