

Practising YIMBYs

Most people support development in practice as well as in principle

Bertie Wnek, September 2025

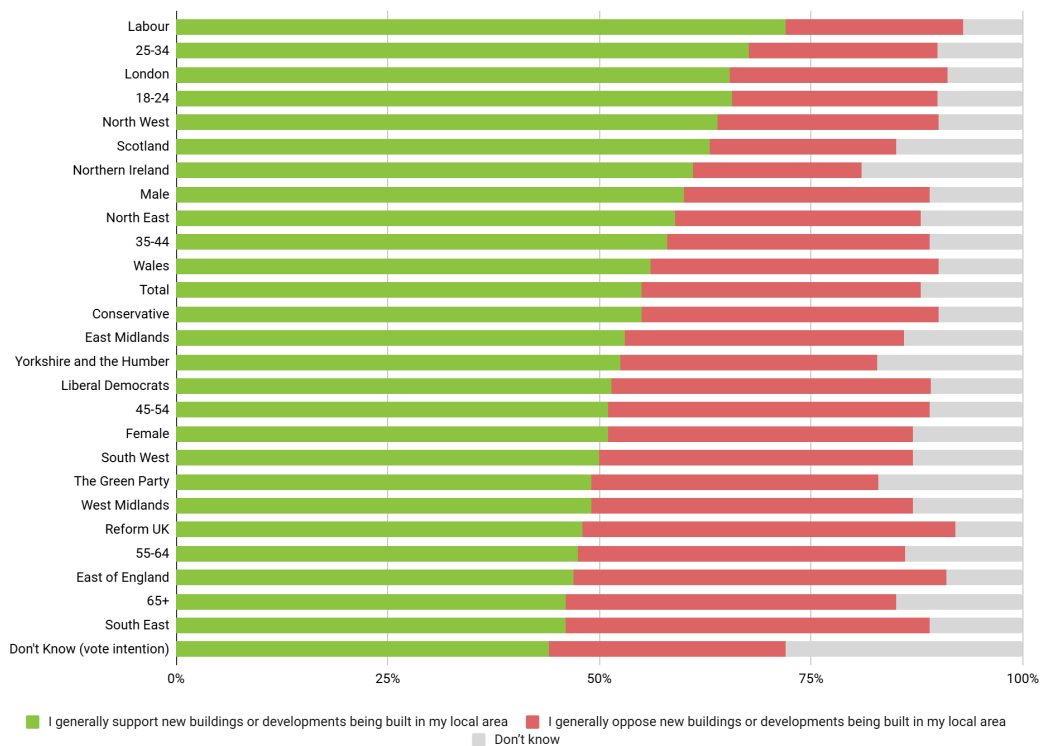
Introduction

After publishing a short essay on house-building last week, my colleague, Jack Airey, was met with a familiar objection.

He'd written about some recent Public First polling showing that most people support more development in their local area - 56% say they're in favour of new development compared to a third who tend to resist it. "Despite negative local news coverage, anti-development placards, and political debates dominated by opposition" he wrote, "most people are more likely to be in favour of local development than against it."¹

The most supportive groups of new development

Public First | UK Adults | Sample Size: 2,005 | Fieldwork: 11th Jul - 17th Jul 2025



¹ [The Quiet Yes - Public First, August 2025](#)



The objection went something like this: *Yes, obviously people support building in principle, but they change their minds when developments are actually being built nearby.* This blog - the second in our YIMBY series - explains why the objection is (mostly) wrong.

If polling and qualitative research conflict, something is wrong

Our polling - in this instance and many others - shows that most people support development. Usually polls throw up small but determined opposition of between one in ten and one in five. Many more have concerns but most often these concerns are manageable and don't boil down to a hard no to every new proposal. They might be dealt with by taking some precautions on traffic or moving the site a few hundred metres away from a school, and so on.

We wanted to see if this held up in our qualitative work. Typically focus groups are the best way of understanding the topline data behind a poll. This is less true when it comes to debates about all but the largest infrastructure and housing developments since most of these debates are hyperlocal - they take place within small geographies immediate to proposed sites. Focus groups tend to involve participants from larger geographical areas, often at the constituency level. Someone living in Ebbsfleet would be unlikely to have views about a specific housing site in Margate, even though they're part of the same constituency.

Public First's immersive research is instead how we understand the balance of opinion in a smaller given location. The research takes place outside of a formal focus group setting and differs from traditional "clipboard" interviews, in that it is planned carefully in advance to speak to the right balance of people in a given town. On the ground, it involves meeting people in their natural environments – not just via high street intercepts, but everywhere they gather in their everyday lives. As a result the research is more informal in tone by design – interviews vary dramatically in length or style and reveal the sentiment in a given location overall - but it surfaces the critical "gut reaction" of many more local people.

We used immersive research to test a simple question

Does support for development hold up when you go from asking people about a hypothetical development to a real one?

Developers and planning authorities will typically ask locals to engage with them (for example by coming to a town-hall event, or by visiting a website). Evidence suggests people who actively engage in the planning process are much more likely to be opposed to development, even if unrepresentative of the local population.^{2 3} When a large cross-section of people are *engaged with*, especially in social or other relaxed settings, the true balance of local opinion is much more likely to come out. This is why immersive research works so well as a complement to polling of local attitudes to development.

We visited several areas in two politically-contested constituencies - Selby and Buckingham & Bletchley - playing host to substantial amounts of new housing and other infrastructure and interviewed over a hundred locals about their feelings towards them. Our findings are consistent with other immersive research we've conducted (and hundreds of other conversations we've had on development) in Runcorn, Selby, Bletchley, Colchester, St. Neots and Mid-Cambridgeshire, North West Cambridgeshire,

² [info.vtaiwan](#)

³ [Who Participates in Local Government? Evidence from Meeting Minutes | Perspectives on Politics | Cambridge Core](#)



Dunfermline, East Thanet and elsewhere. Taken together, what we found was remarkably consistent with our polling: **most people support development**.

A short summary of the hundreds of interviews we have conducted

There is a misunderstanding that attitudes to local development are entrenched. The reality is that most people are open minded and tend to speak conditionally about housing, *I'm all for it as long as... It's alright provided... It's a good thing if...*

They think housing costs are too high as they are and that there is a shortage of homes. They think we need more housing *'so it's more affordable for younger people.'*, *'for younger people saving up for a house'* etc. People often say things like *'my kid's got no hope of ever getting their own place'*, or *'for youngsters it's more or less impossible to get on the ladder.'* They want that to change. This is why they mostly support Labour's commitment to build 1.5 million homes in principle.

But they want the commitment to be *'done right'*. That mostly means two things: firstly, building enough houses that *'normal people can afford'* as opposed to only *'executive housing'*⁴. Emphatically, this doesn't just mean social housing, but homes that are affordable for those on ordinary salaries. Secondly, they want to be sure that upgrades in local infrastructure are made alongside the increase in population: *'the infrastructure and services need to be kept up.'* Nearly everywhere people make the point that housing is good but that there doesn't seem to be *'any plan'* for *'the services that need to come with it. Doctors, dentists, schools'*⁵.

This comes from a feeling that the standard of our infrastructure and services - roads, GPs, dentists, schools and others - are not up to par, and are continuing to decline. In most cases this is not a rejection of local house-building, it's a cry for more investment. Ultimately, people want more homes *and* investment in infrastructure.

In these conversations, which were the most common, the typical response to questions about specific developments nearby was **passive support**. In line with our polling younger and more left-leaning voters were noticeably more likely to be in favour of development, usually because they've had firsthand experience of failing to get on the housing market: *'if you're on your own you can't really afford it.'*

Other than passive supporters, there tend to be two other distinct groups.

A chunk of NIMBYs who argue against the development of any and all new housing; *'We're swamped'*, *'It's killing the area.'*, *'It's a nightmare'*. This group is unlikely to be persuaded to adopt any other position - they were a sizeable minority in each place we visited, but they weren't seen as the 'middle-ground' or as moderates by the majority. It was also noticeable that in smaller, close-knit communities - villages of c.100 or fewer - you typically encountered more NIMBYs relative to the whole population.

Also in line with our polling, there tends to be a sizable minority of **people who are completely disengaged** in these debates (likely to be the 'Don't Knows' in a poll). Even very locally to specific sites there is a reliable group with no interest or awareness of development proposals. *'You're probably talking to the wrong person'*, people who don't know *'what is going up where'*. The 'Don't Knows' might be better

⁴ Our research, [Market Filtering | Public First](#), demonstrates that building larger homes does much more to improve the local affordability of smaller homes suitable for first-time buyers than the building of smaller homes.

⁵ Very often these concerns are closely linked to immigration, with people linking the rise in immigration and the growth in local population to more pressure on services.



understood in our qual as 'Don't Cares'. This group wouldn't dream of interacting with the planning system.

It's mostly true that you find these opinions across the country. There are many cases where the relationship between a local community and a developer has broken down, and local opposition has become the default - again, this typically happens in smaller, close-knit communities. But it usually happens when engagement is not done properly, as an afterthought or a box-ticking exercise. People understandably rage at this kind of dismissive approach but it's not the standard dynamic. And, wary of this, most developers now have proper processes for engaging locals.

Why is this underappreciated?

The obvious question: if this balance of opinion is so reliably true across the country, why is it so underappreciated?

- **Local politicians** have an incentive to understand the balance of local opinion but they tend to hear from voters with objections as opposed to those voters who passively approve. People on the doorstep who are supportive are likely to raise other issues.
- **The planning system** systematically selects for people with objections to development. There's a wealth of evidence to suggest our approach to planning results in a NIMBY selection bias.
- **Local media** has an attention-incentive; reports of conflict between local groups and developers sell more papers than reports reflective of the true balance of opinion.
- **Policymakers** have a much easier life if they are to accept the planning system as is - with its inherent biases - than reforming it wholesale, confronting the fact that it is not in any way representative. Reform is made more difficult by the fact that the planning system benefits those who are used to engaging in legal, policy and political processes.

Conclusion

In the last blog we made some recommendations about how to improve the representativeness of the planning system. These included encouraging councils to prepare local plans on the basis of representative samples of local people, and more engagement on what the public would like to see from developer contributions⁶.

The evidence outlined here should give policymakers more confidence that what is picked up in polling is true in theory and in practice. At times it can feel like politicians are paralysed with fear about what voters (particularly in swing seats) think about building projects. They shouldn't be. Our interviews with over 150 voters living near to development show that the narrative around planning in Westminster is misaligned with the reality on the ground. The public wants politicians to deliver on cost-of-living and public services, these priorities are not incompatible with more development, in fact they go hand in hand.

⁶ [The Quiet Yes - Public First, August 2025](#)

