



# Mind the Skills Gap

The skills we need for sustainable communities

## Report Summary

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# A review of the skills we need for sustainable communities

1. This report assesses the gaps in the supply and demand of skills required to deliver the sustainable communities programme. These are a combination of technical skills, linked to regeneration and the built environment, and generic skills, linked to, for example, finance and project management, leadership and communication.
  - **The key finding is that England faces a significant shortage of qualified professionals with the necessary skills to deliver sustainable communities between now and 2012.**
  - The study is based on research commissioned by the Academy for Sustainable Communities (ASC) and carried out by Arup. It builds on earlier work by Ernst and Young and York Consulting.
2. **Arup's work has involved:**
  - an online survey of 146 organisations involved in the delivery of sustainable communities to identify their perceptions of current skills gaps and future requirements;
  - an online survey of 763 individuals within organisations to establish perceptions of personal skills and future requirements;
  - case study audits of specific sustainable community organisations and projects to establish their workloads, skills gaps and issues; and

- a modelling exercise to provide forecasts of the scale of gaps in labour supply.

This research has reviewed all previous relevant material and developed new information on the sector. However, it does not take account of the recent Housing Green Paper (2007), the impact of the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR07) or the impact of post 2012 Olympics on the sustainable communities agenda. A second stage is being commissioned which will investigate their impact.

### 3. Defining sustainable communities

Sustainable communities balance and integrate the social, economic and environmental aspects of places to meet residents' needs today and in the future. They are diverse, reflecting local circumstances, but share common characteristics and offer people:

- a decent home that they can afford;
- a community in which they want to live and work;
- the chance to develop their skills and interests;
- access to jobs and excellent services; and
- the chance to get engaged in their community and to make a difference.

The adoption of this all-encompassing approach requires that individuals and organisations involved in the delivery of sustainable communities gain new skills and new ways of working.

## Over-arching findings

- **The key finding is that England faces a significant shortage of qualified professionals with the necessary skills to deliver sustainable communities between now and 2012.**
- **A national drive to address labour shortages and skills gaps is needed**  
Organisations need qualified staff with a range of generic skills in order to deliver sustainable communities. Although there are significant numbers of highly-qualified, highly-committed individuals throughout the industry, there are labour shortages, concerns over some technical skills, and generic skills are lacking. A national drive is needed to address this.
- **Labour shortages and skills gaps are widening**  
For nine of the twelve sectors studied, the gap in labour shortages and skills is growing. This is despite the notable progress on improving skills which has been made recently.
- **Multi-disciplinary working**  
The best projects result from full engagement of all professionals, working together to develop solutions and sometimes compromising on their individual objectives.
- **Organisational culture must evolve**  
The research shows that skilled people are central to the delivery of sustainable communities, but talented people need a supportive organisation. Other barriers include pressures on resources, risk management, and organisational culture, which at its best embraces opportunity and mutual understanding, as well as cross-disciplinary working.
- **Further research**  
In terms of the housing profession, evidence from a wide range of sources is ambiguous. There is a need for a clear set of data for the housing sector so that baselines can be determined and used across the industry. Further research is also needed to update the findings for all professional groups to take account of the impact of CSR07, the Housing Green Paper (2007) and other major developments.

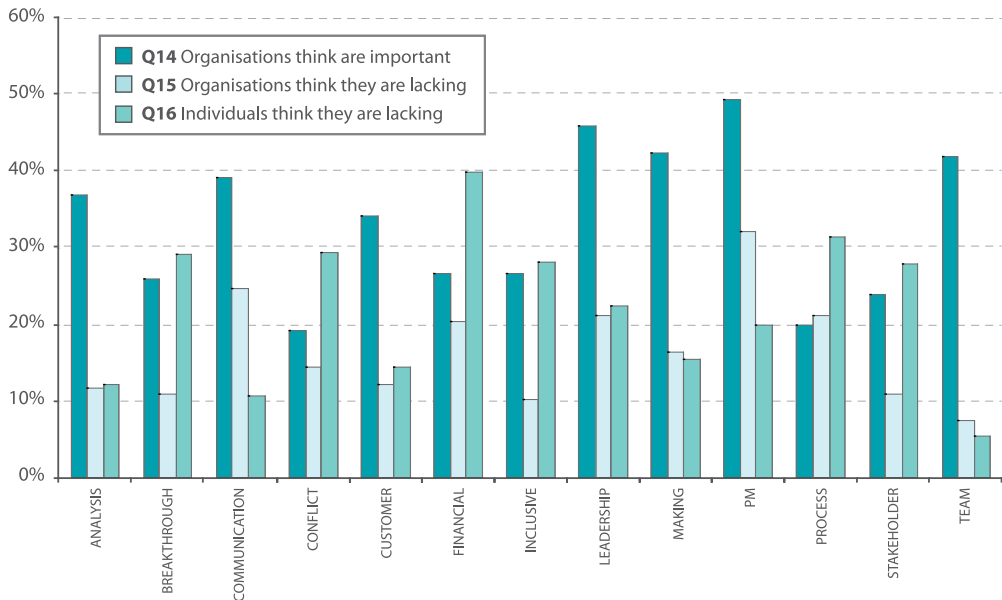




# The sustainable communities workforce

- The core sustainable communities workforce is made up of a broad mix of built environment, public service and socially focused professionals working across public, private and voluntary sectors. It includes 'technical' professionals, such as planners, as well as newer groups such as regeneration professionals or community workers with broad generalist and facilitation skills.
- The scope of the sustainable communities programme is considerable and the related workforce is a large group, ranging from 750,000 to 1.3 million individuals, depending on how widely the definition is drawn.

## Individuals' and organisations' perceptions of generic skills gaps



Source: Arup's Forecasting Model

**KEY:** **ANALYSIS** – Analysis, decision making, learning from mistakes, evaluation, **BREAKTHROUGH** – Breakthrough thinking/brokerage, **COMMUNICATION** – Communication, **CONFLICT** – Conflict resolution, **CUSTOMER** – Customer awareness, **FINANCIAL** – Financial management/appraisal, **INCLUSIVE** – Inclusive visioning, **LEADERSHIP** – Leadership, **MAKING** – Making it happen, given constraints, **PM** – Project management, **PROCESS** – Process/change management, **STAKEHOLDER** – Stakeholder management, **TEAM** – Team working/leadership

## Skills gaps by sector and organisation

6. The private sector tends to be staffed with a younger workforce, and faces fewer barriers to recruiting good staff.
7. Competition for good professionals can be strong and is thought by much of the sustainable communities sector to be increasing – and private sector firms seem better able to attract scarce candidates.
8. Organisations expect to have particular difficulty recruiting in the 'landscape architects, urban designers and architects' sector (with difficulties focusing on landscape architects and urban designers) and the planning sector in the future, a problem felt most acutely in the public sector.
9. Government spending and employment policy issues affect how the public sector is able to organise their recruitment, and the result of this is that staff levels in many public sector bodies are lower than they would ideally like.
10. **In conclusion:**  
the combination of these factors contributes to the frequent and increasing use of consultants by the public sector. This raises important questions for the public sector about cultivating skills in managing consultants, and how best to ensure knowledge is retained inside an organisation. This suggests the increasing importance of focusing on generic skills development, particularly in the public sector.

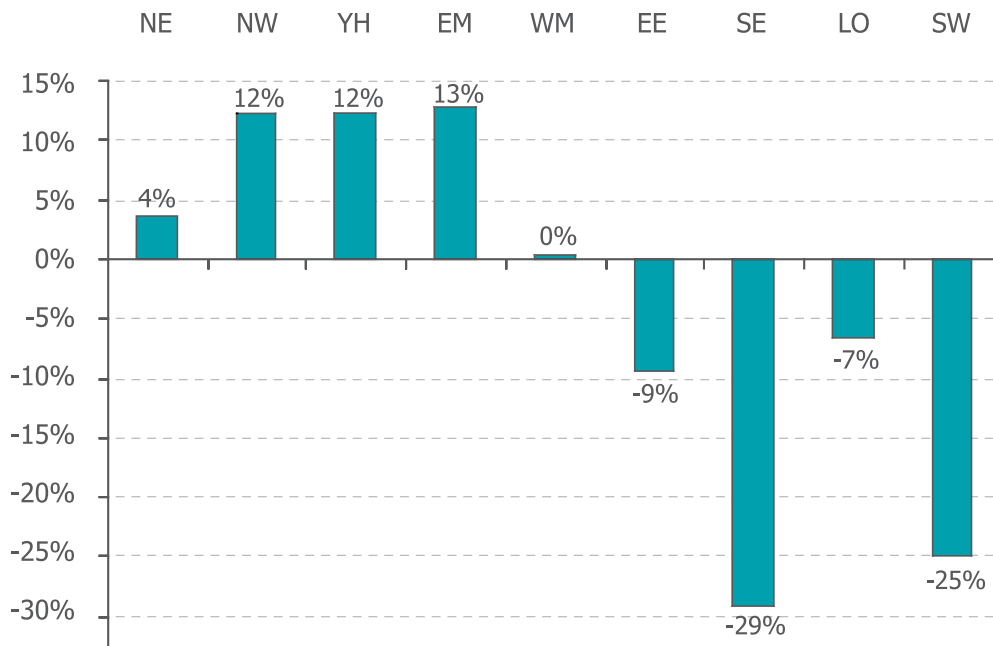
**The definition of a  
cohesive community  
is one in which there is  
a common vision and  
sense of belonging for all.**

## Regional skills gaps

11. The Egan Review noted the lack of reliable information relating to skills issues on a regional basis. Part of the remit of this study was to investigate the extent to which there is a

variation in skills levels or skills needs by region. The forecasting model developed for this study predicts labour shortages by profession and by region.

### Arup's forecast of skills gaps in the sustainable communities workforce by region in 2012 (shortage shown as % of supply)



Source: Arup's Forecasting Model

**KEY:** NE – North East, NW – North West, YH – Yorkshire & Humber, EM – East Midlands, WM – West Midlands, EE – East England, SE – South East, LO – London, SW – South West.

12. The sustainable communities workforce as a whole is distributed across the country in roughly the same proportion as the workforce at large. However, within this, there are clear 'clusters' of types of professional, for example, architects and surveyors in the greater South East, and community and neighbourhood workers in the northern regions. This may reflect different policy priorities by region as well as individual lifestyle choices, differential wage rates and other issues.
- The model forecasts a national shortage of professionals in most professions by 2012, with a projected surplus of professionals in the northern regions and a shortage in London and the greater South East.

- Organisational and geographical mobility is higher in and around the southern regions, with the majority of people saying they would be prepared to work in the South West, London or the South East, and commute longer distances.
- It is expected that a substantial proportion of the surplus professionals projected for the northern and midland regions may be 'sucked in' to the greater South East, in particular given the number of high profile projects and organisations which currently exist or are expected in future.

The overall percentages by region mask shortages in particular professional groups. Further details can be found in the full report which can be downloaded from [www.ascskills.org.uk](http://www.ascskills.org.uk)

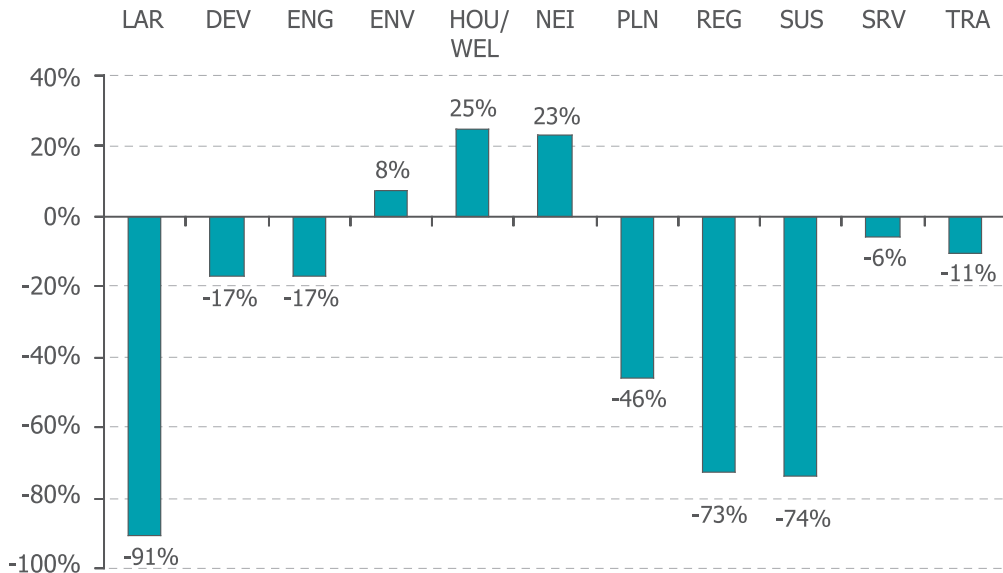


## Skills issues by occupation

13. The forecast model for this study predicts the scale of labour shortages to 2012 across England, by region and profession. It does not take into account recent developments such as the Housing Green Paper (2007) or the Olympics. The model is structured around a supply forecast and a demand forecast from 2006 onwards.

Data are presented as observed trends in the baseline (2002-2005) and then forecasts forward from 2006 to 2012 in terms of supply and demand. These forecasts are based on assumptions drawn from LFS trends, Arup's online surveys, and details of public expenditure plans.

### Arup's forecast of labour shortages in the sustainable communities workforce in England by profession in 2012 (shortage shown as % of supply)



Source: Arup's Forecasting Model

**KEY:** LAR – Landscape Architects, Urban Designers and Architects, DEV – Developers, ENG – Engineers, ENV – Environment Specialists, HOU/WEL – Housing and Welfare Officers, NEI – Neighbourhood Officers, PLN – Planners, REG – Regeneration Professionals, SUS – Sustainability Specialists, SRV – Surveyors, TRA – Transport Planners.

14. **Landscape architects, urban designers and architects** are concerned with the design of buildings, the public realm and settlements.

There are close relationships between these professions, not only in their approach but also in the flow of individuals between professions, particularly from architecture and landscape architecture into urban design. Their involvement in the quality and nature of the built environment is crucial to place-making, an essential element of the delivery of sustainable communities.

• **Labour shortages**

In landscape architecture, urban design and architecture, labour shortages are forecast to increase significantly to 91% by 2012. This is a reflection of the growing demand for design skills and the lack of people entering the profession. However, there is little evidence of a significant shortage of architects. This remains a popular career choice with a steady level of university applications and high retention within the field. Landscape architects, on the other hand, are in short supply.

The increasing recognition of the role of an attractive public realm in delivering social, economic and environmental benefits has led to an upswing in demand not matched by supply. In the case of urban designers there is evidence of a labour shortage. Although influenced by organisational background, this profession was identified by over 35% of online individual survey respondents as an area of labour shortages.

• **Technical skills**

Survey material suggests confidence amongst this sector in the level of technical skills. Only architects show some concern over their knowledge of relevant procedures and specialist skills required to undertake the job.

• **Generic skills**

Urban designers and landscape architects, in common with the rest of the sector, identify gaps in financial and project management skills. There is a sense that design professionals could benefit from close working with other sustainable communities specialists, partly in order to help future-proof designs.

15. **Developers and surveyors** play a key role in the development of the built environment. Surveying is quite wide ranging from building surveying to evaluation of the financial feasibility and value of a development. Developers, often from a surveying background, oversee the physical development of sites.
  - **Labour shortages**

There are limited labour shortages reported at present, but future trends in supply and demand suggest increasing areas of shortage. The labour shortage is forecast to be 6% for surveyors and 17% for developers by 2012. This reflects the growing demand for the skills of these professionals as many large projects move in to the delivery phase and major new drives for housing delivery are planned for the future.
  - **Technical skills**

Over 35% of surveyor respondents in these professions are concerned about their specialist skills. 50% of respondents are concerned about their knowledge of specialist procedures and over 70% identify specialist skills as requiring improvement. This partly reflects the rigorous technical background and recognition of the value of technical skills within this field.
  - **Generic skills**

Surveyors identified project management and communication as priorities, whilst developers identified a wider range of generic skills, reflecting the more cross-cutting nature of the role of the developer. Surveyors have limited engagement in the sustainable communities agenda, sometimes hindering delivery because their skills are essential in many areas.
16. **Engineers** contribute to the delivery of sustainable communities in the practical solutions they develop to provide fit-for-purpose sites, buildings and infrastructure. This involves a number of different types of engineers, including civil, structural, building services, transport, mechanical, electrical and geotechnical.
  - **Labour shortages**

The shortage in skilled engineers is predicted to widen to 17% by 2012. This is driven by significant increases in the level of demand, causing gaps to widen despite improvements in the supply of engineers.
  - **Technical skills**

Although individual engineers are concerned about maintaining their technical skills, organisations are reasonably confident in the ability of staff to meet the requirements of the job.
  - **Generic skills**

Engineers identify project, process and financial management as gaps in their generic skills. Leadership is also identified as an area of weakness and engineers sometimes also appear to have limited engagement with the sustainable communities agenda.



17. **The environmental sector includes environmental and sustainable development specialists** and covers a broad range of disciplines and individuals who are likely to be involved with the delivery of sustainable communities. Jobs range from the promotion of biodiversity to green spaces management to strategy development and impact assessment. Professionals are involved at every stage – design, production, maintenance and management of communities. Sustainable development has emerged in recent years as a profession in its own right.
- **Labour shortages**  
Shortages in environmental specialists will worsen temporarily and then start to improve to the point where, by 2012, there is a forecast 8% surplus. A shortage of sustainable development experts is likely to steadily increase to over 70% in the period up to 2012.
  - **Technical skills**  
Individuals report concern about the depth and breadth of their technical skills, given the wide subject matter involved.
  - **Generic skills** The survey identified perceived gaps in project management, stakeholder management, leadership, conflict resolution, inclusive visioning and breakthrough thinking. There is a need for those in this sector to be embedded in delivery teams, ensuring sustainable development issues are not seen as constraints but opportunities.

18. **Housing and welfare officers and neighbourhood/community development officers** are principally concerned with the social aspects of planning and maintaining sustainable communities and are mainly employed in the public sector. Housing and welfare officers manage and maintain properties whilst neighbourhood and community development officers focus on local regeneration, often working to build community capacity. There are particular difficulties in estimating the numbers employed in the housing sector. Also, the sector is currently subject to particularly rapid policy change, which will impact on future demand. The housing sector is not just made up of housing officers but contains professionals covered elsewhere in the study, such as planners, surveyors and developers.
- **Labour shortages**  
Results show that while a 47% growth in the supply of housing and welfare officers is needed to meet demand, forecasts suggest that supply will exceed demand by 25% to 2012. However, this surplus is based on recent trends and more research is needed to take the Comprehensive Spending Review 2007 into account, as well as the recent housing policy announcements. Evidence from the online survey indicates real difficulties amongst housing associations and a more general shortage of housing officers at senior management level particularly in London and the South East. It is vital that a clear data set is established for the housing sector so



that baselines can be set and used across the industry. There is a forecast surplus of more than 20% for neighbourhood and community development officers by 2012.

- **Technical skills**

More than 55% of housing and welfare officers and more than 60% of community development officers felt that their specialist technical skills did not meet the requirements of the job. Organisations showed less concern, suggesting a problem of confidence in a fast changing policy and technical environment rather than serious skills shortages.

- **Generic skills**

A number of generic skills gaps amongst housing and welfare and community development professionals were identified including communication, breakthrough thinking, inclusive visioning, financial management and stakeholder management, leadership, project management and making it happen. There are increasing demands on housing professionals in particular to lead cross-sector working at a local level.

19. The **planning system and planners** have received increasing attention in recent years with the acknowledgement of the importance of planning in the delivery of policy objectives ranging from housing to mitigating and adapting to climate change. The lack of resources faced by the sector, alongside the diminution of professional status, need for culture change and sometimes individual and organisation demoralisation has also been widely recognised.

- **Labour shortages**

When spending-based demand trajectories are compared to supply trends, the labour shortages in the planning profession is forecast to increase over the long term to 46% by 2012.

- **Technical skills**

Planners are identified by approximately 10% of organisations surveyed as requiring improvement in their technical skills, a relatively high proportion compared to other professions. There are particular gaps in development control.

- **Generic skills**

Financial management skills were most frequently identified by individuals.

20. **Effective regeneration and economic development** requires improvements to the physical landscape as well as the creation of new social and economic opportunities. As such, those who work in regeneration are employed in a range of different occupations often playing very different roles. The common feature is their focus on improving the performance of their local community and their perception of themselves as regeneration professionals, distinct from other categorisations.

- **Labour shortages**

The model forecasts significant increases in demand so that labour shortages will be over 70% in 2012.

- **Technical skills**

Regeneration and economic development officers do not have the option of such rigorous technical training as some of the other professions, unless they enter regeneration via these occupations or undertake specialist postgraduate training. This may contribute to a lack of confidence, as well as a lack of skills, in some areas.

- **Generic skills**

A wide range of generic skills are required by regeneration and economic development professionals, including project management, partnership working, making things happen, leadership, community engagement,

negotiation and conflict resolution.

Regeneration officers are often expected to drive forward cross-sector working, demanding technical knowledge and comprehensive generic skills.

21. **Transport planners** are concerned with the provision and management of a sustainable transport infrastructure, at a national, regional and local level. There is also a very wide range of specialists, from highway designers through to regional land use and transport modelling.

- **Labour shortages**

An increasing shortage of transport planners is forecast, with the labour shortages expected to increase to over 10% by 2012. Over 10% of organisational respondents to the survey anticipated shortages in this area.

- **Technical skills**

Amongst sustainable communities professionals, transport planners and organisations are relatively confident of the level of technical skills in this area.

- **Generic skills**

Transport planners are also relatively confident about their generic skills. In common with those across the sector, financial, project and change management are most likely to be identified as areas requiring improvement. There is evidence that transport planners are not always as engaged in the sustainable communities agenda as they could be.

# Recommendations

As a consequence of undertaking this study a number of recommendations for addressing the labour shortages and skills gaps that threaten the delivery of sustainable communities in the future have been made.

(i) **Promote a national drive to address skills gaps:**

It is evident that labour shortages, generic skills gaps and concerns over specialist and technical knowledge are experienced across the regions and occupations. There needs to be a nationally co-ordinated approach to developing skills and knowledge, in which all partners and stakeholders are engaged. ASC needs to continue its role as the national centre for delivering skills for sustainable communities, working with partners across the sector to ensure a coherent and integrated approach to tackling shortages and gaps.

(ii) **Recognise generic skills are key:**

Individuals and organisations across the full range of professions and in all the regions recognise the critical importance of generic skills. In response to the research findings, we recommend that:

- a) national programmes must be developed and delivered on a cross-professional basis in order to address common gaps and encourage and reinforce cross-sector working;
- b) short courses and dissemination of best practice are clearly recognised as preferred approaches for busy practitioners;

(iii) **Work to address labour shortages, recruitment and retention:**

Delivering sustainable communities in the future requires more skilled professionals. Continued effort is needed in attracting new recruits and retaining them by providing attractive ongoing opportunities, including continuous professional development. ASC should continue to promote sustainable communities professions, by raising the profile of occupations and by providing enhanced entry routes for all ages. ASC will work with other relevant bodies, including Sector Skills Councils, professional institutes and the local government sector, to add value to each other's work.

(iv) **Identify, recognise and promote technical skills:**

Specialist skills and knowledge are required across the sector. Skills need updating, improving and adapting in response to changing market conditions and policy changes, including climate change. Partners and stakeholders must support the development of technical skills amongst the newer professions and reinvigorate those of more established professions. At the national level, ASC should encourage professional bodies and other partners to ensure that

technical and specialist skills shortages are addressed. ASC's work to provide practical guidance for technical areas, such as climate change, will be co-ordinated with other relevant bodies and departments and promoted across the range of professions.

(v) **Promote best practice:**

Research and best practice needs to be captured, collated and translated into practical guidance and examples that reflect the needs of delivery organisations. At the national level, ASC should continue to disseminate research findings and best practice in an accessible and practical format that leads to action and improvement.

(vi) **Develop and embed a common understanding of sustainable communities:**

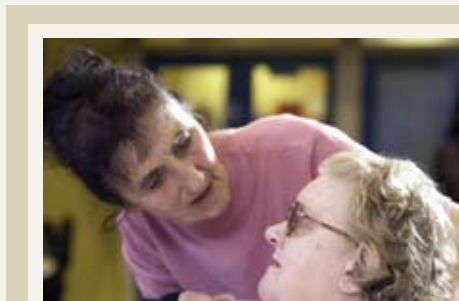
There needs to be a common and shared understanding across the professions of what delivering sustainable communities actually means in practice. As the national body for promoting sustainable communities skills, ASC should work with key partners and stakeholders to develop a common language. This will include the development of benchmarking and diagnostic tools that highlight knowledge gaps and sign post users to areas of support. This work will

also contribute to a more consistent level of engagement by occupational groups.

(vii) **Undertake further research:**

This report does not take into account the outcomes of CSR07, the Housing Green Paper (2007) and the post-2012 impact of the Olympics. New directions in housing policy announced over the past few months will change, and arguably exacerbate, forecasts for the sector. Further research is needed on this sector, including the agreement of a shared definition for the housing sector. ASC will work with key partners, including Asset Skills and CIH, to commission further research work in this area.

A copy of the full report can be downloaded from our website at [www.ascskills.org.uk](http://www.ascskills.org.uk)





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