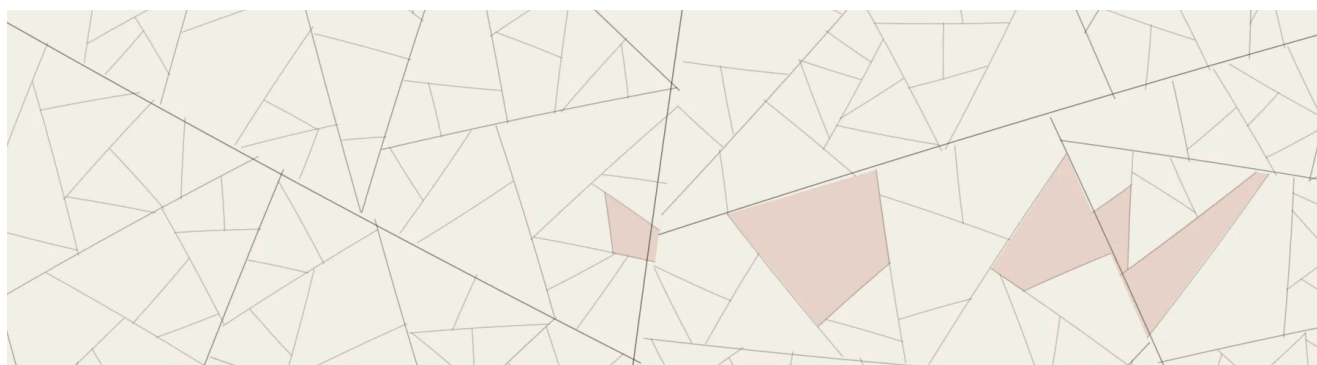


— THE SYSTEM

The fewest major housing decisions since 1979, and the larger schemes coming forward.

Councils in England decided 1,026 applications for major housing development between April and June 2026, fewer than in any quarter since the government's quarterly returns begin in 1979. Fewer schemes are coming forward, but the outline applications that do arrive propose more homes than at any point in the four years those figures cover. The stage at which a scheme is fixed in detail is the one that is shrinking.

The Editor



Ground Level, generated

Between April and June 2026, councils in England decided 1,026 applications for major housing development. No quarter since the government's quarterly returns began, in April 1979, has had fewer.

The previous low was the quarter before, January to March 2026, at 1,033. For 15 years the lowest point had been April to June 2009, at the bottom of the financial crisis, when councils decided 1,117. That was passed in July to September 2024, and six of the seven lowest

quarters on record have come in that quarter or since. Over the year to March 2026 they decided 4,269, the lowest annual total in the series. The highest was 13,706, in 1988-89.

1,026

Decisions on major housing applications in England, April to June 2026. The fewest in any quarter since the government's quarterly returns begin in April 1979.

SOURCE · MHCLG, PLANNING APPLICATIONS IN ENGLAND: APRIL TO JUNE 2026, PS2 OPEN DATA AND LIVE TABLE P120A, PUBLISHED 24 SEPTEMBER 2026

A major housing application is one for 10 or more homes or, where the number of homes is not given, for housing on a site of half a hectare or more. Until now these were the applications most likely to reach a planning committee. The figure counts decisions, not homes, and the difference between the two is the subject of this piece.

The fall is not in approvals.

Councils are not refusing more of these schemes. In April to June they granted 865 of the 1,026, or 84%. In the same quarter of 2016 they granted 81%. In April to June 2009 they granted 74%. Councils approved more major housing schemes this April to June than in the same months of 2009, while deciding fewer.

What has fallen is the number of applications reaching a decision at all. Ten years ago councils decided 1,926 major housing applications between April and June. This year's figure is 47% lower.

Fewer applications, with far more homes in each.

Fewer applications are coming in. Since June the government's statistics have carried figures from Glenigan, a construction research com-

pany, on the applications themselves. In the year to June 2026 developers and landowners made 2,933 outline applications for housing. On the provisional figures that is 6% fewer than a year earlier, and 36% fewer than the 4,595 made in the year to June 2022.

The homes inside those applications went the other way. The 2,933 applications proposed 245,758 homes, up 41% in a year and the highest annual total since the series began in 2022. The average outline application now proposes 84 homes. In the year to June 2022 it proposed 48.

84

Homes proposed in the average outline housing application in England in the year to June 2026. In the year to June 2022 it was 48.

SOURCE · MHCLG, PLANNING APPLICATIONS IN ENGLAND: APRIL TO JUNE 2026, GLENIGAN TABLES, TABLE 3A

Much of the total sits in a handful of schemes. On Glenigan's figures, about 10 outline applications in the year were for 2,000 or more homes each. Together they proposed 47,700 homes, about a fifth of everything applied for in outline. Just over half of all the homes applied for in outline were in two regions, the East of England and the South East.

47,700

Homes proposed in about 10 outline applications of 2,000 or more homes each, about a fifth of all the homes applied for in outline in England in the year to June 2026.

SOURCE · MHCLG, PLANNING APPLICATIONS IN ENGLAND: APRIL TO JUNE 2026, GLENIGAN APPLICATIONS ANNEX, TABLE 4A

An outline permission is a starting point.

Outline permission settles whether a scheme is acceptable in principle. Before anything is built, the developer needs the details approved, which planners call reserved matters, and usually a section 106 agreement setting out what the scheme must pay for or provide. On large sites that takes years.

The planning consultancy Lichfields measures how many. In the third edition of its Start to Finish research, published in March 2024, sites of 2,000 or more homes took a median of 5.1 years from the first application to the first detailed permission. The first home was completed a median of 6.7 years after the first application.

On those medians, a scheme of that size applied for in the year to June 2026 would reach detailed permission in about 2031, with its first homes around 2033. That is an average drawn from past sites, not a forecast for any single scheme. Both dates fall after the end of this Parliament, the period covered by the government's milestone of 1.5 million homes in England, set in its Plan for Change in December 2024. The milestone covers all new homes, not only those from large schemes.

The detailed end of the pipeline is shrinking.

A detailed application fixes what will be built. Glenigan counted 22,729 of them for housing in the year to June 2026. That is almost unchanged on a year earlier, but 29% fewer than in

2022. The homes they proposed, 273,775, were down 8% in a year and 30% below the 2022 total.

Permissions followed. Glenigan counted 212,492 homes given detailed planning permission in the year to June 2026. That is down 12% in a year and 30% below the 301,587 of the year to June 2022. We reported the annual fall in Financing every link.

The Home Builders Federation publishes its own quarterly count from Glenigan's data. Its report of 30 September put the homes permitted in April to June at 45,315, the lowest quarterly total since 2012. It counted 1,234 projects of three or more homes approved in the quarter, the lowest on its record.

Read together, the figures suggest a pipeline filling at the front and thinning at the back. More homes are being proposed in principle, in fewer and larger schemes. Fewer are being fixed in detail. The statistics do not follow individual schemes from one stage to the next, so this is a reading of two series side by side, not a measurement of one.

Where the time goes.

The statutory time limit for deciding a major application is 13 weeks. In April to June councils decided 19% of all major applications within it, down 4 percentage points on a year.

Most major housing decisions now run to a different deadline. Of the 1,026 decided in the quarter, 829, or 81%, carried what the statistics call a performance agreement. The term covers an extension of time agreed with the applicant, a planning performance agreement, and the longer period allowed where a scheme needs an environmental statement. In the same quarter

of 2016 the share was 62%. Measured against those agreed deadlines, councils decided 89% of major housing applications on time.

81%

Share of major housing decisions in April to June 2026 made against an agreed or extended deadline rather than the 13-week statutory limit. In the same quarter of 2016 it was 62%.

SOURCE · MHCLG, LIVE TABLE P120A, PUBLISHED 24 SEPTEMBER 2026

An extension of time needs the applicant's written agreement. A planning performance agreement is, in the words of government planning guidance, "a project management tool" for agreeing "timescales, actions and resources", and it is "agreed voluntarily between the applicant and the local planning authority". Councils can charge for them. On 8 October the federation published research with Paragon Bank which found that the 85 councils answering a Freedom of Information request had each received an average of almost £600,000 in such fees between 2022 and 2025. It argued that routine use of these agreements can make headline performance figures "less representative of the length of time applicants actually wait for decisions".

Two readings of the same numbers.

The house builders' explanation is demand and cost. The federation says the continued fall in supply "reflects weak effective demand, constrained access to affordable mortgage lending and subdued market conditions". It adds that rising construction costs, taxes, levies and pol-

icy requirements are squeezing the viability of sites.

“

These figures show a housing pipeline being squeezed to historically low levels, with too few planning permissions coming forward to meet the country's housing needs.

Neil Jefferson, Chief Executive, Home Builders Federation · Ground Level, 30 September 2026

Councils look further down the pipeline. In March the Local Councils Network, which represents district and unitary councils, published a survey of 62 of its members. Since 2012-13 they had granted permission for 633,010 homes. Government figures suggest 331,300 homes were completed in those areas over the same period, a build-out rate of 52%. About 200,500 homes had valid permission but had not been started. The top four reasons the councils gave, in order, were viability, market demand, the behaviour of developers or landowners, and infrastructure.

“

Asking councils to approve even more housing applications, when we already approve about nine in every 10, is missing the point to a complex problem.

Cllr Richard Wright, Chair, Local Councils Network · Ground Level, 31 March 2026

The network's "about nine in every 10" is close to the grant rate for all planning applications, 88% in April to June. For major housing it was 84%.

Both accounts name viability. Neither speaks directly to the change in shape that the decision statistics show. Councils are approving a higher share of the major housing schemes they decide than in 2016, and the outline applications coming forward are larger, but far fewer schemes are reaching a decision.

What changes next.

From 31 October the national scheme of delegation takes effect. The government's impact assessment estimates that "nearly 40% of major residential decisions are made by committee". After that date a major scheme reaches committee only if two nominees agree, as we set out in who decides from 31 October. The government expects that to speed decisions up.

National policy changed on 17 August as well. Housing outside a settlement in an area with an unmet need now has a named route to approval, which we examined in the universal tilt.

The next figures, for July to September 2026, are due in December. They will include about six weeks under the new framework. The delegation rules start on 31 October, so the October to December figures, due in 2027, will cover their first two months. The first full quarter under them is January to March 2027. The count of decisions is one measure to watch. The other is whether the 245,758 homes proposed in outline begin to appear in detailed permissions.

How we counted.

The government publishes every council's quarterly planning return as open data. We added up the decisions on major housing development for every authority in every quarter from April 1979 to June 2026. For each quarter since 2012 our totals match the government's own Live Table P120A exactly, including the 1,026 for April to June 2026. The figures count decisions on applications, not homes.

Some returns are missing. There are none for 16 councils in July to September 2000 and for 1 in October to December 2003, so those two totals are slight undercounts. One authority's return is also missing in eight other quarters, Langbaurch on Tees from April 1985 to March 1986 and Sheffield from April 1996 to March 1997, a handful of decisions each. None of these quarters comes close to the lowest.

The latest figures are provisional. In April to June 2026, 309 of 310 authorities sent returns in time. The department estimates figures for any that do not, and it revises the previous seven quarters with each release. The new low is 7 decisions below the last.

The Glenigan figures are provisional and rounded in places. The government gives them as context rather than as accredited official statistics, says they give a broad indication of trends, and notes that the latest quarter's permissions figures tend to be revised upwards.