Is the CPO process damaging our mental health?

David Holland
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COMMENT It will come as no surprise that the compulsory purchase process can be stressful for those affected, in particular for those who have property or land acquired by CPO.

As an industry organisation, the Compulsory Purchase Association was getting more and more reports from our members of how the experience of the CPO process was negatively affecting people's mental health and wellbeing.

However, we didn't want to jump to conclusions and base any potential recommendations for change on anecdotal evidence. Instead, we wanted to take the temperature of those engaged in the CPO process and build a strong evidence base of the actual experiences of those affected.

The Affected Parties Working Group commissioned a survey of our members and other professional membership organisations in order to gain a deeper insight.

It's the first survey of its kind to look specifically into the health and wellbeing effects of the compulsory purchase process and, in undertaking it, we have taken a big step forward in seeking to understand the issues faced by affected parties and specific factors to be addressed.

Stark findings

We presented the findings of the survey for the first time at our recent National Conference in Birmingham. We had 124 responses and the vast majority were from surveyors.

The overarching finding of the survey was stark, where 96% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the process causes claimants "high levels of anxiety and stress".

There were a number of specific factors identified as causes of anxiety. The first, put simply, was a lack of understanding of the process by claimants, with one respondent summing up their concerns that "until you're the subject to a CPO, why would you understand how it's going to work?"

Another common factor identified was that people feel anxious about the lack of certainty concerning the timetable, whether they are going to be compensated fairly and why a CPO is even required.

A significant majority of respondents identified that they feel like they are not in control of the process and have to deal with too many different parties within the process. Other factors were also highlighted, including quality of guidance information available, lack of confidence in professional advisers and varying standards of professional advice received.

While a proportion of respondents suggested that reform to CPO law and process as a specific factor, it is clear the majority of factors contributing to negative experiences are behavioural. There was a common theme in that, for many, it came down to a lack of communication throughout the process that would help to ease some of those concerns.

Respondents to the survey consistently identified that the compulsory purchase process is, by its nature, complex and requires those involved to have both expert knowledge and also empathy and understanding towards those affected.

Room for improvement

So where do we go from here?

The Affected Parties Working Group will now consider the survey findings and identify practical recommendations to improve the process. All ideas are on the table, however, a key focus will be on improving best practice to improve guidance and information available to affected parties and promote behavioural change amongst professionals engage in the CPO process to develop a more collaborative and empathetic approach.

It's fair to say that we don't have all the answers yet but the fact this is firmly on the agenda is a very positive starting point.

David Holland is vice-chair of the Compulsory Purchase Association

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