



RTPI

Royal Town Planning Institute

RTPI research paper

Investing in Delivery

The state of resourcing of planning departments
in the South East and North West of England

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Introduction

The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI), RTPI South East and RTPI North West, in partnership with the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) commissioned Arup to investigate the level of investment in public sector planning services across the South East and North West regions of England and how this relates to performance and delivery.

Housing remains a priority for the Government with a number of initiatives introduced over the last decade aimed at boosting delivery. Planning is a fundamental enabler of housing delivery, although the profession continues to face criticism suggesting it delays the development process. Despite these challenges, there is a significant role for local planning authorities (LPAs) to play in supporting the realisation of Government objectives.

In the Housing White Paper (February 2017), Government committed to:

“...take steps to secure the financial sustainability of planning departments; ensure that the planning system has the skilled professionals it needs to assess and make the tough decisions we expected; and provide targeted support to address areas of specialist weakness.”

The report focuses on the South East and the North West, which after Greater London are the second and fourth most populated regions in England.

- South East: 74 LPAs serving a population of over 8.5 million people.
- North West: 42 LPAs serving a population of over 7 million people.

Both regions are facing significant growth pressures and a need to deliver new housing. They were chosen as an indicative sample of England as a whole.

The purpose of this research on ‘Investing in Delivery in the South East and North West’ of England was to investigate planning service resourcing, staffing pressures and delivery structures in LPAs in the regions between 2011/12 and 2016/17.

The report explores five research themes; Planning Resource, Budget and Income Changes, Performance, Influence of Planning, and Planning Culture and Behaviour. The report is structured around these themes setting out the challenges, findings and recommendations.

Planning Resources

This theme explores changes to local authority planning resources and capacity over five years.

Context

Figure 1 shows the change in planning resources and expenditure over the last 10 years. Staff reductions mirror the downward trend of planning and development service expenditure.

Analysis of CIPFA planning service expenditure between 2011/12 and 2016/17 shows a 46% reduction in the North West and a relatively stable position in the South East.

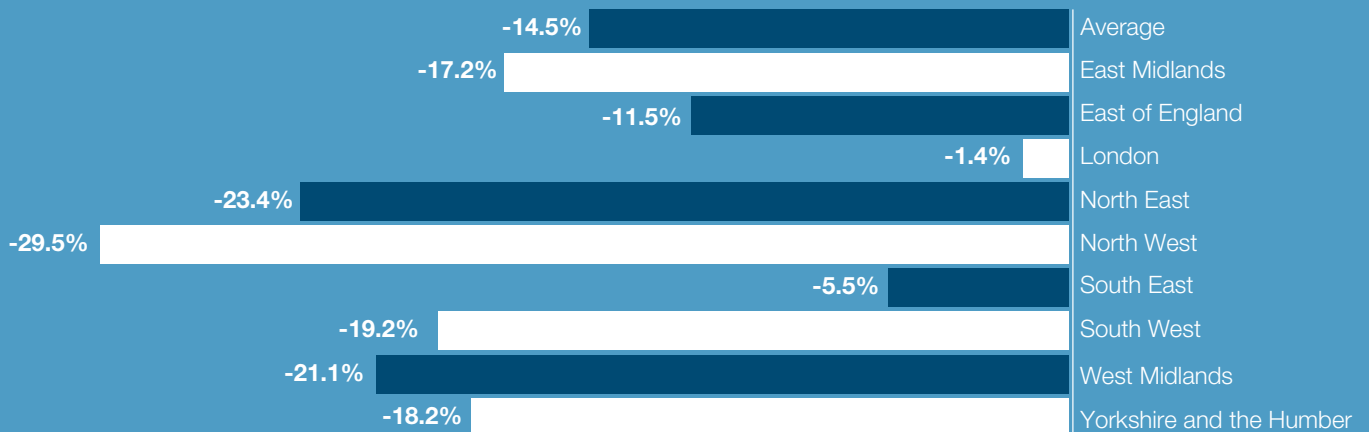


Figure 1: Change in Planning Department Resourcing by Region 2006 – 2016 (Planning Futures, 2017).

Findings

1. Over half of survey respondents stated their local authority planning service is not able to effectively recruit and retain staff.
2. Figure 2 shows resources are diverted from 'placeshaping' activities to core statutory functions (Survey and Focus Groups).
3. Income streams are subject to the peaks and troughs of the development cycle.

"Recruitment is difficult... graduates [are] snapped up by the private sector and LPAs cannot compete."
(Survey respondent)

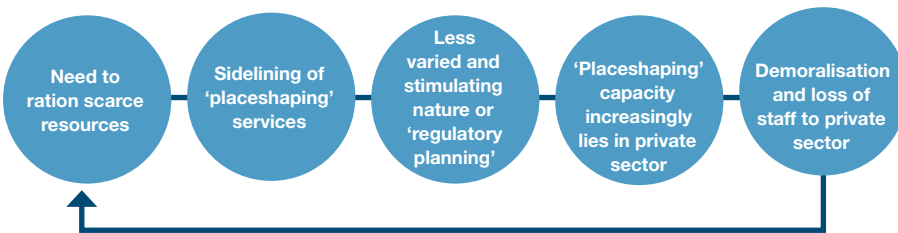


Figure 2: Reinforcing the cycle of pressure towards regulatory planning (Arup, 2018)

Recommendations for England

1. Seek flexible and competitive pay scales.
2. Promote the public sector lifestyle and training merits to graduates and school leavers.
3. Embrace and nurture the next generation of planners through 'grow your own' initiatives and apprenticeships.
4. 'Balance the books' through retention of planning income for planning services.
5. Invest on specialists with on-demand service agreements or resource sharing.
6. Consider the deployment of existing staff across planning teams to manage fluctuating service demand.
7. Use placements to build skills and plug service gaps.

Case studies

The Budgetary Rollercoaster In Practice

A South East local authority faced high volumes of residential applications compounded by the lack of a 5-year housing supply. After a number of strategic sites received consent, the 5-year housing supply was re-established. The local authority was able to defend the position regarding housing supply and the number of planning applications dropped. This resulted in a £400,000 drop in fee income which will need to be reconciled with the number of employees in the planning team.

Birmingham Graduate Hub, Birmingham City Council

The Graduate Hub concept was introduced in response to an ageing workforce and a lack of graduate-level talent. Graduates are hired on a two-year fixed-term basis and rotated around services based on business needs. Initially funded through Enterprise Zone, Planning Performance Agreements (PPAs), site delivery and corporate funds budget is now partly met by the Council's General Fund. It has been successful, attracting and retaining graduates and promoting them to senior planner positions.

Investment and Income

This theme sets out the availability of resources for planning service investment.

Context

Figures 3 and 4 show that income generation efforts are being successful. Income is generally increasing across the South East and North West, but still falls significantly short of covering the cost of processing planning applications.

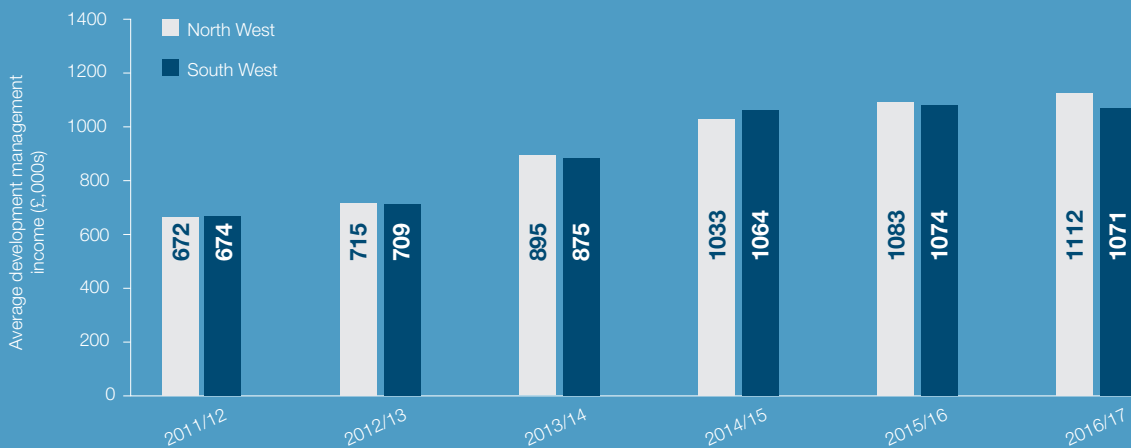


Figure 3: Average income generated through Development Management services in South East and North West LPAs (CIPFA).

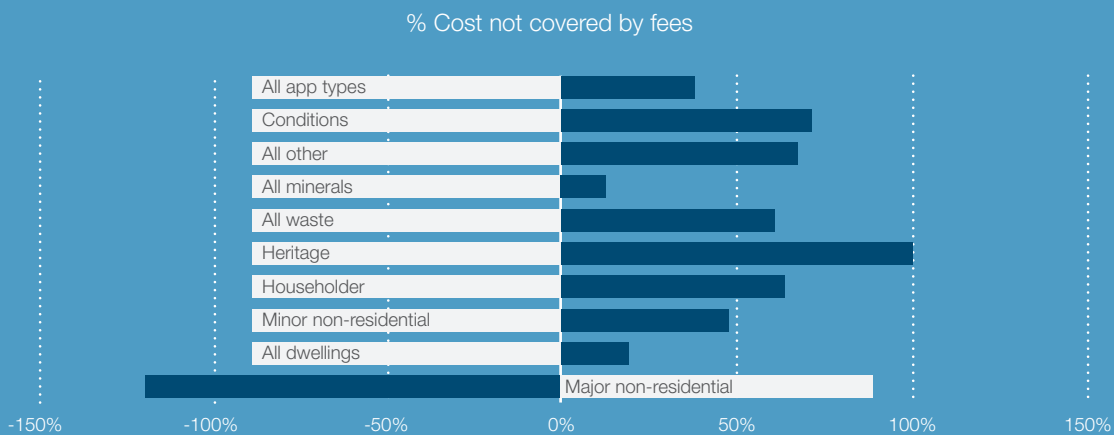


Figure 4: Based on source data from PAS, 2015.

Findings

1. The 20% increase in planning application fees is not the whole solution to resource challenges.
2. The gap between application fees and costs means cost recovery challenges remain.
3. Local plan costs are viewed as an investment in delivering the growth agenda.
4. Income is being bolstered through PPAs and New Homes Bonus.

“The existing fee of £195 [for a Section 73 application] covers just half of the expense for required newspaper advertising.”
(Survey respondent)

“All the nearby authorities are experiencing problems in recruiting experienced officers, so have resource issues, even where funding is available.”
(Survey respondent)

“[The local authority] has spent considerable time demonstrating how planning can deliver the corporate goals of growth, and members understand that the planning service is key in delivering these...additional homes and business space generates additional income and is the key to financial stability.”
(Survey respondent)

Recommendations for England

- 1. Rethink cost recovery:**
 - Use time measurement applications to monitor and manage staff effort against application types.
 - Use this evidence for fee increases or government subsidy.
- 2. Innovate to create new income streams.**
- 3. Make the case for reinvestment.**
- 4. Invest in digital solutions:**
 - Explore the case for future efficiency and savings through investment in digital planning tools. Time monitoring or workload software can help manage caseloads whilst Artificial Intelligence (AI) chatbots can manage routine public enquiries.
- 5. Future research on the use of the 20% uplift in fees is needed.**
- 6. LPAs should invest in people and talent management.**

Case studies

Milton Keynes Council (MKC) Planning Hub

MKC aimed to reduce its annual planning budget by £250,000 per annum by 2020. The council acted commercially in order to generate income to support a high quality service. The Planning Hub signposts applicants to pay for services such as PPAs and allows them to choose their case officer based on skill set. The Hub has contributed to a 69% increase in development management income since its launch in 2017.

London Borough of Barnet (LBB) Fast Tracking Pilot

LBB altered its pre-application advice charging schedule to differentiate the service offer to potential applicants. This covers major and minor applications, certificates of lawfulness applications and prior notifications. The charging schedule defines the service standard and quality expectations for customers seeking pre-application advice.

Performance

This theme seeks to understand measures and innovative practices by local planning authorities which can boost performance.

Context

- Development management performance against statutory determination targets remains strong.
- Overall planning performance and delivery of 'quality' outcomes remain difficult to measure.
- Figure 5 shows delays in local plan production across the South East and North West lead to uncertainty and challenges over a 5-year housing land supply.

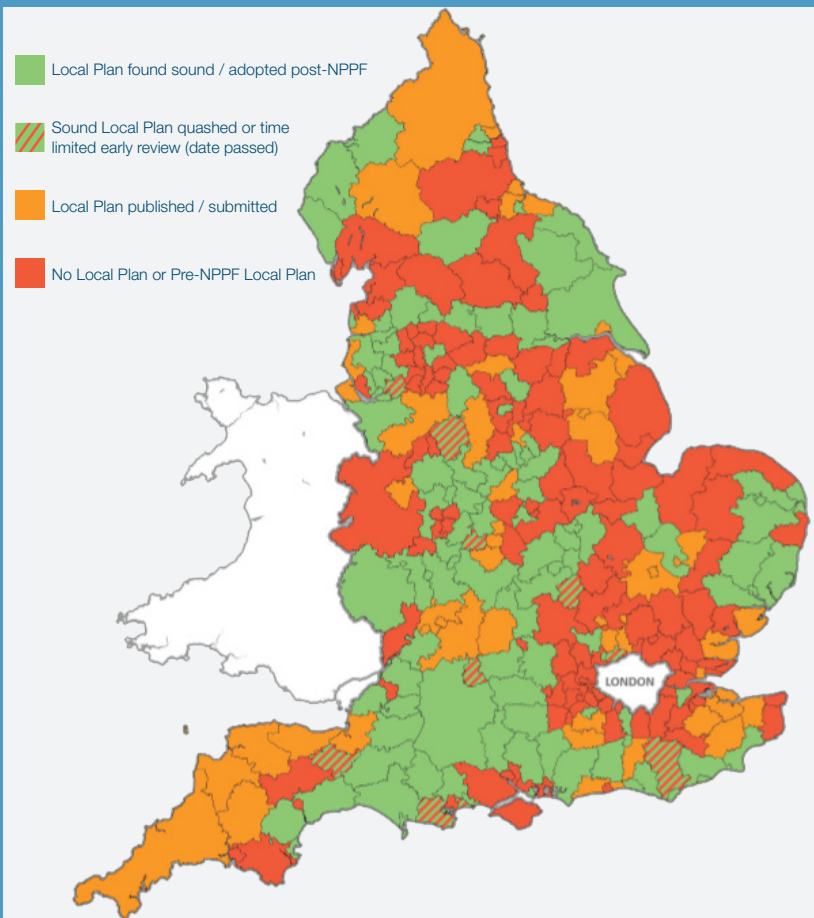
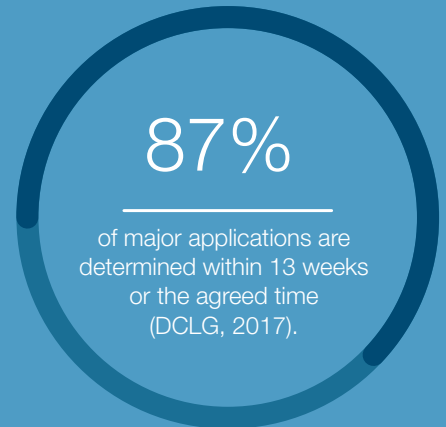


Figure 5: Post-NPPF local plan status by local planning authority as of March 2017 (Lichfields, 2017)

Findings

1. Delivering targets rather than outcomes:

- There is a disconnect between existing performance measures of 8- and 13-week determination rates and the intangible value of good planning.

2. Focus group participants identified potential quality performance measures as:

- Extent to which and way in which proposals are shaped at the pre-application stage.
- Design, quality and functionality of built-out developments following approval.
- Applicant satisfaction with the processing of their application.

3. Moving planning beyond regulation:

- Case officers should be more than passive 'post boxes' who compile consultation responses. (Focus group)
- Planners want to have a proactive, solutions-based approach to the planning process; planning judgement should be valued. (Focus group)

“Good planning is associated with delivery on the ground, the developers being challenged to improve their schemes, rather than 8-13 week dates.”

(Survey respondent)

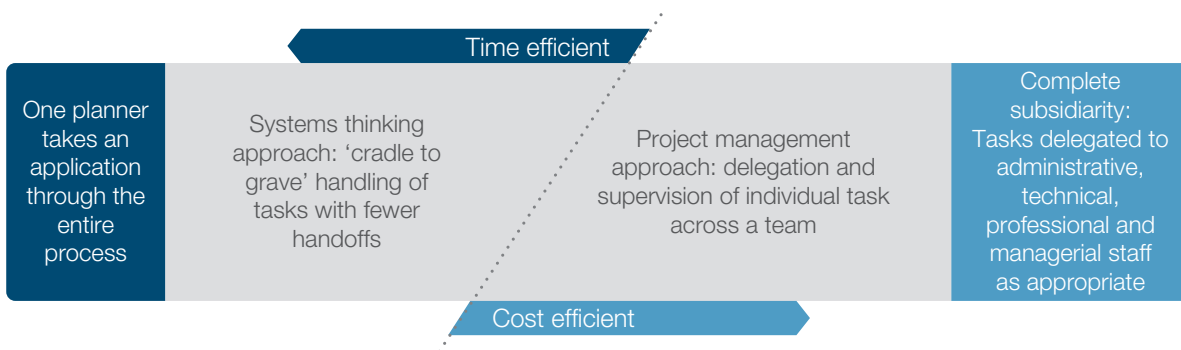


Figure 6: Workflow management in development management – a spectrum (Arup, 2018)

Recommendations for England

1. Balance the need for speed and the need for quality. Measuring the performance of one must be accompanied by measuring the performance of the other.
2. Allow, encourage, empower and protect planning judgement and placemaking, avoiding 'post box' or targets-based decision making.
3. Consider the merits of a systems approach or a project management approach and embrace it to ensure the benefits of that approach can be realised (Figure 6).

Influence of Planning

This theme seeks to investigate the position and influence of planning within the wider local authority corporate structure, and how leadership within planning drives and influences the delivery of services.

Context

- There is limited published research or discussion around the position and influence of planning within local authorities.
- The Barker Review of Land Use Planning (2006) emphasised the importance of the chief planner role in raising the profile of planning within the wider corporate structure.

“The Government should raise the status of the Chief Planner within local authorities, potentially on a statutory basis, to reinforce the status of the profession for all parties, including members.”

(Recommendation 21, Barker Review, 2006)

Findings

1. Chief planning officers should sit at the top table in order to celebrate and realise the role planning plays in delivering corporate objectives and the Government's growth agenda.
2. Put a 'face to a name' by developing a better relationship between planning leaders and planning department staff to influence improvements in culture, practice and quality of service.
3. Develop a better, positive and transparent relationship between corporate leadership (including the Chief Executive, Council leader and others) and planning leaders, enabling planning to contribute fully to corporate objectives and delegating authority to implement change programmes which meet the objectives of the planning service.
4. Put planning at the hub of placemaking. Planning is more than local plans and planning applications; economic development, urban design, regeneration, major projects and other similar elements all form part of a cohesive service.
5. Figure 7 shows that there is an absence of planners in top positions within local authorities. This has resulted in a self-reinforcing lack of influence resulting in deprioritisation and demotion of planners within organisational structures. This is more evident in the North West than the South East but remains a national challenge.

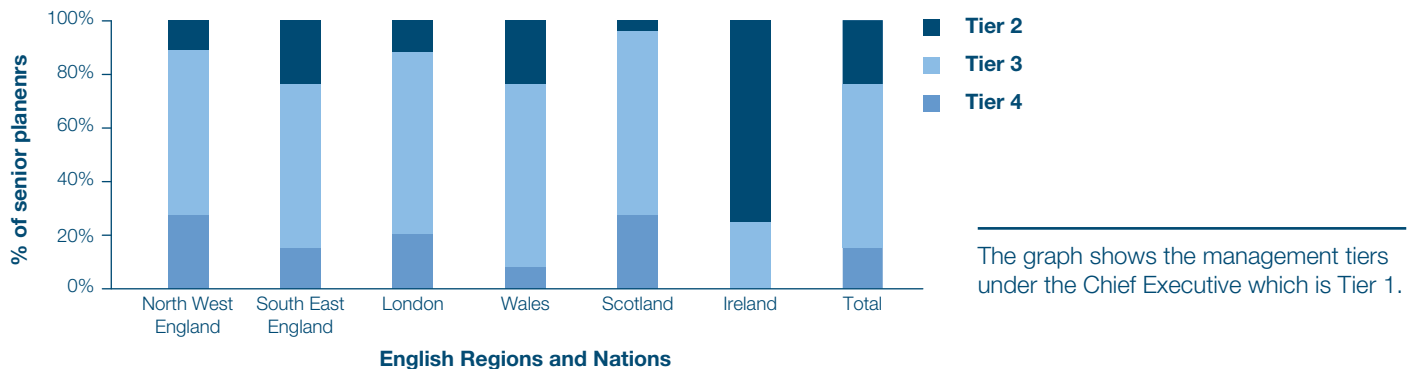


Figure 7: The management structure of local government (RTPI, 2018)

Recommendations for England

1. Make the head of planning a statutory position:

- Chief planning officers should sit at the top table in order to celebrate and realise the role planning plays in delivering corporate objectives and the Government's growth agenda.

2. Gain trust and respect from the top:

- Demonstrate the wider benefits of planning at director level by showing how planning service outcomes can deliver corporate objectives.

3. Communicate planning success:

- Make use of management team meetings or intra-council communication to create a route to feed back positive planning outcomes.

4. Bring planning functions into a collective team:

- Recognise the wide reach of planning across housing delivery, regeneration and economic development, and look to combine place-making functions under one directorate.

Culture and Behaviour

This theme addresses how planning culture and behaviour impact on the delivery of planning services. Culture and behaviour encompass leadership, motivation, morale, practice and training. These issues cross-cut the other aspects considered by the research.

Context

- The benefits of working in a local authority are:
 - Opportunities to progress your career.
 - Ability to achieve a work – life balance.
 - Flexible working practices.
 - Public sector ethos.
- Graduate local authority planners gain insight into planning regulations and political processes, which may not be accessible in the private sector.
- Around 8.8 days per full time equivalent staff is lost each year per local authority employee (LGA Workforce Survey 2015/16) due to stress, anxiety, mental health or fatigue.
- Figure 8 shows factors which are motivating local authority respondents in their public sector roles.

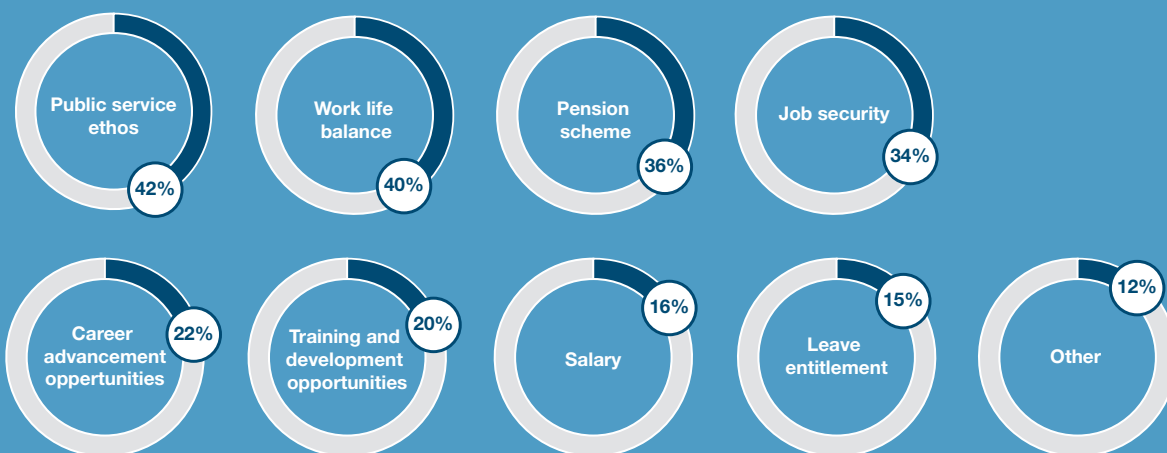


Figure 8: Motivations to work in local government (NGLN and LGA, 2017)

Findings

1. Sustaining morale:

- Results from the survey found that, for over half of respondents, planning staff morale has remained positive despite workplace pressures.

2. Team building:

- Diversity of people and skills is an important factor in creating a successful team and more can be done to create a team ethos within LPAs.

3. Cross-collaboration:

- Planning departments sometimes end up working in a 'silo'. Collaboration with other departments, LPAs, and private sector planners can break down barriers.

4. Empowered planners:

- A lack of confidence and/or empowerment can hold back public sector planners, limiting effective decision making. There is a need to drive cultural and behavioural change at all levels.

5. Working with members:

- Any disconnect between planners and elected members has an adverse effect on morale and quality of service directly. Good planning comes from a good partnership.

6. Training is key:

- Training opportunities are considered a main benefit of working in LPAs, however the concern is these are being eroded due to resource pressures.

7. Proud Planners:

- Accreditation can provide corporate and public recognition of planning quality and professionalism. However, planners having to pay their own subscription fee implies that the local authority does not value this and can disincentivise planners from pursuing and maintaining accreditation.

Recommendations for England

1. Maintain team spirit:

- Create and shape a shared department vision with buy-in from staff members.

2. Collaborate:

- Consider collaboration across regional networks and public-private sectors through resource sharing, mentoring, secondments and information networks.

3. Build a professional – political partnership (PPP):

- Adopt a partnership approach to create an atmosphere of understanding and collaboration through methods such as joint training sessions and lead member liaison officers.

4. Invest in staff and promote professionalism:

- Encourage career development and accreditation.
- Provide access to training on technical and softer skills.

Case studies

Cornwall Council Talent Development

Cornwall Council have recently undertaken a programme of talent development within the department which aims to improve in house planning knowledge and expertise.

The talent development programme consists of:

- **'Grow Your Own':** developing existing staff by providing training, degree options, lunchtime learning, providing chartership support and appointing a senior level training manager.
- **Councillor Annual Training Programme:** the programme covers a range of topics including participating in officer training to develop closer working relationships.
- **Planning Conferences:** these are held with councillors from town and parish councils on 'hot issues' within planning.
- **Accessible Information:** 'A Day in the Life of a Planning Application' can be used by applicants to assess key planning information in a user friendly manner.

About Arup

Arup's planners bring innovation, creativity and a multidisciplinary approach to our work including planning research, plan making and development management. We delight in sharing our knowledge with our clients.

Our UK planning team comprises 84 chartered members across 14 offices. We harness technology to improve our efficiency and accuracy and use visualisations to communicate more effectively with decision takers and stakeholders. We run a mentoring system and a lifelong learning environment that ensures planners at all levels are supported and stimulated.

For further information please contact: planning@arup.com
www.arup.com/expertise/services/planning/town-planning

The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI)

RTPI champions the power of planning in creating prosperous places and vibrant communities. We have over 25,000 members in the private, public, academic and voluntary sectors.

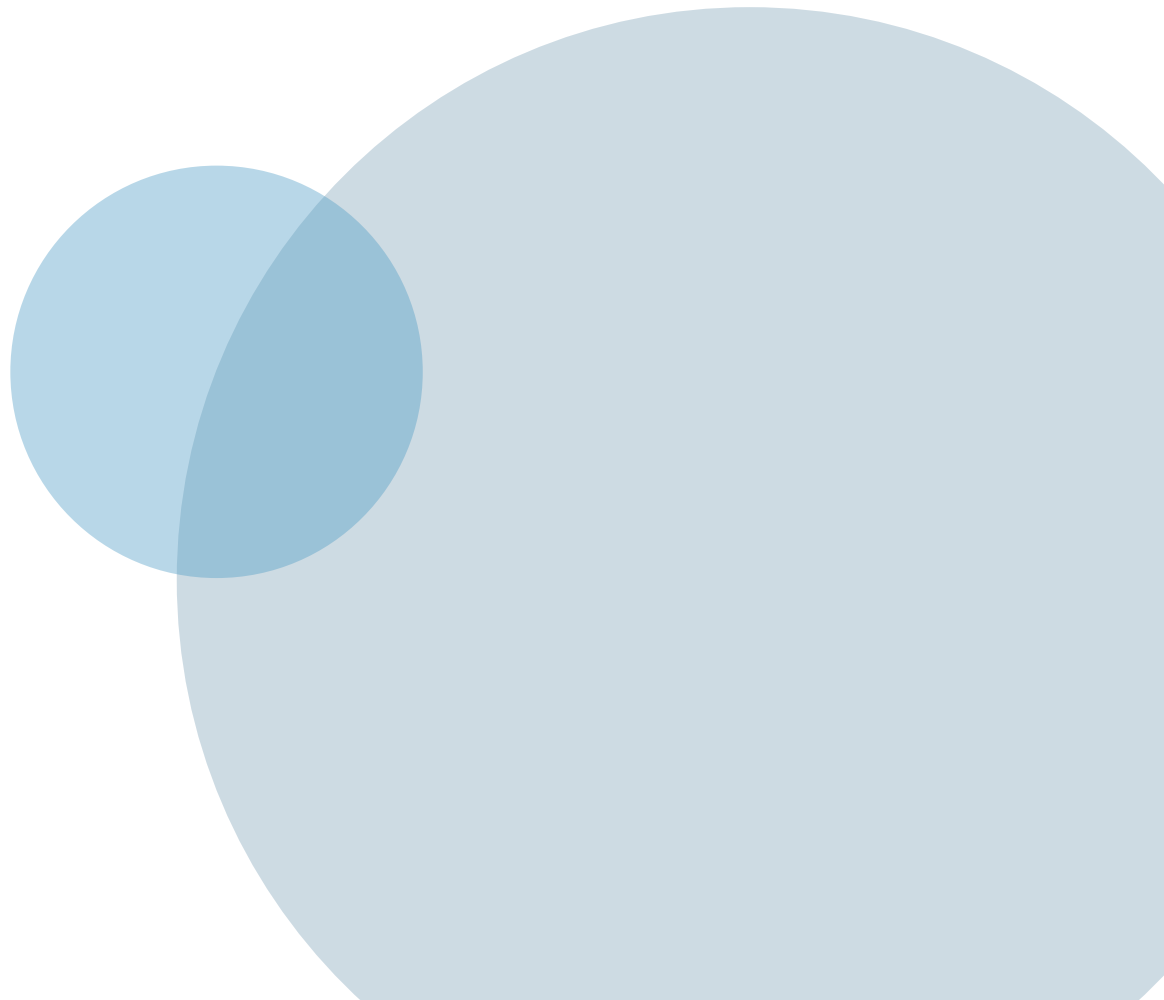
Using our expertise and research we bring evidence and thought leadership to shape planning policies and thinking, putting the profession at the heart of society's big debates. We set the standards of planning education and professional behaviour that give our members, wherever they work in the world, a unique ability to meet complex economic, social and environmental challenges.

We are the only body in the United Kingdom that confers Chartered status to planners, the highest professional qualification sought after by employers in both private and public sectors.



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