

Chief Planner: an appraisal

December 2019

Planning Officers Society

POS is the single credible voice for public sector planners, pursuing good quality and effective planning practice. The Society's aim is to ensure that planning makes a major contribution to achieving sustainable development in ways that are fair and equitable and achieve the social, economic and environmental aspirations of the community.

We operate in three main ways:

- As a support network for planners in the public sector
- As promoters of best practise in planning
- As a think tank and lobbying organisation for excellence in planning practice

Where we can, we will work across the sector to craft proposals that have widespread support from the people who operate the planning system at the coalface: landowners, developers, agents, legal, local authorities and politicians. We will be both radical and practical as we look for solutions to tangible problems that will make a real difference to crucial areas. Our objective is to improve the planning system to enable it to deliver its key aim of sustainable development.

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1 Introduction

- 1.1 The RTPPI has launched a campaign to highlight the need for Chief Planning Officers across the UK and Ireland. They published a report in June 2018 that shows that planning is represented on the top management team in only 17% of councils across the UK, despite the fact that, like social services and education, it is a statutory function.
- 1.2 This paper sets out POS's support for that campaign, welcomes the RTPPI research and looks to build on it by setting out the skills and competencies required of a Chief Planner¹.

2 Chief Planner Role

- 2.1 The Chief Planner is an important role in councils; not only in fulfilling the statutory planning function, but also in contributing to the placemaking and place leadership visionary work that is essential for successful growth - homes, jobs and supporting infrastructure.
- 2.2 POS promotes the importance and value of Chief Planners within local authorities. This report is not, however, about dictating how the public sector is organised and it is not advocating for chief planners to necessarily be on the management team of all Councils. The view of POS is that this decision is for public sector organisations to decide when considering their hierarchy and will depend on typology and size, amongst other considerations. For example, planning is likely to be a higher priority in district authorities, whereas adult social care and transport may be higher priorities in unitary authorities.
- 2.3 What POS is clear on is that placemaking and place leadership must be a key priority for Chief Executives and their leadership team, as well as for political leaders. This leadership does not necessarily need to be directly led by a planner. Place-making and place-leadership needs to be understood and "bought into" by officers and council leaders beyond just those in the planning department. However, in driving place leadership, the Chief Executive needs the direction and professional expertise of their Chief Planner, supported by a well-resourced planning department, and Chief Planners need to be a driving force behind delivering the corporate agenda for place-making, ensuring that it is deliverable in the context of the statutory planning framework.
- 2.4 Chief Planners play a critical role in supporting Chief Executives and Politicians in place leadership, and their function, skill set, and competencies are crucial in determining the effectiveness of this role. However, POS considers that the place-making and place-leadership agenda is not exclusively the responsibility of the planning department. Colleagues in housing and transport (for example) should be engaged in the place-making and place-leadership agenda and POS would not argue that leadership positions, such as the Strategic Director of Place and Regeneration, can only be filled by a planner. Provided planners are a driving force behind delivering the corporate agenda around place making the Council can succeed in delivering this vitally important agenda.

¹ We use the term Chief Planner in this document to describe the senior officer responsible for managing the planning service in a local planning authority. Such officers go under a myriad of other job titles and often manage other services such as building control, strategic transport, land charges etc.

3 Chief Planner Skills

3.1 This paper does not seek to define the Chief Planner role as it will vary in different Local Planning Authorities. Nevertheless, POS wants to encourage aspiring Chief Planners to take up the opportunity to be part of the place-leadership agenda, and as such, we have tried to set out the necessary skills and competencies required for this:

- **Negotiation skills** – this is not only important at the scheme level but negotiating housing and growth deals with MHCLG and keeping check that this is deliverable in statutory legislation will also be important.
- **Interpersonal skills** – communicating with a wide range of different groups of people is a key skill for chief planners as they articulate the growth strategy for their area. In some cases this will be to an audience who are not particularly happy with the message.
- **Working collaboratively** – delivering the place making agenda will require Chief Planners to work across and outside their organisations in order to forge effective partnerships.
- **Strategist skills** – Chief Planners have to be able to compute a vast evidence base and craft compelling and deliverable strategies that key stakeholders buy into. Therefore, they need to be attuned to changes in their area so that necessary strategy adjustments can be identified and actioned.
- **Commercial and financial awareness** – Chief Planners need to operate their services with a more commercial perspective, but they also need to produce plans that are commercially viable and thereby deliverable.
- **Relationship builder and influencer** – people, departments and organisations need to be aligned – we need to influence upwards and outside of organisation to make place-leadership happen – Chief Planners need to be influencing their Chief Executives and Members.
- **Analysis** – ability to analyse a suite of interests and understand what other colleges are trying to deliver, balancing those priorities and making links.
- **Knowing who to bring in** – a good Chief Planner is skilled in many trades/areas but recognize what other skill sets are required. There is a saying that ‘you need to be a better politician than the politicians’ – this will help you get what you want.
- **Share and escalate information** – organisations need to understand their population. Planners need to share their evidence base findings – then corporately, a Council can buy into actions which come out of this evidence. Sharing the large amount of evidence planners gather would help organisations understand where they are and where they need to get to.
- **Taking opportunities** – You never know what’s around the corner and the ability to be prepared for this is a key skill. Developing plans insofar as you can given current circumstances and knowledge places you in the best position to move forward when conditions allow.

- 3.2 Local Government needs strong Chief Executives and strong Chief Planners to support and guide both members and the council to deliver housing and growth which, in turn, will support the delivery of infrastructure in their areas. Chief Planners need the confidence to be positive, pragmatic and drive forward Spatial Planning and Development Management (as opposed to a Development Control service, which in some places is still happening). Leadership is a key skill, as is emotional intelligence, political nuance, influencing and being commercially aware.

4 Chief Planner Marketing

- 4.1 The importance of public sector planning in creating sustainable communities needs to be articulated well to young people, to attract the next generation of planners into the sector. There is a recent trend for more of the graduates from planning schools to enter private practice rather than the public sector, so there is a need to promote the benefits of a public sector career. The recent success of Public Practice in recruiting Place professionals from private practice into LPAs demonstrates the potential to make a significant change. POS would therefore like to encourage planning staff at Local Authorities to talk at their local secondary schools and universities to encourage students into the public sector. There is a role here for POS to provide a template pack, which can be downloaded and taken into schools, to make this option easier and more straightforward for planners and reduce the amount of preparation required. This is something that we could potentially work with the RTPi and other organisations on.
- 4.2 POS also supports the recent RTPi Chief Planners of Tomorrow initiative, which offers RTPi Young Planners the chance to step into the shoes of a Chief Planning Officer for the day. This can provide the opportunity to learn from the best, to understand what it is like to be 'at the top table' and see how strategic decision making processes operate. POS also supports the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE), which offers good leadership training for existing and aspiring Chief Planners.

5 Chief Planner Support

- 5.1 POS is keen to support existing and aspiring Chief Planners to fulfil their roles. We have identified this as a future work stream in our recently agreed Business Plan and will be looking to see how best this can be rolled out. A buddying network of experienced Chief Planners and former Chief Planners will be part of the offer and we are keen to discover what further support might be helpful.
- 5.2 POS also wants to drive innovation and new ways of working. There are many great examples of planning using technology to engage positively with communities, such as QR codes on site notices and letters, fly throughs of allocated sites or applications, talking head duty planner services, Artificial Intelligence (AI) validation and permitted development assessments. Innovation will be taken forward at each of POS's Development Management and Spatial Planning Network events, as well as the DM and Local Plans learning groups and if there is demand in the future, POS enterprises will set up a dedicated learning group.

6 Conclusions

- 6.1 This paper highlights the importance of place leadership and the critical role of the Chief Planner within this agenda. Place leadership – leading to successful growth – needs to be a key corporate priority for a Council, ideally led by the Chief Executive, and an effective Chief Planner and planning department to support delivery.
- 6.2 This paper seeks to highlight the skill set required by Chief Planners, in order that POS can continue to look at ways of supporting current and future Chief Planners in this role.
- 6.3 The POS Business Plan sets out key actions around supporting existing and future Chief Planners, promoting the role of planning to young people, and how POS can best support planners in adopting future technologies.