

Case Study: Supporting Our Planners

Attribute 2: The Planning Authority has a valued and supported workforce planning authority

Context

The Planning Department at East Ayrshire Council is working to ensure it supports its staff and future planners by opening up opportunities and ensuring succession planning is in place as well as mechanisms to upskill.

What happened

Graduate Planning Officer

Recruitment challenges in planning are well recognised and research has been undertaken by Heads of Planning Scotland and RTPI Scotland, culminating in the Future Planners Project Report, issued in July 2022 and recently updated in June 2023. There are varied recommendations within that report and implementation will be required to ensure an adequate pipeline of qualified students enter the profession.

In East Ayrshire, it was recognised that sufficient experienced staff were difficult to attract and in October 2015 Cabinet agreed a significant commitment and investment into the service to support and develop its own staff, this included a number of new posts, one of which was a trainee planner post. That post is based in Development Management and is specifically targeted at recent graduates. The purpose of the post was essentially to 'grow your own' experienced staff by introducing an entry level post that allowed supported career progression through training and development structure. Similar posts have also been created within our Building Standards team.

The role offers a basic introduction to the planning system and the function of a development management officer, using peer mentoring, shadowing and training across the various elements of the local authority planning department. This includes building confidence and knowledge through general public duty enquiries and building up to householder and small application developments.

Over the years since introduction, the post has been held by four graduate planners. In most cases the trainee planner has progressed, via competitive interview, onto a full planning officer post internally when vacancies have arisen with previous post holders now employed as Planning and Senior Planning Officers at this Authority, with one member being successful in a permanent Planning Officer post externally at another local authority. The quotes below are from a previous post holder:

"The trainee planner post was a fantastic entry point into the planning profession. This was my first job in planning and allowed me to learn the ropes in a pressure-free environment, without the expectation of having any previous professional experience. I gained a broad, and detailed, knowledge of development management which eventually allowed me to progress into a Planning Officer role here at East Ayrshire Council. Throughout my time at the Council, I have had the opportunity to develop my skills through shadowing of colleagues in other roles and attending seminars. I have also been encouraged to utilise the departmental learning budget for any other training experiences I identify. I feel that senior colleagues have sought to foster an environment where training and development are supported, and my team leader has actively sought out development opportunities for me

within my daily work. I am grateful for the opportunity the trainee role presented to gain experience in planning following completion of my university studies and in helping me to kick off my career in planning!"

- Planning officer, Development Management

Graduate Intern

Development Planning and Regeneration have employed a Graduate Intern for 2 years, the post being shared with Economic Development to provide experience across the Economic Growth portfolio. The quote below is from the current postholder:

"As a Graduate Intern in Economic Growth for East Ayrshire Council, I have had the opportunity to work across three departments: Planning, Business Support and the Ayrshire Growth Deal. This has allowed me to identify the specific areas I enjoy and potentially want to pursue. I have been given the responsibility and autonomy to complete a number of different and complex tasks, which has made me feel confident in my abilities and contribution to the team, as well as increased my problem solving, communication and leadership skills. Throughout my time as a Graduate Intern, I have been welcomed and received a huge amount of support from my colleagues, who have been willing to give me their time, knowledge and guidance which has helped make me feel like an important part of their team and has further built my confidence which is only going to benefit me in my future career with the Council".

In recognising that the number of graduates has decreased over the years and that if the trend continues, the Planning Authority has also begun to consider and actively participate in other programmes to explore and support the ongoing provision of qualified staff.

The Council approved the establishment of a £6m Jobs and Training Scheme to support apprenticeships within the Council and local businesses in February 2022. From 2022/23 to 2024/25, 172 placements will be established for the Council, with a further 38 apprenticeships and 3 interns within the private sector.

109 young people have been appointed to posts (65 Modern Apprenticeships, 17 Graduate Interns and 38 within local businesses) across the Council. A further 33 young people have joined the Council's Modern Apprenticeship scheme via existing routes. All of the placements are being aligned to the Council's terms and conditions and importantly, will provide work based skills and qualifications at the conclusion of the apprenticeships.

Student Placement

Development Planning and Regeneration have also agreed to take on a student placement. This demonstrates the commitment of the team to promoting the planning profession and providing learning opportunities.

Supporting the development and upskilling of our staff

East Ayrshire are committed to supporting and developing their staff. With the year mark of NPF4 having past, the Council recognise the strong focus on tackling the twin crisis of climate change and biodiversity loss, within increased expectations and requirements being placed on planning departments and planning officers professionally to increase the planning profession's role in contributing to a more sustainable future – adding new strings to our bows.

"I was successful in securing a Trainee Planner post at East Ayrshire while studying for my MSc in City Planning and Regeneration part-time, while working in the Planning Technical Support team. Although this was not my first post within the Planning department, it was a wonderful opportunity for me to gain invaluable experience working directly within the profession I was training for. I have been greatly supported in my professional learning and development across my career at East Ayrshire Council for which I am grateful. This has given me the knowledge, skills and confidence to apply for new opportunities which have arisen, both within Development Management and Development Planning & Regeneration where I am currently an Acting Senior Planning Officer.

The new challenges of NPF4 has highlighted areas where there is a skills deficit and provided an opportunity for me to expand my knowledge on matters that are of both personal and professional interest to me, including the natural environment and biodiversity. The Council have actively supported this and enabled me to upskill, attending webinars, seminars and CPD training on natural environment matters including carbon literacy, trees and ancient woodland. While the Trainee Planner position was a great entry point into the planning profession, I continue to feel supported and empowered to progress, learn and grow as a Planner.”

- Rachel Hall Acting Senior Planning Officer, Development Planning & Regeneration

Areas of collaboration

Planning authority staff and other organisations who deliver and organize training including HOPS, RTP1 Arboricultural Association etc.

What was the overall result

NPF4 has altered the expectations and definition of what it means to be a planner, expanding our role and skillset. By supporting our Planning staff to upskill and expand their knowledge, we are facilitating and empowering our planners to deliver greener and better planning decisions. The Council by its progressive approach to recruitment is providing a pipeline of Future planners and addressing succession planning for East Ayrshire which are supporting and embodying the recommendation of the Future Planners Report.

Lessons learned

Whilst not everyone who has undertaken one of the pathways into the profession has stayed at East Ayrshire Council, all have stayed in planning and related professions. Whilst the scheme has been successful, it can be difficult to attract people into these and other posts who live in Ayrshire, and are therefore more likely to remain within the area. We are therefore interested in exploring apprenticeship pathways into the profession and developing stronger links with the new planning degree courses in University of the West of Scotland.

What contribution did it make towards delivering outcomes?

Please tick all the below outcomes that this example worked towards:

NPF4

- Sustainable places
- Climate change and nature crisis
- Climate mitigate and adaptation
- Biodiversity
- Natural Places
- Soils
- Forestry, woodland and trees
- Historic assets and places

- Green belts
- Brownfield, vacant and derelict land and empty buildings
- Coast development
- Energy
- Zero waste
- Sustainable transport

Liveable places

- Design, quality and place
- Local living and 20 minute neighbourhoods
- Quality homes
- Rural homes
- Infrastructure first
- Heat and cooling
- Blue and green infrastructure
- Play, recreation and sport
- Flood risk and water management
- Health and safety
- Digital Infrastructure

Productive places

- Community Wealth Building
- Business and industry
- City, town, local and commercial centres
- Retail
- Rural development
- Tourism
- Culture and creativity
- Aquaculture
- Minerals

Place and Wellbeing Outcomes

- Movement
- Spaces
- Resources
- Civic
- Stewardship