

A new generation of strategic planners is desperately needed, but, although the current situation is bleak, there may be light at the end of the tunnel, says **Catriona Riddell**

where have all the strategic planners gone?



I am often asked two related questions about strategic planning, the first being what makes a good strategic planner and the second where all the strategic planners have gone. My answer to the first is that, while a good understanding of the planning system and how it fits within other agendas—particularly around the economy, climate and the environment—is a prerequisite, other softer skills are also very important.

Much of the strategic planning role is not just about managing the competing demands of development on land, infrastructure and natural resources, but usually involves managing the different priorities of partners and other organisations. This ringmaster role requires good core skills in negotiation, collaboration and communication, ensuring that everyone understands what is needed and what their particular role in delivering the shared agenda is, whether they be in a local authority, a government department or delivery agency, or are working in the private or voluntary sectors. Partnerships need nurturing, and often this role falls to the strategic planners.

My answer to the second question is much more difficult. There is only a small group of experienced strategic planners still practising in England, and that pool is getting shallower by the day. Since the demise of Structure Plans in 2004, followed by the abolition of regional planning in 2010, this part of the profession has slowly withered. There are only a few hardy souls left now, mainly tucked away in county and unitary authorities. There has been some replenishing as a result of the few local authorities that are bravely trying to develop strategic plans and frameworks, especially within the city regions, but generally the picture is pretty bleak.

A new generation of strategic planners is desperately needed—and not just in case the government, any government, decides that strategic planning is actually a good thing and reinvents it. The need to think strategically and build strong

partnerships across local authority boundaries did not disappear with regional planning in 2010. In many ways, it is needed even more today than at any time before, given the increasing demands on land, the national priorities around building health, economic and climate resilience in which planning has a key role to play, and the many, many different partners involved in all of these areas. Whether it is addressing city-region-scale housing needs, levelling up socio-economic disparities or managing strategic infrastructure investment or the impact of nutrient neutrality, strategic planning is a necessary part of cross-border collaboration in most parts of England.

The current government does not show any serious intent to resurrect a more formal approach to strategic planning, other than some platitudes in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill on 'voluntary Spatial Development Strategies'.¹ But, just for a minute, think about what would happen if the next government does decide that the mistakes of 2010 need to be rectified and a new formal approach to strategic planning is introduced after the next general election. How will we deliver this if there is no-one to do it?

To answer this question, we need to look at what is happening more widely within the profession, particularly in local authority planning departments. It is no secret that morale generally across the profession within local authorities is pretty low as a result of a complex range of issues that have impacted over the last decade, starting with the 2010 coalition government's austerity measures, which are still hitting the public sector hard today. All the recent evidence points to the same range of issues that have had a significant impact on local authorities' ability to both attract and retain planners, as well as the many other specialists that contribute to place-making functions.

Resourcing is an ongoing challenge, with more and more being squeezed from diminishing budgets, and more and more heavy lifting being expected from the statutory planning system and therefore planning departments. New working practices, especially as a result of Covid, have resulted in a significant number of local authority planners working largely from home, with some home-working full time and not through choice, with less support and greater feelings of isolation, especially among

Table 1
Recruitment difficulties in local authorities—results from the Local Government Workforce Survey 2022

	Counties, %	Districts, %	Single tiers, %	All councils, %
Responses to: 'Please indicate for which of the following occupations, if any, your authority is experiencing recruitment difficulties — <i>counties, districts and single tier roles</i> '				
Planning officers	83	63	47	58
Legal professionals	67	50	53	53
ICT professionals	83	31	45	43
Chartered surveyors	50	35	40	39
Engineering professionals	58	6	42	27
HR and industrial relations officers	33	19	32	26
Finance officers (other than s151)	50	22	21	24
Heavy goods vehicle drivers	17	28	17	22
Administrative officers/assistants	67	4	17	16
ICT user support officers	25	19	11	16
Economic development officers	33	11	13	14
Civil enforcement officers	17	15	11	13
Cleaners, domestics	42	2	11	10
Call centre agents/operators	25	4	8	8
Personal assistants and other secretaries	25	4	4	6
Gardeners and grounds people	8	6	6	6
Community drivers	33	0	4	5
Other front line staff	8	4	2	3
Section 151 officer	0	2	4	3
Playworkers	0	0	0	0
Other (please specify below)	17	13	17	15

Base: All respondents 119 — counties (12), districts (54), single tier (53)

Source: Table 9 in *Local Government Workforce Survey 2022*⁵

younger and less experienced planners. There has been an increase in abuse of planners personally (especially online abuse) from all quarters, including internally from their own councillors. Planning as a function has seen significant devaluation, and there is now a general lack of trust in the planners that deliver on behalf of the public sector. These negative perceptions are largely a result of the focus that the current planning system places on housing numbers and regulation, as opposed to the positive place-shaping role that planning should play.

In 2018, the lack of trust in planning was an issue identified in the Raynsford Review of Planning in England, which recommended that planning should have a clear purpose 'prioritising the safety and wellbeing of people, within a framework of long-term sustainable development, so as to create places of beauty, safety and resilience'.² This lack of trust was confirmed in 2019 Grosvenor research on public trust in planning for large-scale development, which found that only 7% of the public trust local

authorities to make decisions in the best interests of the area—and this position is unlikely to have changed since then.³

The Raynsford Review also identified how funding cuts and negative messages about planning have led to a demoralised planning service, citing the fact that planning departments had suffered the largest cuts in budgets in local authorities between 2010 and 2017, with a 53% reduction in spending during this short period.⁴ The 2022 Local Government Workforce Survey found that 58% of all councils were experiencing difficulties in recruiting planners, a higher level than that for any other occupations in local government (see Table 1, above).⁵

These sources all provided compelling evidence that the situation was bad, but it was really the fall-out of our Covid experience that confirmed that we had reached crisis point. In December 2021, Sam Stafford, author of the 50 Shades of Planning blog, put out a call for evidence from the front line to see how bad things really were.⁶ While there



Attendees of a 'summit' held in April to look at the issues impacting on planning departments and explore what is needed to address them in a co-ordinated and comprehensive way

were some positive stories from local authority planners in the mix, generally the issues cited were of low morale, resourcing challenges, and the impact of new 'post-Covid' ways of working. A follow-up 'call for evidence' from Sam a year later indicated that things had not got any better, and in many ways had got progressively worse.⁷

This anecdotal evidence has been backed up by recent quantitative evidence. The RTPI's interim findings in its 2023 State of the Profession survey found that 82% of local authorities had difficulties recruiting planners in the last year and that a quarter of planners left the public sector between 2013 and 2020.⁸ Alongside this, a survey undertaken by the RTPI's magazine, *The Planner*, found that 87% of planners feel that social media is fuelling misinformation on local planning issues and that planners often find themselves the target of online trolls as a result.⁹ A survey carried out in 2022 by Public Practice found that the majority (63%) of those surveyed agreed that siloed working had a negative effect on their ability to work productively, and that difficulty in attracting qualified and skilled candidates was overwhelmingly the most common issue being faced.¹⁰

I could go on, but it is clear that we have reached crisis point in our planning departments, which is now universally acknowledged by all parts of the industry—including central government, which has established a working group to look at how to build capacity and capability in local government. Out of this, so far, we have had a consultation on increasing planning fees¹¹ and some verbal promises from the government's Planning Minister and Chief Planner that announcements about further resources are expected over the summer. The government has also introduced significant help for local authorities

on digitising as much as possible of the work that they do. The existing planning bursary programme managed through the RTPI has also been expanded to help more young people into the profession.¹²

But this is not enough, and we have already waited three years since the government first promised a comprehensive skills and resources strategy to support the planning sector as part of the now-forgotten Planning White Paper.¹³

Of course, solving the myriad of problems impacting on planning departments is not just a matter for the government, and it is not simply a case of increasing funding and digitising services, although both would help. There is a lot that local government itself can do. Strong leadership is critical, especially in relation to championing the positive value of planning and planners within local government, and that needs to start with a much better understanding from within, especially among councillors. There also has to be a recognition that we cannot simply morph into new ways of working without really understanding the impacts that they will have on people and then establishing the necessary support systems. What does a manager's 'open-door policy' look like, and how does a customer-focused service operate in an increasingly virtual world? How do we ensure that those new to the profession or more junior still get both personal and professional development support in order to progress?

We need a co-ordinated approach across all partners and sectors with a role to play and a coherent, deliverable and sustained action plan that targets all the issues impacting on planning services. This has to start with changing the narrative around the value of planning and the role that planners play in supporting sustainable growth, shifting it from the negative perceptions that we are often faced with today and the increasingly polarised debates that monopolise the narrative around housing numbers.

What we do not need is more beleaguered planning departments being targeted by the Secretary of State for not being able to deal with the number of planning applications that they receive within a set timescale. In April, Michael Gove wrote to 10 local planning authorities telling them that their 'very poor quality service to local residents' was 'not good enough' and that he was minded to designate them, taking their decision-making powers away.¹⁴ Clearly, poor service needs to be addressed, but there is very likely to be issues behind this, such as lack of resources, wider internal organisational changes, or simply an overwhelming number of applications to deal with. Support rather than attack from the government would be more welcome.

All this approach will do is encourage even more planners to walk away from local government—a 'lose-lose' situation in the end for all involved.

Thankfully, there is a chink of light beginning to shine on the crisis. Thanks to the initiative of the Planning Officers Society, the TCPA and the RTPI, a 'summit' was held in April to look at the issues impacting on planning departments and explore what is needed to address them in a co-ordinated and comprehensive way. All bodies representing the profession attended, alongside representatives from the private sector, higher education and wider stakeholders, including the Local Government Association. This initial stage was as much about sharing what everyone was already doing individually as it was about collaborative actions. It was a 'call to arms' and reflected the urgency of the crisis, but it is also just the start of the process.

I have been working as a planner for over 30 years and those like me who have been around a long time will have benefited from the golden era when planning was so much more than a numbers game and a regulatory function, and planning departments were well resourced with the right capacity and skills. We owe it to the later generations to find a way back to that.

I am under no illusions; I know the new 'normal' is very different from the old, with the impact of austerity measures over the last decade, changes as a result of our Covid experience and changing technology, especially in relation to social media, all impacting on working practices as well as the value placed on planning. Apart from anything else, the money we had then simply is no longer available, so sharing resources and skills across local authorities and more public-private partnerships will be essential going forward.

It is likely to take years to instigate real change and repair the reputational damage of planners, increasing the value of planning back to where it started many decades ago. But there will also be some early wins from this campaign, learning from those local authorities that, probably against the odds, are doing brilliantly and should be celebrated. Vitally, it is a start, and all involved are committed to making things better. And maybe somewhere in the mix someone is thinking about how we build a new generation of strategic planners so that we can hit the ground running should a new government decide that strategic planning is a critical part of the planning system to support long-term sustainable growth.

● **Catriona Riddell** is Director of *Catriona Riddell & Associates*, a Vice-Chair of the TCPA, and Strategic Planning Specialist for the Planning Officers Society. The views expressed are personal.

Notes

- 1 Schedule 7 of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill makes provision for two or more local planning authorities to prepare a Spatial Development Strategy on a voluntary basis
- 2 *Planning 2020 'One Year On'—21st Century Slums?* Raynsford Review of Planning in England: Updated Final Report. TCPA, Jan. 2020. www.tcpa.org.uk/resources/the-raynsford-review-of-planning/
- 3 *Building Trust*. Discussion Paper and Research Findings Summary. Grosvenor, Jul. 2019. www.grosvenor.com/property/property-uk/community-success/building-trust
- 4 See Fig. 10, 'Change in spending by sub-service by local authorities in England, 2010–11 to 2016–17' in *Financial Sustainability of Local Authorities 2018*. National Audit Office, Mar. 2018. www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Financial-sustainability-of-local-authorities-2018.pdf
- 5 See Table 9 in *Local Government Workforce Survey 2022*. Local Government Association, May 2022. www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/LG%20Workforce%20Survey%202022%20-%20Final%20for%20Publication%20-%20Tables%20Hard%20Coded.pdf
- 6 'Life on the front line'. Blog Entry. 50 Shades of Planning blog, 14 Dec. 2021. <https://samuelstafford.blogspot.com/2021/12/life-on-front-line.html>
- 7 'Life on the front line II'. Blog Entry. 50 Shades of Planning blog, 13 Dec. 2022. <https://samuelstafford.blogspot.com/2022/12/call-for-evidence-life-on-front-line-ii.html>
- 8 See 'Interim State of the Profession 2023'. Webpage. RTPI. www.rtpi.org.uk/policy-and-research/interim-state-of-the-profession-2023/
- 9 See '87% of planners say social media fuels misinformation'. News Story. RTPI, 21 Mar. 2023. www.rtpi.org.uk/news/2023/march/87-of-planners-say-social-media-fuels-misinformation-on-local-planning-issues/
- 10 See 'Authority resourcing & skills survey 2022'. Webpage. Public Practice. www.publicpractice.org.uk/survey-2022
- 11 *Increasing Planning Fees and Performance: Technical Consultation*. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Feb. 2023. www.gov.uk/government/consultations/increasing-planning-fees-and-performance-technical-consultation
- 12 See 'RTPI bursaries increase to support more young people into planning careers'. News Story. RTPI, 12 May 2023. www.rtpi.org.uk/news/2023/may/rtpi-bursaries-increase-to-support-more-young-people-into-planning-careers/
- 13 See Proposal 23 on page 71 in *Planning for the Future*. Planning White Paper. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Aug. 2020. www.gov.uk/government/consultations/planning-for-the-future
- 14 See the letters from the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities sent on 12 Apr. 2023 to local planning authorities at risk of designation, at www.gov.uk/government/publications/letter-from-the-dluhc-secretary-of-state-to-local-planning-authorities-at-risk-of-designation