



PLANNING DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME



Student Placements in Scottish Planning Authorities

Case Study

featuring

Dundee City Council

Fife Council

South Lanarkshire Council

2008

Introduction

Student placements provide a vital route for undergraduates in Scotland to gain experience of council planning departments and explore the possibility of a career in the public sector. Not only are placements an important preparation for moving into the workplace, but evidence suggests that students make a valuable contribution to the work of a planning department.

Typical placements run for around 10 weeks during the summer and often bring the benefit of closer links between academic institutions and the councils.

This case study explores how placement programmes were developed and implemented in three Scottish councils - Fife, Dundee and South Lanarkshire. The case study:

- considers the benefits both for the councils and for the students
- demonstrates the potential value of this approach for other councils
- provides useful hints and lessons learned for other councils wishing to use this method of supporting the development of new planners in Scotland

“I was impressed by the student’s enthusiasm and willingness to undertake a wide range of tasks. Her questioning of how and why things happened as they did led to much debate that was beneficial to us all.” Team Leader, Local and Community Policy, Fife Council

Fife Council Placement Programme

“The main reason I enjoyed the placement is because the team is a really good one and they all supported me well and made me feel very welcome.” Sarah Johnston, student, Town and Regional Planning, Dundee University

Fife Development Services has a student placement programme which has become established over the last two years (2006 - 2007) with around six to seven students placed each year.

Recruitment and Selection

Fife Council chose to advertise the student placements by contacting Heriot-Watt, Dundee, Abertay and Aberdeen Universities. Students of relevant degree subjects were invited to apply.

“Are you self-motivated, enthusiastic and looking for a challenge over the summer? Development Services has 6 student posts. Each of these posts provides an excellent opportunity to gain experience. Applications are invited from all students, however it would be advantageous if students had a working knowledge of the Fife area.” (Extract from advert)

Appointments were made to the following teams:

- Economic Regeneration (1 post)
- Local and Strategic Policy (2 posts)
- Development Promotion and Design (3 posts in area offices)

A post was advertised in Economic Development, but there were no suitable applicants, so no appointment was made.

Working as part of the team

Over the course of the ten week placements students were gradually able to tackle more challenging tasks. In Development Promotion and Design, for example, students got involved in many different aspects of the work of the office:

- General administration, including writing letters, mailing and filing.
- Working alongside different members of the team - technician, planning officer, etc
- Dealing with householder applications

Project Work

Students also became involved in a number of specific projects and were able to make valuable contributions to completing outstanding work. For example:

- A student placed with the Strategic and Corporate Policy Team took part in data gathering for a town's economic profile and carried out primary research for town centre audits. They also did work on strategic planning and economic information and research, gaining experience in strategic policy and information.
- A student working with the Local and Community Policy Team carried out initial work towards submitting an entry to the Scottish Awards for Quality in Planning and analysis for a town centre action plan.

How Fife Council benefited

The Team Leaders who managed the students found that the placements:

- Contributed to the overall workload of the team

In addition to the staffing benefits:

- Junior team members benefited from the opportunity to advise and mentor someone with less

experience

- Papers on relevant subjects were written
- Pressing project work was completed

All the students placed in 2007 contributed to the workload of the Service and teams they were working with. This gave the students an insight into the roles and responsibilities of planners within the Development Service.

How the students benefited

“It was valuable to be working within a team - learning how university work fits into the work place - and seeing the bigger picture of how the Council works.” Sarah Johnston, Student, Town and Regional Planning, Dundee University

The many benefits to students of planning placements include

- General experience of working in an office environment
- Learning to work as part of a team
- Experience of working with the general public
- Learning to take ownership for a project
- Seeing the practical applications of areas studied as part of course work
- Learning more about a possible career choice.

Above all, the students saw the placement as a meaningful way of gaining the experience that would make a difference when applying for jobs following graduation.

Rachel Webster was studying Geography and Environmental Studies at Dundee University. With a year to go to complete her degree course she was enthusiastic about finding a summer placement that would give her relevant experience for the future. She wanted to work in Fife as it allowed her to live at home with her parents over the summer. She had not seen job adverts, but took the initiative and contacted the council to see what was on offer.

Her positive experience of a planning placement in Fife’s Development Promotion and Design offices means she is now considering a postgraduate course in planning, which she had not previously considered as a career direction. *“The Fife placement was an excellent experience and I have been recommending their placements to students in the year below me on the course.”*

The value of placements as a route to gaining employment is supported by staff who are involved in making permanent appointments. Stuart Wilson, Team Leader, Development Promotion and Design, West Fife said, *“There is no substitute for experience, especially in a development control office. When I make graduate appointments I am looking for someone with direct, relevant experience. Spending a summer working in the busy, pressured and sometimes confrontational environment of a busy design office gives students a real advantage when applying for jobs.”*

Challenges

It can be a challenge to identify projects that will fit into the 10 week timeframe and allow students to complete a meaningful piece of work during their placement. Although this was a concern for some of the teams, in reality the students made very significant contributions to some of the projects. One student completed an additional week of placement in order to finish a project.

Other challenges included

- finding the time to invest in the initial stages of the programme
- finding a desk for the student
- getting the necessary IT support

Garry Dickson is Team Leader for Customer Service and Human Resources within Fife Council's Development Services. He commented on the wider issue facing the service of the recruitment and retention of planning staff. *"The student placement scheme is seen as one route to attracting and keeping high quality individuals, although so far it is disappointing that we have not made any permanent appointments as a result of student placements. We offered a post in 2007 which the student turned down because his partner was relocating. However we are committed to supporting student placements as an opportunity to invest in academic success, a way of raising the profile of Fife Council as an employer of planners and hopefully also as a direct route to recruitment of planners for the council. The student placements are part of our overall approach to create "An Employer of Choice" branding for Planners in Fife Council alongside attending career fairs, creating career pathways, etc."*

Success Factors

The success of the Fife student placements results from the following factors:

- A rigorous recruitment process
- The students' enthusiasm, motivation and willingness
- The students' ability to undertake the work
- An obliging, co-operative team
- Resources - a desk available, IT support etc

Sarah Paterson was a student studying Geography at Edinburgh and completing a placement in the Development, Promotion and Design office in Cupar. She suggested that each of the students visit the other students in order to make their placement experience as broad as possible. She then successfully organised visits in such a way that the students were able to attend meetings or other events, to maximise the interest of the visit. Sarah comments, *"I had many opportunities to take part in the real work of the office, writing reports on site visits or responses to planning enquiries that would then be checked by a planning officer. In fact I enjoyed the placement so much I have applied for another placement in 2008."*

Lessons learned

- Time must be invested over the first few weeks of the placement in order to maximise the benefit both to the staff and to the department.
- There is a need to be clear about start dates and salaries, right from the start (this point arose as a result of the salary review - see Resources below)
- Little is currently known about the routes that students take into employment after completing placements with Fife Council. Further study of this might provide useful information for the recruitment and retention purposes.
- More clearly defined criteria would be of benefit to measuring effectiveness of the placement in relation to the student's expectations, for example using competencies developed within the Council.

Resources

Having established the principle that students should be placed on a salary scale that reflected their academic experience, all students were placed on SCP11 - £15,130 p.a. The total employment cost for the 6 student placements was £22,360 (5 placements ran for 10 weeks, one for 11 weeks). There were no advertising costs or travel costs.

South Lanarkshire Council Placement Programme

South Lanarkshire Council planning service offers around 5 placements each year to students who are normally based in Planning and Building Standards Headquarters.

Recruitment and Selection

Placements are generally advertised at Heriot Watt University, Glasgow Caledonian and the University of Dundee and on the Councils recruitment pages. The University of Strathclyde used to be the most common place to recruit students, but there have been no difficulties recruiting for the placements following the closure of the undergraduate planning course at Strathclyde.

Working as a team

In contrast to Fife and Dundee student placements at South Lanarkshire work together as a team situated in Planning and Building Standards HQ although the students can be placed in any of the satellite offices if a particular piece of work arises.

Laura Gaddis is responsible for the day to day management of student placements: *“I have been managing the student placements for a number of years. Over that time I have seen a wide range of students and the vast majority of them have contributed in very significant ways to the work of the department. Occasionally but rarely there have been students who have not made a useful contribution, but overall the standard of students coming on placement with us is extremely high.”*

On one occasion a particularly able student who was completing a second placement was given the task of managing the workload of a team of students.

Project Based Placements

Students undertook a range of work, usually project based, linked to the development plan or to ongoing monitoring.

Examples of regular project work undertaken by student placements:

- Retail monitoring
- Housing land audit
- Industrial land audit
- Environmental monitoring

Other projects include working on an urban capacity study, a specific project on sustainability, cognitive mapping and updating listed building information and helping produce Conservation Area Appraisals.

Stewart McNally was studying Town and Regional Planning at Dundee University. He completed two placements on consecutive summers as a student. *“During my second placement I became involved in a cognitive mapping exercise involving local secondary school children. The project was designed to raise awareness of the South Lanarkshire Local Plan and encourage public participation. My role was to analyse the maps the children had drawn, looking at ways of incorporating the information into the local plan. I was later able to use the experience as the basis for a dissertation in my final year of studies.”* Stewart is now working for East Dunbartonshire Council.

How South Lanarkshire Council Benefited

One of the purposes of the placements is to provide the planning service with the opportunity to carry out projects that regular staff do not have the capacity for. Students are provided with specific tasks and projects which can be completed by the end of the placement. The regular nature of these placements means that there are annual tasks (such as the projects outlined above) that are allocated to be completed over the summer.

Other benefits for the Council include:

- A positive effect on the council's profile as an employer.
- Successful placements can also be a useful source of recruits for graduate positions.

Increasing graduate recruitment is part of a strategy of developing staff from the early stages of their career rather than relying on recruiting experienced staff, which are in short supply.

Several years ago Pamela McMorran completed a placement between third and fourth year while studying Environmental Planning at Strathclyde University. She is now a fully qualified planning officer, working for South Lanarkshire in the Lanark office. *"The placement was an extremely positive experience for me. I enjoyed the atmosphere in the office and gained useful experience working on updating listed building information and carrying out a Conservation Area Appraisal. The placement gave me the opportunity to understand both policy and practice at South Lanarkshire Council, which put me in a good position when I started my job here."*

How the Students Benefited

Feedback indicates that students find the experience beneficial.

- It's an "eye-opener" - students see what it is really like to work in a planning office.
- Often students are surprised by the diversity of what planners do.
- Students gain knowledge of the practical context which helps them apply what they are studying.
- It's a stimulating environment
- Visits were arranged to a wind farm and an open cast coal site.
- Although based at HQ, students were given opportunities to visit local offices to gain a wider experience of planning.
- The mix of dense urban areas and remote rural areas provides diversity and different types of challenges to the planning system which students find of value.

Some of the students have later been employed by the council as graduate planners.

Challenges

One of the challenges for the students is to learn to work on their own. Some students find it difficult to take ownership of a project, while others can show great initiative.

Success Factors

- The regular nature of the placements allows planning ahead to identify projects that need completed.
- Students appreciated the efforts made to organise the trips to the wind farm and the open cast coal site.

Lessons Learned

- Recruiting the right students is vital for successful placements
- Investing time at the beginning of the placement will show a benefit later.

Resources

Students are placed on salary scale Grade 1 levels 1 to 3 which is £10,603 to £15,165. Summer placements tend to be on the lower end but distance learning and part time planning course students may be offered a slightly better salary, particularly where they have had to leave another job.

Dundee City Council Placement Programme

In 2007, three students completed 10 week placements at Dundee City Council on three different teams:

- Development Quality
- Information and Research
- Partnership and Regeneration

This well-established student placement programme has run over several decades and is just one aspect of the close links between the Council Planning Division and the Department of Town and Regional Planning at the University of Dundee. Council officers visit the University to give talks to students and there is also a Civic Award offered to students.

There is a long history of local graduates obtaining employment with the Council and the placement programme provides a valuable starting point. The Council is also committed to trying to interview all the students who are interested in placements, as a way of providing interview experience.

Recruitment and Selection

Placements are generally offered to students between their third and final year at university.

Recently the recruitment process at Dundee has changed. In the past, students would be assessed for placements through informal interviews, but increasingly there is a requirement to follow a highly structured formal recruitment procedure equivalent to appointing permanent staff.

Ian Buntin is Team Leader for the Information and Research Section of the Planning Division at Dundee City Council. When recruiting for a student placement for his team he looks for a strong interest in Information Management. His ideal planning student will have well developed IS/IT skills, including spreadsheet and database experience. Experience of Geographic Information Systems used to be rare amongst students, but now is much more prevalent, which has advantages for the spatial analysis regularly carried out by his team.

Having had very successful placements in recent years, for 2008 he decided not to offer a placement on his team, for a number of reasons:

- There are other major staffing changes happening in the team in the summer months.
- There were fewer specific work items which could appropriately be allocated to a student.
- The recruitment and selection process has become increasingly time consuming.

Another Team Leader reported interviewing a number of students who were interested in a placement but decided not to make an appointment. Although the students were of a reasonable calibre none of them had demonstrated a sufficiently thorough knowledge of critical aspects of the placement subject, carried out adequate research before the interview or shown how their own knowledge or experience was relevant. It was felt that further work could be done both by the University and by visits from council staff to prepare students better at making applications and for this type of interview.

Project Based Placements

Typically, students are given survey projects to complete during their placements. A project might include gathering the data, inserting it into a database and often making some kind of presentation at the end of the project.

In addition an effort is made to ensure students are aware of and exposed to the general work across the Planning Division and an opportunity given to the students to meet with a wide range of staff within the division.

There is a deliberate approach to arranging survey type work in relation to student placements. Projects are identified during the course of the year, but held for the summer months. Longer days and better

weather make this the ideal time to complete this type of work and the projects are seen as ideal work for students to complete. Where appropriate students are encouraged to take the next step and get involved in the analysis of data and the writing and presentation of reports.

Between third and fourth year at Dundee University Andrew Grey worked with the Regeneration Team on a project to survey tenement buildings. The project involved grading the quality of tenements, completing survey sheets and then returning to the office to enter the data on the computer. *“It was a hugely important experience for me and when I came to applying for jobs I was successful at achieving a number of interviews. I am convinced that was the result of being able to include details of the placement on my CV. More than that, I gained a good understanding of how a council planning department operates and a confidence about taking on a work role which will make it easier as I start a permanent job with Aberdeenshire Council. It wasn’t necessarily always the most interesting work, but no student should be put off by that.”*

How Dundee City Council Benefited

Although there were occasional exceptions over the years, the overall experience of student placements was of enthusiastic, capable and proactive people who made significant contributions to the teams they were placed in.

The teams benefited from:

- The fresh enthusiasm and innovative ideas of a student
- The opportunity to mentor and support someone
- An extra person in the office who could carry out survey type work

The University and the Council both benefited from the ongoing working relationship between the two organisations.

“We have a close working relationship with several local authorities, with many important collaborations in place. However the student placements can be valuable in terms of the feedback about current practice that the students bring back.” Barbara Illsley, Head of Town and Regional Planning at Dundee University.

How the Students Benefited

“The greatest value is to the students, who gain a real idea of what it is like to work in a local authority planning office. The work experience is often very significant in helping students gain an interview for a permanent job.” Barbara Illsley, Head of Town and Regional Planning at the University of Dundee

The students themselves identified a wide range of benefits in taking part in a placement.

- A good understanding of how a planning department operates
- Valuable work experience that could be mentioned on a CV
- Experiences that provided a context for coursework
- The opportunity to meet and talk to senior staff about projects

Simon Fraser, a planning student from the University of Dundee took part in a house price survey with the Information and Research Team at Dundee Council. *“The placement gave me a great opportunity to see planners at work at first hand. Some of the tasks in relation to this project were understandably quite mundane, but overall it was an excellent experience. I was able to pick some planning applications and follow their process right through the system in the time I was there. I also had the opportunity to attend a meeting, and meet people who were leading major regeneration projects in the Dundee area.”*

Challenges

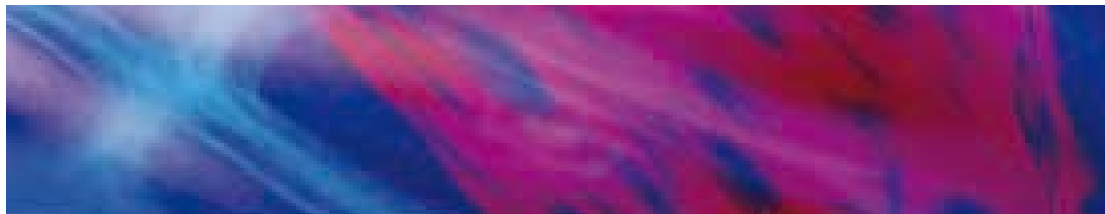
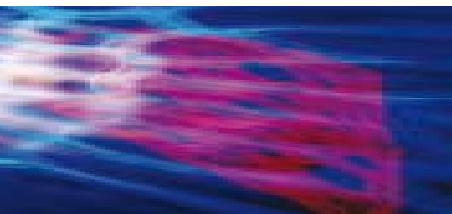
- The time involved in recruitment
- Varying workflow - it is not always possible to identify an appropriate piece of work
- Other team pressures, such as changes in permanent staff

Success Factors

- It is important to identify discrete pieces of work of an appropriate nature for the students to benefit from and that genuinely contribute to the work of the team.
- The student should have a comprehensive experience of the department, wider than just the particular project

Lessons Learned

- The formal recruitment process involves significant time resources.
- Staff time must also be invested at the beginning to make a placement worthwhile.



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