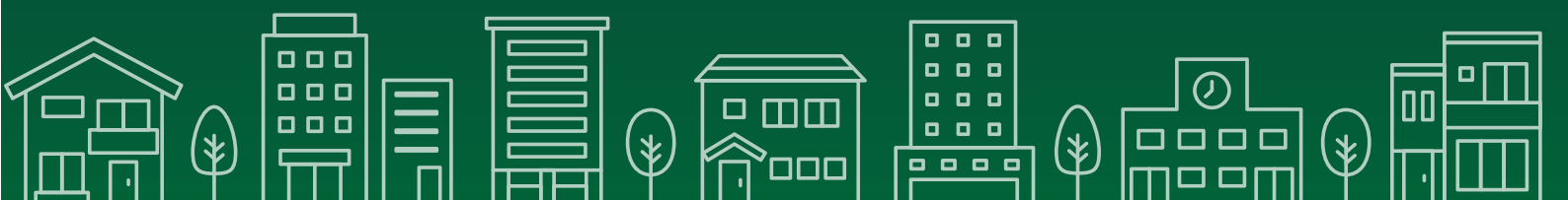


REPORT

National Planning Improvement Insights Report: Workforce and Capacity in Scottish Planning Authorities

Financial year 2025/26



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Evidence Series

A key aspect of National Planning Improvement's work is to gather evidence that will help identify the challenges facing planning authorities in terms of performance. We do this through analysis of the National Planning Improvement Framework as this provides data, intelligence and evidence on the improvements planning authorities have identified for themselves, progress being made on these and the impacts they are having. We also undertake primary research to inform our work and planning service improvement.

This report and its analysis of planning authority's workforce and capacity is an important part of our analytical strategy. It allows us to gain an ongoing understanding of the resourcing situation in planning services, which is recognised in the National Planning Improvement Framework as one of the factors that can impact on their performance.



Context

Workforce and capacity challenges are a key issue in planning performance.

The National Planning Improvement Framework is undertaken by all planning authorities to allow them to assess their performance and identify what improvements are required. Our analysis of this shows that planning services have recognised the need for sufficient resources and skills to maximise productivity and to have a valued and supported workforce. Given this, the majority of planning authorities are working on improvement actions to enhance approaches to workforce planning.

National Planning Improvement (NPI) is working with them to take these actions forward. In March, we held a Workforce Planning Webinar where we heard from four planning authorities on the approaches they have been taking; Inverclyde on their staff structure review, City of Edinburgh on their people plan, Dundee City on work experience opportunities, and Aberdeenshire on their early careers development.

The discussion during the webinar resulted in several actions around the topics of workforce strategies, getting young people interested in planning careers, staff retention and recruitment of planning officers, early careers development, and undertaking staff skills audits.

[Sway summarising the Workforce Planning Webinar](#)

Our Annual Report, published last year, highlighted that many planning authorities still face challenges in resourcing their work and in accessing the specialist expertise required to assess planning applications and also in plan making. It highlighted a continued need to ensure that there is a sufficient pipeline of new talent entering the profession in the medium and long term, that planning services are adequately resourced, and, that planning authorities can access the specialist expertise and short-term capacity that they require. We recommended that:

- Local and national park authorities should look to reinvest the planning fees generated to support their planning services, where this is possible.
- Scottish Government should continue to take forward the National Planning Hub to support for planning authorities to access surge capacity, specialist skills and upskilling where this is required.
- Scottish Government, working with partners in the High Level Group on Planning Performance and the education sector, should continue to support pipeline initiatives such as bursaries, future planners and practice based degrees.



NPI gathers information on workforce and capacity on an annual basis. Last year's NPI workforce and capacity survey told us that:

- Most Scottish planning authorities had one or more vacancies.
- Vacancies were mostly held in planning officer, senior planning officer, and other posts.
- Mid and senior-level posts were the most difficult to recruit for.
- Planning authorities had difficulty recruiting in policy, ecology and biodiversity, and enforcement.
- Lack of suitably qualified or experienced candidates was a barrier to recruitment for two thirds of authorities.

This report aims to build upon this analysis and provide an up-to-date picture of the situation regarding planning services' workforce and capacity.

In 2026, all 34 Planning authorities were invited to complete the Workforce, Capacity and Resources Survey, covering the 2025/26 financial year. A total of 32 responded to the survey.

The questionnaire was administered electronically using KoboToolbox and included a combination of closed questions, including multiple-response questions, and open-ended questions to capture additional qualitative information. The NPI Team analysed the survey findings during August and September 2026 and developed a series of recommended actions based on the evidence gathered.

This report presents the key findings from the survey and the recommendations arising from the analysis.



Key findings

Below sets out the key findings from our analysis which has provided valuable insights on the key challenges facing planning authorities:

Demography

There are challenges for planning services given an ageing workforce and inconsistencies in levels of accredited staff.

- There are 1190 people working in the 32 planning authorities who responded to the survey.
- Around a quarter of planning staff are aged over 55 and over half are 45 or older.
- Approximately 1 in 2 planning service staff are RTPI accredited.

Vacancies

There are still significant levels of vacancies across planning authorities and high levels of movement of staff between planning authorities and other development sectors.

- Of the planning authorities that responded 88% reported at least one vacancy and 38% reported four or more vacancies.
- Assistant/ graduate roles accounted for the largest share of all reported vacancies closely followed by planning officers and senior planning officers. Planning officer, senior planning officer and Head of Planning/Chief Planning Officer posts were reported as the most difficult to fill.
- The most commonly reported barriers to filling vacancies were a lack of qualified or experienced applicants and hiring freezes or lack of funds.
- 54% of responding planning authorities identified staff moving to another planning authority as a common reason for leaving, while 43% identified retirement and 32% identified staff leaving for the private sector.

Recruitment and Retention

Although planning services have taken measures to attract and retain staff, issues remain and there is scope to better join up approaches.

- The most commonly reported responses to support staff retention are professional training and development opportunities.



- The most popular steps taken to attract new staff include internship or work placement opportunities, graduate recruitment schemes, and partnerships with universities or colleges.

Resourcing, Capacity and Use of Technology

Planning services are ‘firefighting’ to access resources and are increasingly looking to consultants, digital approaches and artificial intelligence to help.

- Almost 60% of planning services are using consultants to address workforce and capacity issues.
- The use of artificial intelligence has doubled since last year with 22% of planning authorities now using this.
- The most used digital planning tools were GIS mapping, digital tools for public engagement, data analysis and workflow automation.



Key actions

Based on these findings, National Planning Improvement believes that there are a number of actions that should be put in place to respond to the challenges identified.

We encourage our stakeholders to actively progress the following actions by September 2027, using them to guide improvement.

Action 1: Heads of Planning Scotland and the Royal Town Planning Institute should explore why there is inconsistency in levels of RTPI accredited staff across authorities. In doing this they should look to find the reasons for staff not taking up membership of the RTPI, examine any implications that this may have in ensuring that qualified staff are able to ‘sign off’ planning decisions, and, ascertain if this is impacting on authorities’ structures, lines of reporting and decision making processes.

Action 2: National Planning Improvement will explore the future demand for planners and, based on this, will examine with other stakeholders how to ensure that there is a sufficient pipeline of people entering planning services and that there are adequate resources are available to planning authorities to meet this need. NPI will then forward discussion arising from this with Scottish Government, Heads of Planning Scotland and SOLACE.

Action 3: Heads of Planning Scotland and the Royal Town Planning Institute should identify practical ways to respond to the challenges created by an ageing workforce. This should include exploring:

- Supporting less experienced planners to move more rapidly to senior positions, where appropriate.
- Make efficient use of the skills and experience of recently retired planners to increase capacity.
- Create opportunities for mentoring, knowledge sharing and shared learning between experienced and less experienced staff.

Action 4: National Planning Improvement, Scottish Government and other appropriate partners will publish research to establish:

- Emerging technologies, development trends and future challenges that could have an impact on planning authorities operational, knowledge and skill needs.
- The future skills and knowledge requirements of planners, planning authorities, and the future demand for planners.



Action 5: Partners in Planning should explore how a more holistic approach can be taken to talent management across sectors to make more effective use and enhance the experience of planners across the country and provide recommendations on how this can be done.

Action 6: Planning authorities should make greater use of established workforce planning tools and frameworks, tailoring them to their organisational context and workforce needs, to support recruitment, development, retention and succession planning. They should better join up approaches to this through sharing resources, expertise, services and learning.

Action 7: Planning authorities, Scottish Government, Heads of Planning Scotland and the Improvement Service should identify how planning authority staff can use their time most effectively, with digital tools and artificial intelligence supporting the reduction of routine and administrative tasks. This should focus on freeing up staff capacity for professional planning work, improving processes and supporting better outcomes. Partners should share experiences and emerging good practice across the planning authorities and take account of advice published by the RTPI on how planning officers should use AI ethically.

National Planning Improvement team will organise a webinar to take a deeper dive into this report and actions. NPI will have oversight of these actions and monitor progress over the next year.



Introduction

The National Planning Improvement Team will be gathering information on workforce and capacity on an annual basis. All 34 Planning Authorities were sent a survey in 2026 for the financial year 2025/26. This report sets out the results.

32 planning authorities responded to the survey, they were:

- Aberdeen City
- Aberdeenshire
- Angus
- Argyll and Bute
- Cairngorms National Park
- Clackmannanshire
- Dumfries and Galloway
- Dundee City
- East Ayrshire
- East Dunbartonshire
- East Lothian
- East Renfrewshire
- City of Edinburgh
- Falkirk
- Fife
- Glasgow City
- Highland
- Inverclyde
- Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park
- Midlothian
- Moray
- Na h-Eilean Siar
- North Ayrshire
- North Lanarkshire
- Orkney Islands
- Perth and Kinross
- Renfrewshire
- Scottish Borders
- South Ayrshire
- South Lanarkshire
- West Dunbartonshire
- West Lothian



Demographics

The planning authorities were asked questions about the demographics of their service. Most Heads of Planning were able to answer the majority of the questions around demographics of their planning teams. However, these figures look to give estimates, and they may be imperfect. Caution is advised when interpreting these results.

Total staff 1190
Accredited staff 619
Approximately 1 in 2 staff members is accredited (52%)

The workforce is concentrated in the middle age groups, with 54% of staff aged between 35 and 54. The largest age group is 45-54 (29%), followed by 35-44 (25%). A further 22% are aged 55-64, while 22% are under 35 and only 2% are aged 65 or over.

Age band	Number	Percentage
Under 35	256	22%
35-44	300	25%
45-54	344	29%
55-64	264	22%
65+	26	2%

The age profile of RTPI-accredited planners is concentrated in the 35-54 age range, which accounts for 61% of accredited staff. The 45-54 age group is the largest (33%), followed by those aged 35-44 (28%). Around 14% are under 35, while 25% are aged 55 or over.

RTPI accredited planners		
Age band	Number	Percentage
Under 35	86	14%
35-44	173	28%
45-54	205	33%
55-64	149	24%
65+	6	1%



The proportion of accredited staff varies considerably across LPAs, from 16% to 83%.

Overall, the workforce is relatively evenly split by sex.

Gender	Percentage
Male	47%
Female	53%
Prefer not to say	0%

In terms of ethnicity, 87% of the planning authority staff reported to be White.

Ethnic Group	Percentage
White (Scottish / Other British / Irish / Gypsy or Traveller / Polish / Other White)	86.9%
Asian (Pakistani / Indian / Bangladeshi / Chinese / Other Asian)	2.2%
Black (African / Caribbean / Other Black)	0.7%
Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups	0.3%
Arab	0.2%
Other ethnic group	0.3%
Prefer not to say	9.4%



Service Structure

All 32 responding planning authorities reported having a Chief Planning Officer in place. In one of the LPAs, the Chief Planning Officer role was split between two senior roles.

Development management and plan-making functions were within the same service in 30 of the 32 responding planning authorities (94%).

All planning authorities have development management and enforcement functions sitting within the same service.

When asked if there were any other services in the same directorate, Building Standards was the service most commonly reported as being within the same directorate as the planning service, identified by 84% of responding authorities. This was followed by Economic Development (66%), Environmental Health (53%) and Roads or Transport (50%).

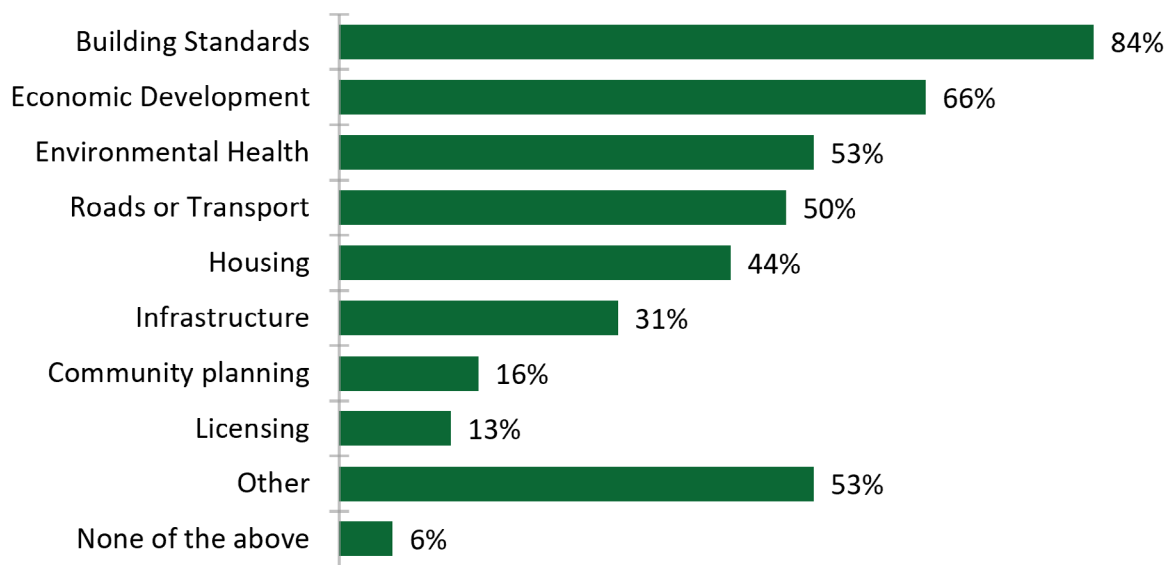


Figure 1: Services that are in the same directorate as planning

Authorities selecting “Other” reported a wide range of services within the same directorate as planning, including climate and environmental services, regeneration, asset and property management, legal and procurement services, tourism, and strategic energy and community development.

The table below sets out the Full Time Equivalent (FTE) % of planners in each type of role from the 32 planning authorities that responded to the survey.

Role	Percentage
Administration/Validation Officer	17%
Assistant/Graduate/Trainee	10%
Planning Officer	32%
Senior Planning Officer	18%
Head of Planning/Chief Planning Officer	3%
Other	20%

The share of the workforce in core planning officer roles (Planning Officers, Senior Planning Officers and Heads/Chief Planning Officers) varies considerably across planning authorities, ranging from 27% to 79%.

Among the planning authorities that responded, 94% reported working to a hybrid model, while 6% reported working fully remotely. This represents a slight change from last year, when all planning authorities that responded reported working to a hybrid model.



Vacancies

Of the planning authorities that responded, 12% reported no vacancies, 50% reported between 1-3 vacancies, 19% reported between 4-6 vacancies, and 19% reported more than 6 vacancies. Overall, the majority of responding planning authorities (88%) reported at least one vacancy.

Role	Percentage
Administration/Validation Officer	13%
Assistant, Graduate, Trainee	28%
Planning Officer	27%
Senior Planning Officer	18%
Head of Planning	4%
Other	10%

Assistant/Graduate roles accounted for the largest share of all reported vacancies (28%), closely followed by Planning Officers (27%). Senior Planning Officers accounted for 18%, Administration/Validation roles for 13%, Other roles for 10%, and Heads of Planning for 4%.

Planning Officer vacancies were most commonly reported as difficult to fill, with 45% of responding Local Planning Authorities rating these vacancies as either difficult (39%) or very difficult (6%). Senior Planning Officer vacancies showed a similar level of difficulty, with 44% of responding authorities rating them as difficult or very difficult (22% each). Head of Planning/Chief Planning Officer vacancies also presented recruitment challenges, with 43% of responding authorities rating them as difficult (29%) or very difficult (14%).



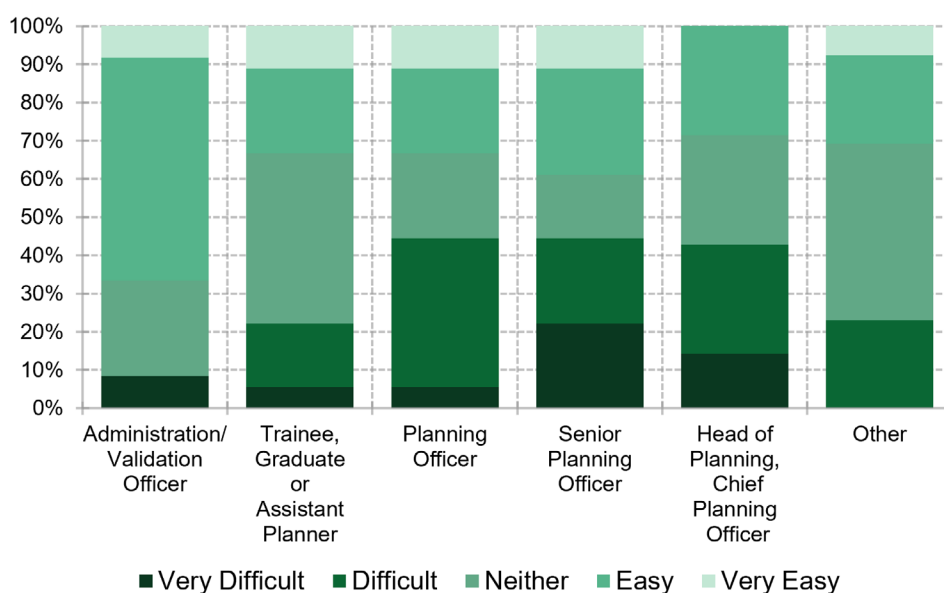


Figure 2: What roles planning authorities found difficult to recruit for.

When asked about barriers to filling vacancies, the most commonly reported challenge was a lack of qualified or experienced applicants (53%). Other prominent barriers included hiring freezes or lack of funds (22%), uncompetitive wages (16%) and remote location (16%).

The table below sets out the average number of weeks it has taken to fill a vacancy by the role. 27 of the planning authorities answered this question.

Position	Average number of weeks
Administration/Validation Officer	7
Assistant, Graduate, Trainee	10.5
Planning Officer	11.06
Senior Planning Officer	9.42
Head of Planning	11
Other	10.4

Planning Officer vacancies took the longest to fill, averaging 11.1 weeks, consistent with the recruitment difficulties reported for these roles. Senior Planning Officer vacancies also took an average of 9.4 weeks to fill. Assistant/Graduate/Trainee vacancies took an average of 10.5 weeks; this category also had a relatively high number of vacancies during the year, although the data does not establish whether vacancy volume contributed to longer recruitment times.

The most commonly reported areas of recruitment difficulty were Planning Policy (19%), Enforcement (16%), and Environment, Ecology or Biodiversity (16%). Digital Planning and Energy or Renewables were each identified by 9% of responding authorities, followed by Transport (6%).



Retention

The planning authorities were asked what the most common reasons were for staff to leave their authority.

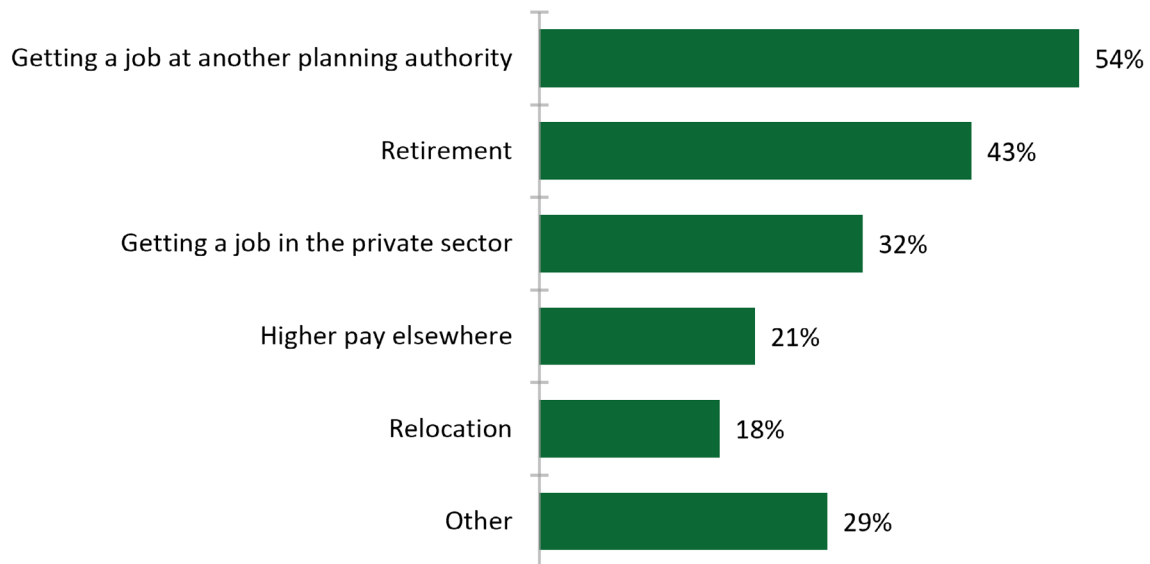


Figure 3: Most common reasons people leave their local authority

When asked about the most common reasons for staff leaving, over half of responding authorities (54%) identified staff moving to another planning authority. Retirement was also a prominent reason (43%), followed by staff moving to the private sector (32%). Higher pay elsewhere was reported by 21% of authorities, while 18% identified relocation as a reason for staff leaving.

When asked what measures have been put in place to improve retention, professional training and development opportunities were most commonly reported (63%), followed by flexible working (53%). Wellbeing and mental health support was reported by 44% of authorities, while career progression pathways and mentoring or coaching were each reported by 41%.



Figure 4: Measures to improve retention

The planning authorities also commented that they had the following initiatives to improve retention:

- Salary reviews.
- Hybrid and flexible working arrangements.
- “Grow our own” approaches.
- Career progression and workforce planning.
- Training, coaching and professional development.
- Staff engagement and team building.

“ We are producing a workforce strategy in the next 6 months, and it will look to address a number of issues, including career progression. ”

“ A restructured planning team has created additional posts and helped to create career progression pathways for existing staff. ”

“ Biannual Performance and Coaching Reviews with staff have led to bespoke training programmes being offered, alongside outdoor team-building days and mentoring for early-career staff to support them towards RTPI accreditation. ”

In terms of routes or initiatives in place to attract new staff, internship or work placement opportunities were the most commonly reported (50%), followed by graduate recruitment schemes (31%) and partnerships with universities or colleges (28%). Relocation packages were offered by 16% of authorities, while 9% reported using recruitment agencies. Almost a third of authorities (31%) reported having none of the listed initiatives in place.

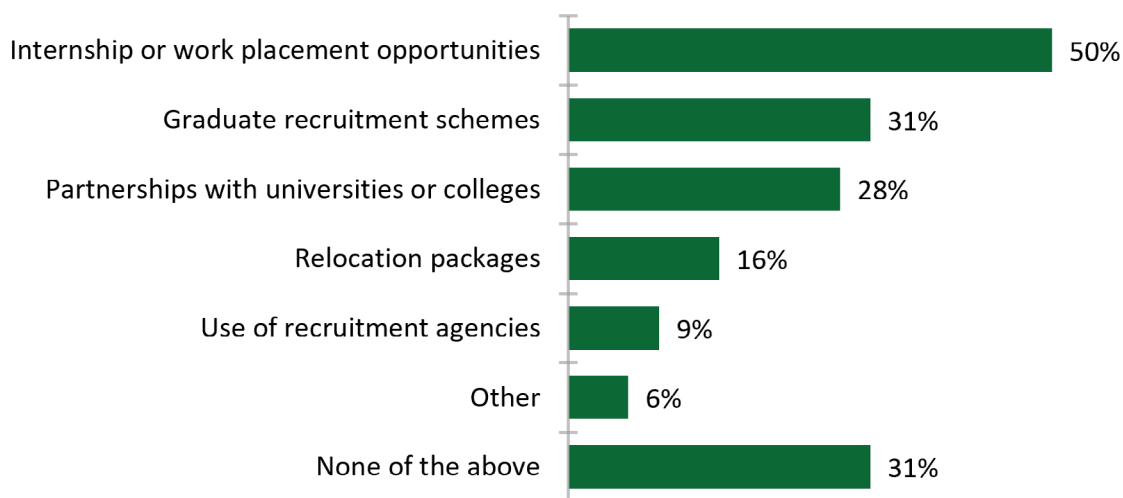


Figure 5: Initiatives used to attract new staff

The planning authorities also commented that they had the following initiatives to attract new staff:

- Graduate and trainee programmes, including funded graduate posts and structured professional development.
- Student placements, internships and work experience opportunities.

- Partnerships and engagement with universities, including careers events and guest lectures.
- Targeted placement opportunities for individuals experiencing barriers to employment.
- Collaboration with other planning authorities, particularly in specialist areas.

“ In 2026 we are hosting a student day, supported through the Improvement Service. We are working towards 3-month student placements in the autumn/winter. ”

“ We have offered modern apprenticeships, student internships and shadowing opportunities, while exploring enhanced partnership working with the universities. ”

“ Four paid summer work placements were offered to university students to support data gathering. Other initiatives included work experience opportunities developed with a university careers service, an MSc dissertation placement within the Planning Policy Team, a careers Q&A session for students, and guest lectures delivered by the Energy Team. ”

“ Graduate posts are offered where applicants do not meet the full specification but can demonstrate a recognised pathway towards achieving it. ”

To provide an overview of the key workforce challenges and responses, findings from four survey questions were brought together, covering reasons for experienced staff leaving, recruitment challenges, initiatives to attract new staff, and measures to improve staff retention. Figure 6 brings together the most commonly reported findings across these areas to provide an overall picture of current planning workforce challenges and responses.



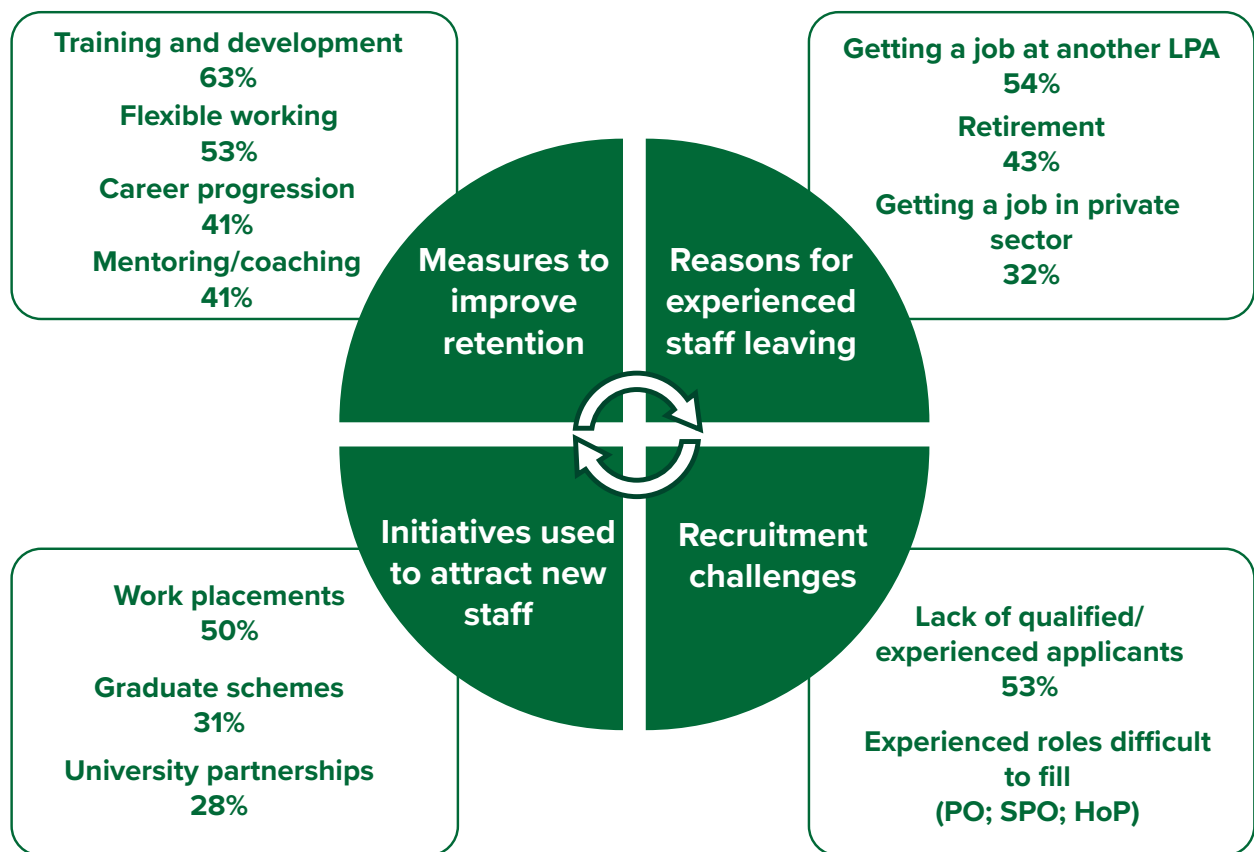


Figure 6: Workforce planning challenges and responses by Local Planning Authorities

Among local planning authorities that provided reasons for experienced staff leaving, 54% reported staff taking up a job at another planning authority, while 43% identified retirement as a reason. Recruitment challenges were also evident, with 53% of LPAs reporting a lack of qualified or experienced applicants. Attraction initiatives focused mainly on new entrants, with 50% offering work placements, 31% graduate schemes and 28% university partnerships. To support retention, 63% reported training and development and 53% flexible working.

Recruitment difficulties were also identified across a range of specialist areas, including planning policy, enforcement, environment, ecology and biodiversity, digital planning, and energy and renewables.

The findings highlight a range of interconnected workforce challenges, including difficulties recruiting qualified and experienced staff, retirement pressures, and the need to develop and retain the existing workforce. A strategic approach to workforce planning could help planning authorities anticipate these challenges and identify appropriate actions to address current and future workforce needs.

Resourcing and Capacity

In terms of introducing methods to support workforce capacity or planning processes, the use of consultants was the most commonly reported approach (59%). Artificial intelligence was used by 22% of planning authorities, while 13% reported using agency staff and 9% specialist digital planning support. Shared services were rarely reported (3%). Around a third of planning authorities (34%) reported using none of the listed approaches.

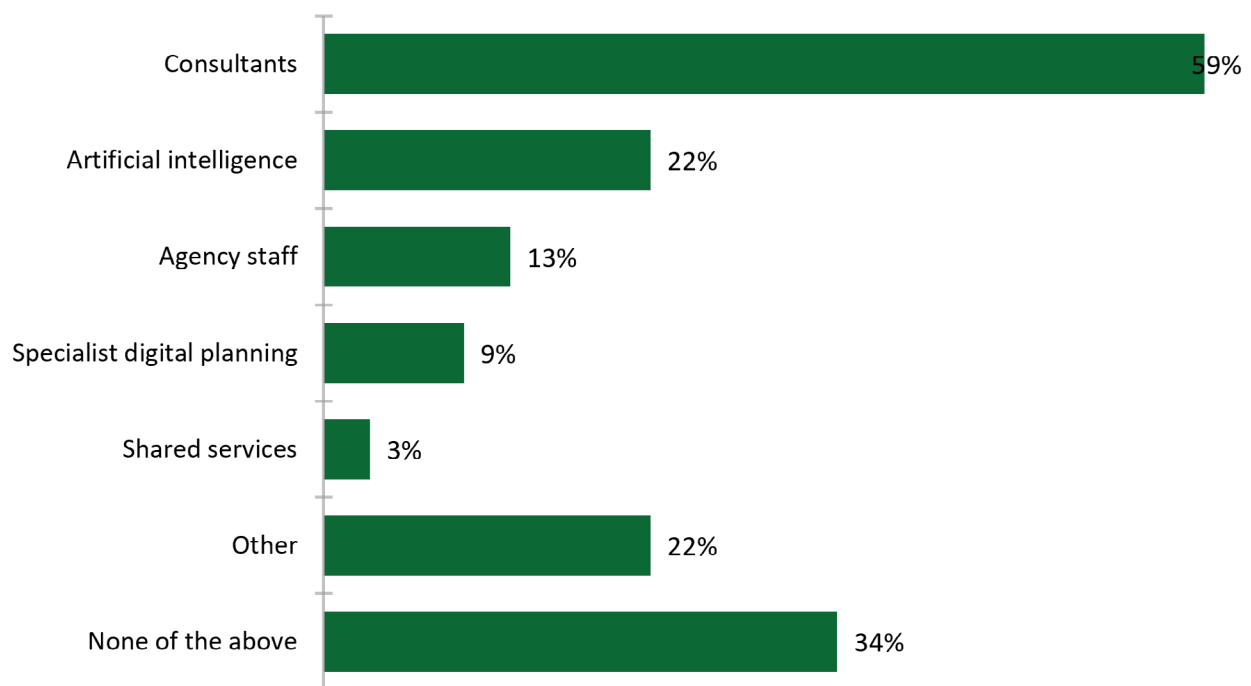


Figure 7: Methods to support workforce capacity or planning processes

The use of artificial intelligence to support workforce capacity or planning processes increased from 10% in 2024/25 to 22% in 2025/26, indicating growing adoption of AI across planning authorities.

Staff Satisfaction

23 out of the 32 planning authorities had gathered feedback on staff satisfaction in 2025/26. Staff surveys were the most commonly reported method of gathering feedback, used by 87% of planning authorities. Informal conversations were used by almost half of authorities (48%), while one-to-one meetings and exit interviews were each reported by 43%. Focus groups or workshops were less commonly used (26%), and only 4% reported using other methods.

When asked what the key themes from the feedback were, the planning authorities mentioned:

- High levels of job satisfaction and positive staff morale
- Staff pride in their work and a sense of making a difference
- Positive and supportive team working and workplace culture
- Supportive and approachable managers
- Flexible and hybrid working and good work-life balance
- Opportunities for training and development
- Positive feedback around staff health and wellbeing
- Workload and staff capacity pressures
- Budget and resource pressures
- Recruitment and staff retention challenges
- Limited opportunities for career progression
- Issues with IT systems and the efficiency of working processes
- Challenges arising from public expectations and external pressures on the planning service



Data and Digital Technology

When asked if their planning services had made use of any of the listed specialist digital planning tools and/or artificial intelligence, Mapping and GIS was the most commonly reported use, identified by 75% of planning authorities. Digital tools for public engagement and consultations and data analysis and reporting were each reported by 44%, while around a third (34%) used these technologies for workflow automation. Use for processing planning applications was reported by 28% of authorities. Decision support was much less common, at only 3%, while 16% reported using none of the listed applications.

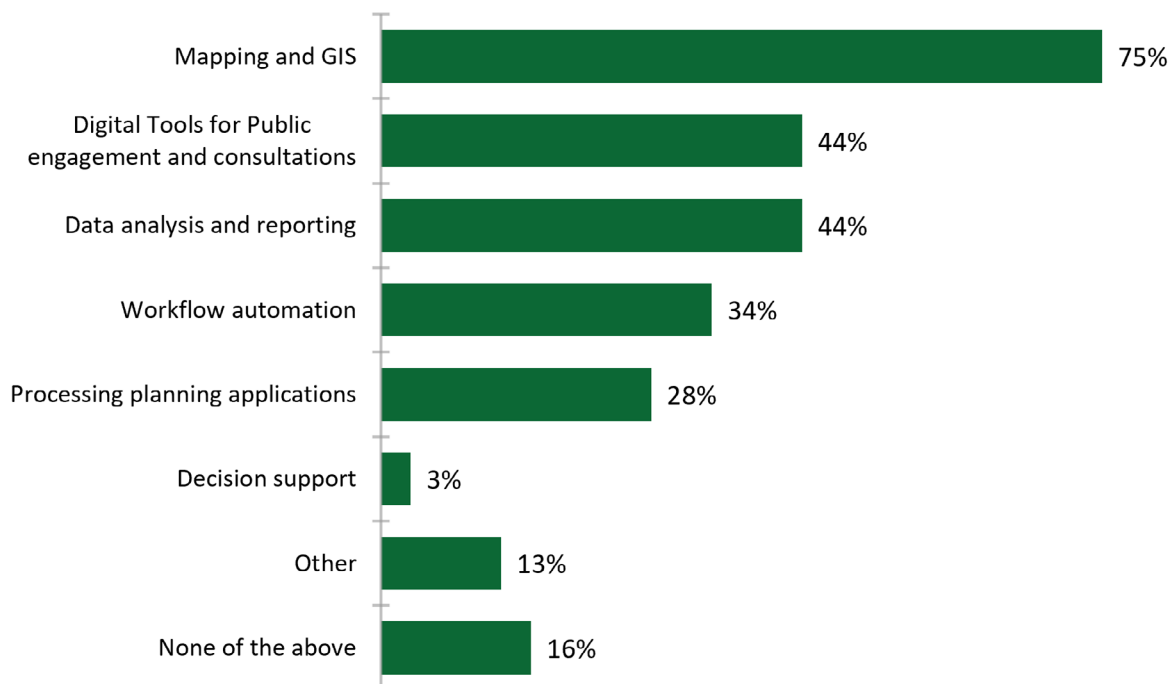


Figure 8: Specialist digital planning tools and/or artificial intelligence used by planning authorities.

Some planning authorities also highlighted the practical benefits they were seeing from the use of digital tools and AI:

“ We have developed and implemented a range of specialist digital planning tools, including performance dashboards, bespoke data collection apps, GIS-based en-gagement platforms, site constraints assessment tools, and AI-enabled analysis solutions. These tools have improved efficiency, reduced manual processes, en-hanced data quality, strengthened evidence-based decision-making, and enabled more effective analysis of consultation responses and planning data. ”

Most authorities mentioned industry standard products such as IDOX, Enterprise, ArcGIS. Others mentioned Power BI, Copilot, and some were investigating the use of AI.

Open-text responses indicate growing interest in the use of AI and digital tools across planning services, although authorities are at different stages of adoption. Emerging uses include summarising and analysing representations and other documents, workflow automation, data analysis and reporting, performance monitoring, and supporting consultation processes. Several authorities are still exploring potential applications or developing corporate approaches to AI, while some highlighted the need for further guidance, coordination and shared approaches. Responses also reflected a degree of caution around the use of AI within planning processes.

One planning authority has developed guidance on the use of AI in preparing planning applications, including how its use should be disclosed and managed. The guidance emphasises accuracy, transparency and appropriate checks, while making clear that AI should support, rather than replace, professional judgement and planning decision-making.

“ The Council have recently approved a corporate policy on the use of AI. We are involved in discussions on how this might be used within the service. ”

“ We are investigating options to develop workflow automation solutions (including AI tools) to support the processing of planning representations and LDP consultation responses. The creation of in-house apps and dashboards are also being investigated to support high-level decision-making and performance monitoring. ”

“ We need to investigate these new tools to evaluate their benefits and see what workload they can reduce or assist with before deciding exactly what they will be used for. ”



Grants

Just over half of planning authorities (53%, 17 LPAs) reported receiving grant funding from the National Planning Hub, while 47% (15 LPAs) did not.

Planning authorities reported using grant funding to support a range of activities, including delivery of NPIF and local actions, strengthening engagement and collaboration across services, and supporting Local Development Plan preparation. Examples included:

“ (Grants) Allowed delivery of key NPIF and local Planning Obligation Group actions. Provided key lead officers with opportunity to improve their engagement with planning. Helped with fostering closer links with other services that interface with planning including: economic development, legal, town centre BID team, building services. ”

“ (Grants) Supported development of the next Local Development Plan by securing external expertise. ”



