

Planning

Chief Planning Officer: Vision, Leadership and Collaboration

East Ayrshire Council

Background

East Ayrshire Council has used the Chief Planning Officer role to raise the profile of planning and to strengthen its contribution to wider corporate priorities. The Chief Planning Officer role became a statutory requirement in April 2024, and in East Ayrshire it was created by the Chief Executive in recognition of the importance of planning to the Council's broader agenda. Within the Council, the role has a direct line to the Chief Executive and a place on the corporate management team, creating access to senior strategic discussions and giving planning a stronger corporate position.

The Council's approach is centred on vision, leadership and collaboration, with a clear emphasis on delivery. Planning is framed not simply as a regulatory function but as a means of delivering the Council's strategic priorities, shaping place, improving quality of development and helping to achieve positive outcomes on the ground. This places equal weight on strategic leadership, day-to-day relationships and long-term place-based change.

Key activities

1. Driving strategic planning leadership

East Ayrshire Council used the Chief Planning Officer role to give planning a stronger strategic voice across the organisation and to ensure that planning contributed to delivery of the Council's wider priorities. This included using senior level influence to support a vision-led and outcome-focused approach, rather than a purely reactive one. The role also helped strengthen the prominence of planning within corporate discussions and reinforced the importance of the local development plan in providing strategic direction for the Council.

2. Empowering the planning team

A strong focus was placed on leadership that gives staff confidence, a shared vision and the authority to act. The Chief Planning Officer described the importance of empowering planning officers to negotiate changes to proposals, including housing development, even when senior officers cannot attend every meeting. This approach aimed to ensure that strong leadership and empowerment filtered through managers, team leaders and younger planners so that quality and consistency were maintained across the service.

3. Building relationships with elected members

East Ayrshire Council invested in regular and constructive engagement with elected members, particularly the chair and vice chair involved in planning matters. The intention was to build trust before formal committee settings, rather than relying only on interaction during complex decision-making meetings. Member development activity was part of this approach, including a programme that brought in partners such as Scottish Water to discuss themes including sustainable drainage systems or informal learning sessions with elected members regarding learning from appeal decisions.

4. Supporting collaborative delivery

Collaboration was treated as an essential part of the Council's planning approach and the importance of bringing the right people around the table to secure positive projects and the best possible development outcomes, particularly in a context of tight public budgets and wider pressures on the private sector. The Council's work with communities and with agencies such as Public Health Scotland, the Health and Social Care Partnership and Transport Scotland support shared objectives and a more joined-up delivery.

5. Advancing a place-based agenda

A strong place focus underpinned the Council's work, drawing on the priorities of National Planning Framework 4 and the local development plan. This increases the prominence of place within the authority amongst other service areas, making it more central to planning and council activities. This included supporting regeneration and masterplanning work in Kilmarnock town centre, as well as major cultural investment around the Palace Theatre and Grand Hall as part of wider town centre change.

Benefits and impact

Stronger corporate recognition

A clear benefit for East Ayrshire Council has been the stronger corporate position of planning, with the Chief Planning Officer role having direct access to the Chief Executive and participation in the corporate management team. This has helped planning contribute more fully to senior strategic discussions and has supported a gradual increase in the profile and prominence of planning across the organisation, aligning it more closely with delivery of wider corporate priorities. It has also helped reinforce planning's role in shaping growth, regeneration and wider corporate priorities.

Better team confidence

The Council's approach has also strengthened confidence within the planning service by emphasising leadership that empowers staff, creates a shared vision and gives officers confidence to negotiate improvements to development proposals. This has supported a more consistent focus on achieving quality development on the ground and has helped ensure that leadership is reflected not only at senior level but across managers, team leaders and newer planners. The benefit of this is practical as well as organisational, because officers who feel trusted and clear about priorities are better placed to make sound professional judgements and to pursue transformational improvements in schemes rather than simply processing them.

Stronger partnership working

A further benefit has been the value of collaboration in a challenging financial and operational context, highlighting the importance of bringing together communities, partner organisations and public agencies around shared objectives. This has helped create a more joined-up approach to development, linking planning with wider considerations such as health, transport and community outcomes, and supporting a more proactive and outcome-focused way of working. The impact of this is likely to be better alignment between planning ambitions and the practical realities of delivery, particularly where successful projects depend on several organisations working towards a common purpose. It also reflects an understanding that well-designed and sustainable places are best achieved through partnership working, with planning adding particular value when it is closely connected to wider partners.

Clearer focus on place

East Ayrshire Council has also benefited from a stronger focus on place, with planning being used to support broader regeneration, cultural investment and long-term local change. Work around Kilmarnock town centre, the developing masterplan and the Palace Theatre and Concert Hall illustrates how planning can help shape a clearer vision for place and demonstrate the practical value of planning in improving the environment and supporting attractive, thriving communities. This provides a stronger narrative about the purpose and value of planning, helping to connect strategic policy with visible change that people can recognise. It also reinforces the role of the local development plan in guiding change positively.

Learning and reflections

Leadership must be active

A key learning from East Ayrshire Council is that leadership needs to be visible, practical and consistent if planning is to have influence. The approach shows that leadership is not only about holding a senior role but about creating shared purpose, inspiring confidence, using influence effectively and ensuring that leadership is embedded throughout the service rather than resting with one individual. This points to a model of leadership that is active in everyday practice, from strategic discussions at corporate level to the support given to officers handling individual cases and negotiations. It also suggests that leadership has the most impact when it gives people clarity about the direction of travel and confidence in the value of their professional contribution.

Relationships make decisions easier

Another important reflection is that regular and constructive relationships with elected members help create a better environment for handling complex planning issues. By engaging early, supporting ongoing training and maintaining open discussion outwith formal meetings, East Ayrshire Council has shown how trust and familiarity can make complex decisions easier to navigate and can support mutual understanding between officers and members. This can help build shared understanding and encourage more informed discussion throughout the planning process and better decision making.

Collaboration needs deliberate effort

East Ayrshire Council's experience also suggests that collaboration has to be actively built and maintained, particularly where resources are tight and delivery depends on a range of partners. The emphasis on getting the right people round the table, working with communities and aligning agencies around common aims shows that collaborative working is most effective when it is clearly

focused on achieving positive development outcomes. This highlights that collaboration works best when it is purposeful and connected to delivery, rather than being seen as an additional process around the edges of decision making.

Outcome-focused planning

A final reflection is that planning is most effective when it stays focused on outcomes, place quality and long-term change rather than becoming purely reactive. East Ayrshire Council's emphasis on vision-led planning, the local development plan, collaborative delivery, masterplanning and quality outcomes highlights the importance of showing how planning can improve places in practical ways and contribute to wider strategic goals over time. This reinforces the idea that planning has greatest value when it provides direction, confidence and a framework for action. It also demonstrates that an outcome-focused approach can help explain planning's relevance more clearly to colleagues, members, partners and communities by linking professional work to visible benefits on the ground.

East Ayrshire Council's approach demonstrates how strong leadership, collaborative working and a clear focus on place can give planning a more influential and constructive role within the organisation. By strengthening the profile of planning, empowering staff, building positive relationships and keeping attention on delivery, the Council has created a solid foundation for continued progress. The work highlights how planning can support better outcomes for communities while reinforcing its value as a strategic function across the Council.

Contact for enquiries

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