

Planning

Leveraging the Chief Planning Officer Role to Champion the Place Agenda Within Local Authorities

Aberdeen City Council

Background

Aberdeen City Council has positioned strategic place planning as both a statutory planning function and a wider place-shaping role within a three-director model. The function sits in the City Regeneration and Environment Directorate, with the Chief Officer post also holding Chief Planner responsibilities. This creates a direct connection between planning, corporate direction and delivery, supported by sustained senior leadership backing over a number of years.

A commissioning model shapes how priorities are translated into action, with strategies developed and services commissioned to deliver them. Strategic place planning brings together development management, building standards and the local development plan with wider policy and strategy responsibilities, including transport, climate policy linked to net zero and carbon budgeting, and environmental policy focused on adaptation and biodiversity.

The overall approach focuses on outcomes, customer service and practical problem-solving. Planning supports not only the assessment of development proposals, but also wider coordination across services and partners, helping to shape investment and influence priorities such as education, open space, transport and healthcare through both statutory and strategic planning processes.

Key activities

1. Structure and governance

Strategic place planning operates within the City Regeneration and Environment Directorate and brings together development management, building standards, the local development plan, transport strategy and programmes, climate policy, and environmental policy. Senior planning leadership and managers are involved in a range of governance forums across the Council, including strategy, city development, transformation, energy, climate oversight, capital, developer obligations and transportation. This places planning within both the organisational structure and the main routes through which priorities and delivery are coordinated.

2. Early engagement

Externally accredited customer service excellence is maintained within the Strategic Place Planning service and renewed through re-accreditation. Pre-application engagement is used to shape proposals before submission, with early clarity on likely acceptability so that applicants can address issues at a stage when changes are easier to make. This approach is intended to improve the quality of submissions while keeping decisions aligned to statutory requirements and agreed policy intent.

3. Housing

Joint working across housing, planning and legal colleagues establishes a clearer framework for affordable housing delivery across developments. Over time, this work strengthens relationships with the development industry, internal housing colleagues and the Scottish Government, with a focus on demonstrating the ability to turn funding into completed homes. Annual allocations, additional funding in some years and completions are all used as measures of delivery.

4. Place

Planning supports a range of place-based programmes and projects across the city. These include city centre and beach masterplan activity, public realm improvement and heritage-led regeneration. They also include major public sector projects, a significant play space shaped with children, the regional integrated joint mortuary, and planning input across the school estate. Transport activity also includes the progression of Aberdeen Rapid Transit, a proposal with two cross-city routes. A strategic business case was approved in 2025, with public engagement taking place in October and November 2025.

Benefits and impact

Stronger alignment

A major benefit is the stronger alignment between planning, corporate priorities and delivery. Because planning is embedded in governance and connected to a commissioning model, it contributes to the development of strategy as well as to implementation. This creates a clearer route from long-term priorities into everyday decisions and helps ensure that planning activity is linked to wider organisational aims rather than operating in isolation. It also strengthens planning's ability to support goals that reach beyond land use alone, including climate, transport and broader place outcomes.

Housing outcomes

Affordable housing provides one of the clearest examples of impact. A more structured framework, supported by coordinated working across services and stronger relationships with delivery partners, helps convert policy intent into completed homes. The figures referenced show completions ranging from 117 in 2016/17 to 805 in 2023/24, with several years delivering several hundred homes and additional funding secured in some years alongside baseline allocations. The significance lies not only in the scale of delivery, but in the sustained ability to demonstrate that funding can be translated into homes for people across the city.

Visible change

The approach also produces visible place-based outcomes. Planning contributes to major regeneration and public realm work across the city centre and beach areas, including projects linked to the city centre masterplan and the development of a new market. Design input and cross-team coordination support the quality of these spaces, while heritage-led activity strengthens the condition and future use of existing buildings through engagement with owners, businesses and communities. The play space shaped with children adds a further dimension by showing how participation can directly influence the quality and relevance of a completed place.

Access and inclusion

Transport work adds a wider social impact. Aberdeen Rapid Transit is progressed not simply as an infrastructure proposal, but as part of a broader place and accessibility agenda. That is important in a city where around 30% of residents do not have access to a private car and where there is a significant student population. In this context, public transport has a direct bearing on access to work, education and services. Aligning transport planning with place, development and climate priorities therefore strengthens inclusion as well as connectivity.

Learning and reflections

Influence through access

One of the strongest lessons is that planning's ability to influence outcomes depends on access to senior decision-making. When planning is represented in governance structures and connected to strategy-setting, it is better placed to shape priorities early rather than only responding at the point of application or implementation. This gives planning more opportunities to contribute as an enabling function, supporting delivery as well as regulatory decision-making.

Clarity from the start

Early engagement has improved the quality of proposals by creating space for issues to be addressed before formal submission. This makes the process clearer for applicants and reduces avoidable late-stage disagreement. It also supports more efficient use of officer time by focusing attention on shaping viable proposals rather than resolving predictable problems later. The benefit is not simply a smoother process: it also helps maintain consistency between development proposals and wider planning priorities, while retaining the ability to refuse schemes that would undermine agreed outcomes.

Empowerment in Practice

A notable feature of the approach is the confidence placed in officers to lead and make decisions. This supports pace, ownership and practical problem-solving across a wide range of work, while also encouraging openness. This reflects a working culture where responsibility sits close to the work, reinforcing trust in officers' judgement. This can help maintain momentum across a broad and complex service while also encouraging staff to focus on solutions and added value. In turn, this supports a more responsive service and helps embed continuous improvement as part of day-to-day practice.

Showing results

A final reflection is the value of demonstrating delivery through visible outcomes. Many planning outcomes take time to emerge through strategy work, development planning, negotiation and implementation. In that context, tangible examples matter. Affordable housing completions, progressing transport proposals, improved public spaces and heritage projects all help demonstrate the value of sustained planning activity. That evidence supports organisational confidence and helps show planning's contribution in practical rather than abstract terms.

Aberdeen City Council demonstrates how planning can play a wider and highly practical role in shaping place, supporting delivery and connecting long-term priorities to visible outcomes. By combining strategic influence, integrated working and a strong focus on implementation, the approach shows how planning can contribute positively across a range of services and projects. Taken together, this presents a strong example of planning as an enabling function that helps support better places and meaningful outcomes for the city.

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