

Planning

Leadership and Culture in Planning: Building Confidence and Capability

Event Briefing



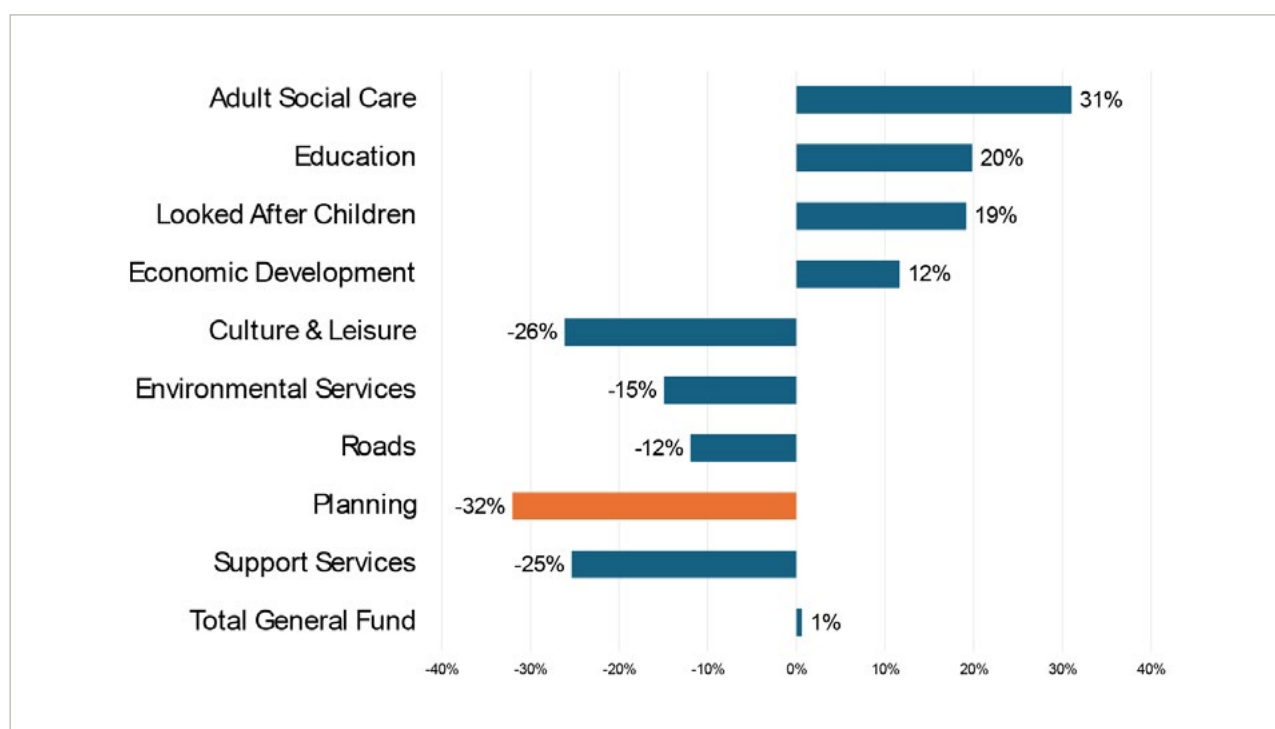
This event explored the role of leadership in shaping confident, capable, and resilient planning services. Focusing on the experiences of Chief Planning Officers and senior leaders, the session examined how councils are building positive cultures, empowering staff, and creating the conditions for service improvement.

Key Messages from LGBF and other Workforce Data

Despite an increasingly challenging financial context for planning authorities, councils have met budget cuts and increased demand with innovative approaches to building confident and capable planning services.

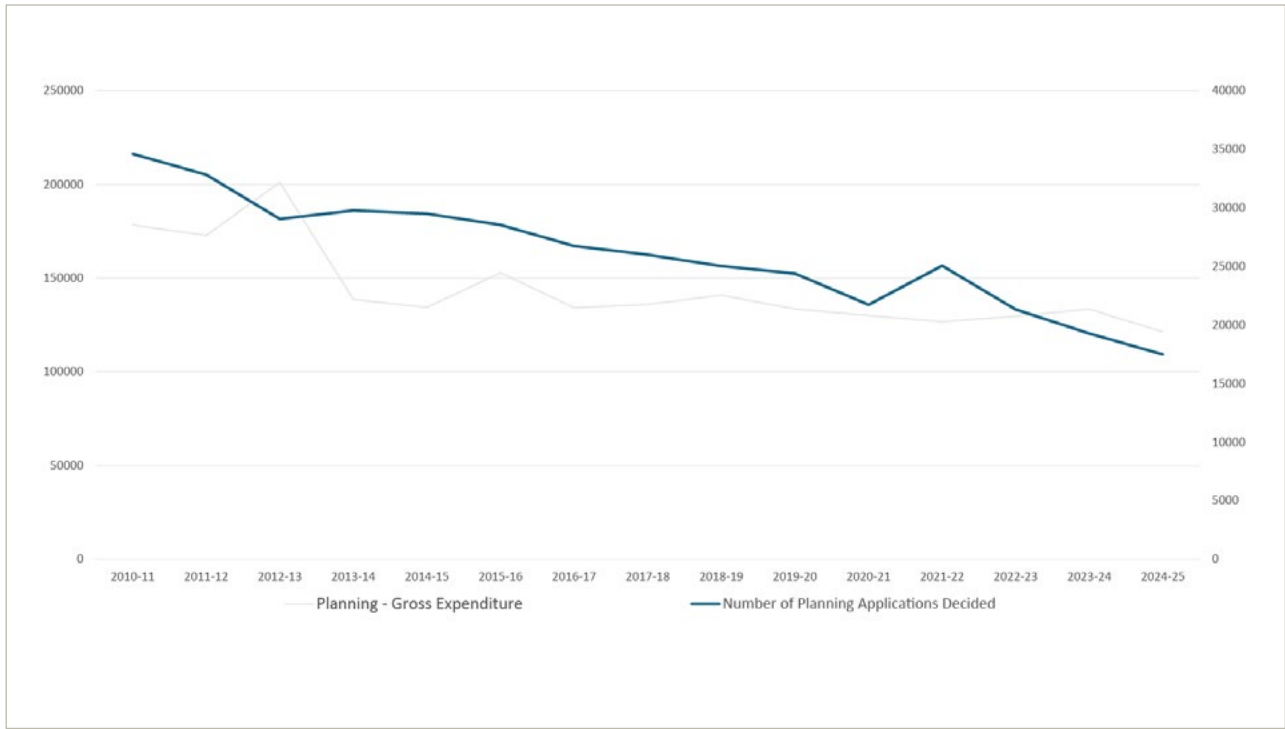
LGBF data shows councils under severe financial strain, prioritising statutory services such as social care and education. As a result, budgets for planning authorities have been reduced by over 30% in real terms across councils since 2010/11, though the scale of reduction varies between authorities, ranging from a reduction of 70% to an increase of 60% over the longer period.

Figure 1 Change in Expenditure by Service Area since 2010/11



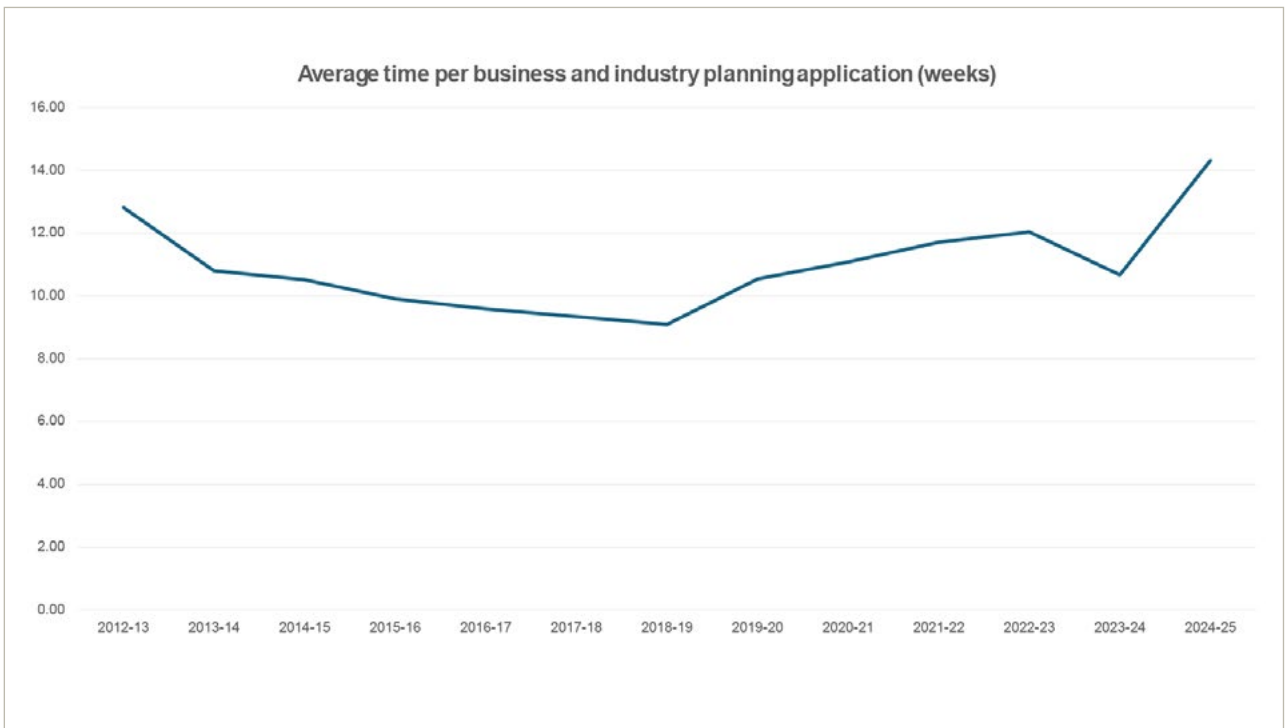
At the same time, the number of planning applications decided has fallen, reflecting economic uncertainty, a more complex regulatory environment and fewer proposals progressing through to a formal planning application. However, this does not reflect the overall volume of work being undertaken by planning authorities. Alongside formal applications, authorities are dealing with a growing range of other casework, including permitted development, certificates of lawfulness and prior notifications. These activities have increased significantly and, together with wider policy and regulatory changes, mean that while application numbers have reduced, the overall complexity and workload of the system have increased.

Figure 2 Number of Planning Applications



Against the backdrop of a more complex regulatory environment, application time has risen over the last six years with additional challenges such as recruitment and retention in planning authorities also being a factor. Despite these challenges, authorities are adopting a number of innovative ways to empower staff, build positive cultures and embed planning across multiple services.

Figure 3 Average time per business and industry planning applications (weeks)



National Scene Setting: Exploring Recent and Future Developments in Policy and Innovation – Sarah Shaw - HOPS

Overview

- Planning authorities in Scotland are working within a period of significant reform and transition, with national collaboration helping to benchmark performance, share practice and respond to emerging policy and legislative change.
- There is also an important role in engaging with Scottish Government and wider partners across the public, private and academic sectors to help shape planning practice and influence implementation.

Current Challenges

- The planning system introduced through recent reforms, including new-style local development plans and National Planning Framework 4, is continuing to be embedded across the system, with local authorities and national bodies adapting to new ways of working.
- These changes include additional responsibilities linked to new statutory requirements, responding to legal matters, and supporting local place plans and community participation.
- Wider local government funding, resourcing and training challenges continue to shape the context in which planning services operate.

Workforce and Capacity

- Workforce capacity has remained an important focus for Scottish planning authorities over the past decade, shaped by funding, recruitment, retention and the need to strengthen the pipeline of newly trained planners.
- Efforts are underway to strengthen workforce capacity through bursaries, university partnerships and alternative training routes such as workplace planning degrees.
- It is also recognised that planning delivery depends on related professions, including geotechnical, flood risk and environmental health specialists.

Looking ahead

- A key message is that planning should be seen as an enabler of housing delivery and wider place-based outcomes, rather than as a barrier.
- The strengthened role of chief planners reflects the growing importance of planning as a strategic function within local government.
- Planning has a valuable contribution to make to broader priorities such as public health, child poverty, town centre renewal, 20-minute neighbourhoods and community wealth building.
- Strong leadership, collaboration and partnership working are seen as essential to positioning planning as a positive force in improving places and people's lives.

Sharing Local Practice

Leveraging the Chief Planning Officer Role to Champion the Place Agenda Within Local Authorities – Aberdeen City Council

Aberdeen City Council is working to embed planning as a service with a wider role in shaping place, supporting delivery and connecting long-term priorities to practical outcomes. The Council's approach combines statutory planning functions with broader responsibilities such as transport, climate and environmental policy, allowing planning to contribute across a range of corporate priorities. A strong emphasis is placed on governance, partnership working and early engagement, helping planning to influence decisions at an early stage and to work constructively with internal and external partners.



The overall picture is of a planning service focused on outcomes, customer service and added value. This includes helping to shape development proposals before submission, supporting delivery through coordinated working, and contributing to place-based projects, infrastructure and housing. The approach also highlights the importance of clear decision-making, empowered staff and evidence of delivery over time. Taken together, it shows planning operating not only as a regulatory function, but as a positive and practical contributor to wider progress across the city.

[Read the full case study.](#)

Place-based – is it as Simple as a Framework, Governance and a Map? – Angus Council

A place-based approach has been developed within Angus Council to make place a more central part of corporate and partnership activity. This reflects a commitment to linking spatial planning, community priorities and service delivery more closely, while recognising that communities across the area have distinct identities, circumstances and aspirations. The work has been shaped by a desire to move beyond multiple separate strategies and towards a more connected model that supports shared vision, local engagement and long-term partnership working.

The approach has involved securing corporate support, developing flexible governance arrangements, organising local evidence and working with pilot communities to test how the model can operate in practice. A strong emphasis has been placed on collaboration, trust and clearer local understanding, with the aim of creating action plans that reflect both community priorities and wider service responsibilities. The experience highlights both the value of this direction and the time needed to embed new ways of working across an organisation and with communities.



[Read the full case study.](#)

Chief Planning Officer: Vision, Leadership and Collaboration – East Ayrshire Council

East Ayrshire Council is taking a strategic approach that is strengthening the contribution of planning to wider corporate priorities and raising its profile across the organisation. It is being positioned not only as a regulatory function, but as an important part of shaping place, supporting quality development and helping to achieve positive outcomes on the ground.



This approach is underpinned by strong leadership through the Chief Planning Officer role, with a clear emphasis on collaboration, empowerment and shared vision. East Ayrshire Council is also supporting this through constructive engagement with elected members, partnership working with agencies and communities, and a growing focus on place-based regeneration and strategic planning. Overall, East Ayrshire Council shows how planning can play a confident and influential role within the Council, while helping to support positive change for places and communities over time.

[Read the full case study.](#)

Sharing Local Practice: Cross Cutting Themes

In wider group discussions, colleagues described how planning authorities are strengthening leadership, widening ownership of improvement, and adapting workforce models to sustain capacity in a demanding environment. Authorities are investing in staff development, internal progression, graduate routes and more flexible structures, while also working to improve corporate visibility, strengthen collaboration, and broaden the mix of skills available within teams. Alongside this, councils are responding to ongoing recruitment and retention pressures, the practical implications of hybrid working, and the need for stronger analytical, digital and technical support within planning services.

1. Leadership, Culture and Corporate Influence



Planning authorities are working to strengthen leadership, improve organisational culture, and increase the visibility and influence of planning within wider corporate structures. This includes clarifying senior roles, strengthening relationships across services, and ensuring planning has a clearer voice in wider decision-making.

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar: The Chief Planning Officer role is helping to raise planning's profile and support greater reporting of planning issues to members. Major infrastructure and renewable energy projects are also increasing the strategic importance of clear and visible planning leadership.

West Dunbartonshire Council: The Chief Planning Officer role is helping to strengthen planning's presence in senior discussions and providing more direct access to corporate conversations.

Renfrewshire Council: Planning leadership sits within a wider senior management structure, with some chief planning functions shared across senior roles. Wider corporate mechanisms are also helping create stronger links between planning and directors or heads of service.

2. Staff Empowerment, Improvement & Leadership at All Levels

Planning authorities are encouraging staff at all grades to take greater ownership of service improvement, contribute ideas for change, and build confidence in exercising professional judgement. Improvement activity is being linked more clearly to development processes, team working and everyday practice so that leadership is spread more widely across services.

East Ayrshire Council: The FACE staff development process is being used to encourage staff to identify outdated processes, suggest solutions and take forward changes themselves. This is helping build confidence, ownership and a stronger culture of continuous improvement across the service.



City of Edinburgh Council: Improvement is part of the service culture, with staff taking forward changes within their own teams. The householder guidance update, taken forward by the householder team, and the use of an improvement board show how improvement activity is being structured and led within the service.

Aberdeen City Council: Leadership is being fostered across the service through a supportive management culture and strong peer relationships. This is helping staff build confidence and contribute more actively to service development.

3. Workforce Development, Recruitment & Retention

Planning authorities are using a mix of graduate pathways, trainee routes, internal progression and flexible workforce models to build capacity and respond to recruitment and retention pressures. These approaches are helping councils to strengthen succession planning, support career development and create clearer opportunities for staff progression.



City of Edinburgh Council: A People Plan is supporting leadership development, workforce planning and career progression. Investment in assistant planners is also helping create a stronger pipeline of future talent.

Aberdeen City Council: The Council is taking a strong grow your own talent approach through internal-first recruitment, buddying, leadership development and plans for a rotational graduate model. Internal progression and workforce planning are also being used to respond to competition from other employers and create longer-term career pathways within the service.

Renfrewshire Council: Renfrewshire is supporting a UWS student planner route alongside graduate and assistant planner posts, helping create practical early-career entry routes into the service. The council is also creating additional posts to improve progression opportunities and retain staff who are ready to move to the next stage.

Angus Council: Angus is using apprenticeship activity, local growth funding and wider workforce development approaches to support future capacity. At the same time, the council is managing small-team pressures and using outsourced support where necessary to respond to a demanding project pipeline.

East Ayrshire Council: Graduate posts, acting-up opportunities and internal progression routes are being used to build and retain talent within the service. This is helping strengthen succession planning while also supporting continuity and retention.

Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park: The Park Authority is taking steps to support retention and career development by introducing a new senior planner role and creating more opportunities for staff growth. A flexible approach to role design and progression is also helping the service nurture talent and build capacity over time.

West Dunbartonshire Council: The Council is exploring a more flexible workforce model to create clearer progression routes for planners and related professional roles. This includes using trainee and assistant approaches in building standards as part of a wider effort to strengthen recruitment and retention.

4. Hybrid Working, Induction & Learning the Organisation

Planning authorities are refining hybrid working arrangements to balance flexibility with the need for new staff to build relationships, learn organisational culture and develop confidence in their roles. Particular attention is being given to induction, probationary arrangements and the importance of in-person learning and place-based understanding.



Aberdeen City Council: A six-month probationary period is being used to establish a strong office-based induction for new starts. Buddy arrangements and wider team support are helping staff build relationships and understand how the service operates.

Angus Council: Angus is encouraging in-person relationship building, office presence and time spent in communities so that staff understand both internal networks and the places they are planning for. This reflects the importance of local knowledge and strong working relationships.

Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park: Flexible and hybrid working arrangements are helping widen recruitment. At the same time, the authority is balancing flexibility with the need to maintain team development and service efficiency.

5. Data, Digital Capacity & Broadening the Planning Skill Mix

Colleagues highlighted a reduction on repeat visits and improving outcomes through longer lasting Planning authorities are broadening their workforce mix to include stronger analytical, technical and business support capacity. This is supporting better use of data, improved reporting and greater digital capability, while also helping planners focus more directly on core planning work.



North Lanarkshire Council: North Lanarkshire has developed a broader planning skill mix that includes a data analyst, technicians and specialist support for Power BI dashboards and GIS mapping. This is strengthening in-house analytical capacity and reducing reliance on planners to lead highly technical work.

Aberdeen City Council: The Council is continuing to make effective use of corporate and technical support arrangements, while adapting how planning support is provided within the service.

Angus Council: Angus is continuing to build data and technical capability within their local context. The service also recognises the benefit of drawing on a broader range of skills to support planning activity.

6. Collaboration, Regional Working & Cross-Service Coordination

Colleagues described how they are using collaboration to strengthen capacity, reduce duplication and support more joined-up working across organisations and geographic areas. This includes stronger internal relationships, wider partnership working, and interest in shared approaches to workforce development and service support.



Angus Council: Angus is strengthening collaboration across communities, departments and regional partners, including interest in wider Tayside approaches to workforce development and shared learning. There is also a strong focus on involving the right departments directly in place-based work.

Renfrewshire Council: A performance board is being used to engage directors and heads of service more directly and support the case for additional planning and building standards capacity. This is giving planning a stronger route into wider corporate discussions on resources and performance.

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar: Cross-council support and external assistance are helping to reinforce capacity for major projects and broaden access to specialist support. This demonstrates how collaborative approaches can strengthen resilience and delivery in high-demand contexts.

North Lanarkshire Council: North Lanarkshire is combining internal collaboration between planners, analysts and technical staff with selective cross-boundary working where relevant. This supports a more integrated approach to service delivery and makes better use of specialist skills.

Sharing Local practice - Summary of Initiatives

Aberdeen City Council

Leadership and service development: Leadership is being fostered across the service through a supportive management culture and strong peer relationships. This is helping staff build confidence and contribute more actively to service development.

Workforce recruitment and retention: The Council is taking a strong grow your own talent approach through internal-first recruitment, buddying, leadership development and plans for a rotational graduate model. Internal progression and workforce planning are also being used to respond to competition from other employers and create longer-term career pathways within the service.

New staff support: A six-month probationary period is being used to establish a strong office-based induction for new starts. Buddy arrangements and wider team support are helping staff build relationships and understand how the service operates.

Digital support: The Council is continuing to make effective use of corporate and technical support arrangements, while adapting how planning support is provided within the service.

Angus Council

Workforce development: Angus is using apprenticeship activity, local growth funding and wider workforce development approaches to support future capacity. At the same time, the council is managing small-team pressures and using outsourced support where necessary to respond to a demanding project pipeline.

Hybrid working and staff development: Angus is encouraging in-person relationship building, office presence and time spent in communities so that staff understand both internal networks and the places they are planning for. This reflects the importance of local knowledge and strong working relationships.

Data skills: Angus is continuing to build data and technical capability within their local context. The service also recognises the benefit of drawing on a broader range of skills to support planning activity.

Collaboration across services and communities: Angus is strengthening collaboration across

communities, departments and regional partners, including interest in wider Tayside approaches to workforce development and shared learning. There is also a strong focus on involving the right departments directly in place-based work.

City of Edinburgh Council

Staff empowerment and improvement:

Improvement is part of the service culture, with staff taking forward changes within their own teams. The householder guidance update, taken forward by the householder team, and the use of an improvement board show how improvement activity is being structured and led within the service.

Workforce development: A People Plan is supporting leadership development, workforce planning and career progression. Investment in assistant planners is also helping create a stronger pipeline of future talent.

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Collaboration: Cross-council support and external assistance are helping to reinforce capacity for major projects and broaden access to specialist support. This demonstrates how collaborative approaches can strengthen resilience and delivery in high-demand contexts.

East Ayrshire Council

Workforce development: The FACE staff development process is being used to encourage staff to identify outdated processes, suggest solutions and take forward changes themselves. This is helping build confidence, ownership and a stronger culture of continuous improvement across the service.

Recruitment and retention: Graduate posts, acting-up opportunities and internal progression routes are being used to build and retain talent within the service. This is helping strengthen

succession planning while also supporting continuity and retention.

Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park

Workforce retention: The Park Authority is taking steps to support retention and career development by introducing a new senior planner role and creating more opportunities for staff growth. A flexible approach to role design and progression is also helping the service nurture talent and build capacity over time.

Hybrid working: Flexible and hybrid working arrangements are helping widen recruitment. At the same time, the authority is balancing flexibility with the need to maintain team development and service efficiency.

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