

# Early Careers Development and Skills-Based Recruitment



## Context

Aberdeenshire Council was facing significant workforce pressures, with 11 planning officer vacancies. This was made more challenging by its rural location, the lack of a local planning degree programme on its doorstep and wider national shortages in the profession. Traditional recruitment approaches were not delivering results, leading to a rethink of how the service attracted and developed staff. Given this, in 2023, the service recognised the need to rethink how it attracts, develops, and sustains its future planning workforce.

## What Happened

The service moved towards a skills-based approach to recruitment, targeting graduates from related disciplines such as geography and architecture, as well as individuals looking to change career. Direct



links were established with university course coordinators to reach potential candidates more effectively. The Planning Service's more proactive and flexible approach involved:

- Offering student work experience days to university students, giving them direct exposure to planning work and sparking interest in the profession.
- Supporting students to complete dissertations in partnership with the service.
- Attending career fairs and engaging with schools to influence subject choice at an earlier stage.
- Working with advanced higher geography students through practical, place-based activities.
- Running collaborative university projects where students tackled real planning challenges and presented their work to planners and local communities.
- Continuing to offer paid summer student posts, typically four each year, advertised through universities as a route into the profession.
- Using Modern Apprenticeships, particularly within the planning administration team, to widen entry routes into planning-related roles.
- Investing time in team development and in-person training activities to maintain service cohesion in a hybrid working environment.

## Areas of Collaboration

The service worked closely with Robert Gordon University, the University of Aberdeen and Dundee University, including involvement in work experience days, careers fairs, and student projects.

Engagement also extended to schools, including advanced higher geography students. Paid summer placements and modern apprenticeships were used to support early entry into the profession.

It involved working with University MSc student groups undertaking real-world planning projects and local communities, where students presented on their findings and ideas. Teams across the service worked together to host, mentor, and support students, apprentices, and early career entrants.

## Overall Result

The Planning Service has created multiple pathways into planning, rather than relying on traditional recruitment alone. Students exposed to the service reported increased interest in planning as a career, and paid opportunities helped bring candidates "in the door" who later considered or applied for planning posts. The approach helped to fill vacancies and open a wider range of entry routes into the service.

Retention improved, and the workforce became more adaptable. Staff reported feeling supported and valued, and there was a clearer structure for progression. Succession planning was strengthened, with more flexibility to accommodate different backgrounds and career paths.

Collaborative projects added value to both student learning and the service's thinking on places, town centres, and resilience, while also strengthening links with education providers.

## Lessons Learned

Key lessons from Aberdeenshire's experience show that broadening recruitment criteria to focus on transferable skills is particularly important in rural areas. A strong induction and ongoing training are



essential to support new staff. Flexible career pathways help retain staff and support development over time. Early engagement with universities and schools can help build a longer-term pipeline of future planners.

It was recognised that building a sustainable, high-performing planning workforce requires long-term investment in early engagement, not just short-term recruitment and a flexible approach to skills and career pathways is essential, particularly in areas without a local planning degree.

It is also considered that widening the skills base beyond traditional entry routes strengthens resilience whilst strong, ongoing collaboration with universities and schools is critical.

Succession planning starts early by sparking interest in planning as a career and supporting people regardless of how they enter the profession. Creating opportunities to come together in person remains important for team culture in a hybrid working environment.

*This case study has been prepared in collaboration by Aberdeenshire Council and the National Planning Improvement Team at the Improvement Service. We publish good practice case studies identified through our work on the National Planning Improvement Framework and the National Planning Hub. They aim to support the sharing of good practice and build collaboration across the sector in addressing common challenges. Please email us at [npi@improvementservice.org.uk](mailto:npi@improvementservice.org.uk) if your authority has a good practice case study to share.*

