

Planning and Building Standards People Plan: new approaches to workforce planning



Context

Following the pandemic, the planning and building standards service at the City of Edinburgh Council faced several workforce challenges. The nature of the workforce and how it functioned had changed. There were workforce gaps due to staff retirements, the service faced different types of demands, there were challenges in capacity, ongoing recruitment difficulties, and there were changing expectations around working arrangements. This brought new challenges and opportunities around hybrid working, flexible working arrangements, changes in technology, and increased pressure on staff that highlighted the need for a clearer, shared approach to supporting people. In response to this, it was decided to develop a formal People Plan that set clear expectations for staff and managers.

What happened

A three-year People Plan was developed, aligned with wider Council priorities such as ending poverty, achieving net zero, and creating great places. Workforce analysis was used to identify current gaps and future needs. The plan focused on attracting new talent, developing leadership at all levels, promoting diversity and inclusion, and improving retention. There was also a strong emphasis on staff wellbeing. A



range of engagement approaches were introduced, including annual staff surveys, regular one-to-one meetings, and “year ahead” sessions to support forward planning and communication.

The plan set out clear commitments around how to:

- Support hybrid and flexible working in a way that benefitted both staff and the service
- Grow and retain talent within the service through provision of CPD, “grow our own” pathways, and staff-led training
- Support staff to learn and develop the skills they needed through introducing protected time for learning, developing in-house training, using external training and CPD providers and through developing skills in digital planning
- Encouraging staff to take responsibility for their own learning and professional standards
- Promoting wellbeing, a healthy workplace and a supportive and collaborative culture
- Engaging with and listening to staff feedback through surveys, one-to-ones, team meetings, and staff briefings

The plan was actively promoted to staff and embedded into existing processes such as performance reviews, personal development plans, annual conversations and regular check-ins between staff and line managers.

Areas of collaboration

The service worked closely with the Council’s HR and learning and development teams, ensuring alignment with wider corporate workforce plans. There was also engagement with external partners, including Heads of Planning Scotland, the Scottish Government, and the Royal Town Planning Institute. New pathways into the profession were supported through student planner placements and assistant planner roles. Specialist recruitment channels were also used to reach a wider pool of candidates.

Across the service staff worked with managers through one-to-one conversations and annual development discussions and contributed to staff-led training and knowledge-sharing. Senior managers provided reflections and direction through the year-ahead sessions and the planning and building standards service came together for service-wide events and shared learning. Collaboration was also supported through in-person training days, site visits, and cross-service exposure to different areas of work.

Overall result

Overall, the plan helped bring people together, reinforced a shared sense of purpose, and improved clarity about how the service supports its workforce. Staff engagement improved through clearer communication, regular feedback, and structured conversations. There was a stronger focus on



leadership development, with more opportunities for internal progression. Work on diversity and inclusion was strengthened through training and awareness. Flexible and hybrid working arrangements supported better work–life balance, and wellbeing was promoted through events and access to mental health support. The People Plan provided:

- Clear expectations that were clearly set and written down
- Consistency in messaging across the service
- Better staff engagement about priorities and changes
- Increased understanding within staff on future work, its challenges, their subsequent development needs and opportunities

Lessons learned

- Having a clear and visible People Plan helps set expectations and provides a basis for accountability
- Regular engagement with staff is important for retention and overall service quality
- Investing in leadership development and creating opportunities for internal progression helps build stability over time. Consistent communication is essential to building trust and engagement
- Linking people plans to existing processes (like annual conversations) strengthens their impact
- Bringing people together in person remains valuable for reflection, shared understanding, and culture
- Regular updates help sustain momentum and keep staff connected to wider service and council priorities
- A strong focus on wellbeing, learning, and staff voice supports a healthier and more resilient workplace

This case study has been prepared in collaboration by the City of Edinburgh 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 if your authority has a good practice case study to share.

