

Shared services for planning

The case for Planning Agencies

Planning is one of the most important strategic and decision-making functions that local authorities have to improve resident's lives. Without better quality planning services, communities will miss opportunities to level up, deliver vital housing and tackle climate change.

The threats to public sector planning

At a time when public sector planning is so important, councils have rising ambitions but have faced significant budget cuts. Political aspirations for planning teams to local drive placemaking and regeneration, assess and implementing biodiversity net gain and deliver more housing means doing more with less.

The Royal Town Planning Institute has updated its analysis of the significant funding, recruitment, skills and performance challenges facing local planning authorities. We have found that:

- **Local Authority net expenditure on planning has fallen by 43%**, from £844m in 2009/10 to £480m in 2020/21. This amounts to just 0.45% of local government budgets allocated to planning services.
- **Public spending on planning fallen the most – by 62% - in the North East of England.** But other regions have faced similar declines: Yorkshire and The Humber (49%), London (48%), West Midlands (47%) and North West (46%).
- Planning fees are an important source of income for the public sector but **proposed rate increases are vulnerable to inflation** and could be lost in real terms when introduced in 2024

However, our research has also found evidence that more than just funding is needed to clear backlogs in applications and redesign planning services to better serve the public and respond to national priorities like levelling up, housing shortages and the impacts of climate change. For example:

- Public sector recruitment is difficult: only 8% of job postings for “Town Planning Officers” published between 2016 and 2021 were for public sector roles
- Key areas of planning performance are also suffering: less than half (49%) of planning applications were decided within statutory time limits in 2021 – continuing a downwards trend since 2010 – and 30% fewer enforcement notices were issued in 2018/19 than in 2008/09

These findings supplement anecdotal evidence that shows how chronic underfunding is impacting planning professional's morale and wellbeing, career prospects and creating new pressures to effect the performance of planning services.

In order to establish a resilient and well-resourced public sector planning system we must approach these structural challenges creatively and holistically.

That is why the RTPI has undertaken research looking at models to improve the resilience of public sector planning teams, drawing inspiration from shared service initiatives and consultation with our members.

**We call on local
leaders to
introduce planning
agencies to serve
your residents**

Planning Agencies

What is a Planning Agency?

Planning Agencies are a voluntary, shared services model that local planning authorities can use to help them do more with less.

The agencies could share responsibility for standard planning services across local planning authority boundaries (including enforcement, development management, research and policy) to pool resources, add capacity and offer multi-disciplinary support that communities need to shape places and tackle inequality and climate change.

Have similar models been used elsewhere?

Our research has found promising evidence that collaborative, shared service models are effective and can be applicable in the UK:

- *Agences d' Urbanisme* used throughout France are held in higher esteem, are focused on strategic objectives, hold deep local knowledge and offer specialist expertise
- Greater Cambridge Shared Planning, formed in 2018, now process 6,000 applications a year and shows how accountability can be maintained in a large, effective shared service teams

How do Planning Agencies differ from other kinds of cooperation (e.g. under combined authorities)?

Planning agencies are an entirely voluntary model to improve service delivery and accountability and join-up policy. Multiple local authorities could bring their services and skills under one roof to create a single resilient, well-resourced and multidisciplinary planning team.

A Planning Agency could also maintain accountability through a range of mechanisms, unlike mechanisms previously prescribed by top-down devolution agreements. For example, governance could include oversight by a committee, under the leadership of a chief planner or in combination with existing devolution arrangements or forums for strategic decision-making like Green Growth Boards.

What are the benefits of Planning Agencies?

We expect that Planning Agencies would:

- **Develop planning skills and professionals:** they would be prestigious, attracting talent and providing more consistent career pathways and mentoring to develop staff. They would also help to recognise and support less visible disciplines of planning like enforcement, ecology, etc.. under a larger umbrella
- **Respond effectively to leaders and the community's needs:** they would maintain accountability, backed by strong leadership and would encourage collaborative and multi-disciplinary approaches to local challenges, interact with residents, business and community groups and build resilient networks and relationships.
- **Develop expertise and local knowledge:** they would commission research, hold and use local data, deliver greater technical and specialist knowledge and generate added value from geospatial data and environmental models for assessments
- **Underpin place-based action:** address key challenges like socio-economic inequality, adapting to and mitigating the impacts of climate change and delivering the infrastructure needed to make developments more sustainable for new and existing residents. Their strategic and operational overview would also enable them to better integrate with other public services like health, transport, education and energy.

If you would like to discuss this proposal further, please contact the RTPI's Public Affairs team at publicaffairs@rtpi.org.uk