



**RTPI**

Royal Town Planning Institute

# CHIEF PLANNING OFFICERS

The corporate and strategic influence of planning in local authorities

**RTPI  
Research  
Paper**

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## Key findings of research

In the UK and Ireland (excluding NI):

Only **23%** of local authorities surveyed had a head of planning service that reported directly to the Chief Executive

**1 in 10** local authorities did not have an individual post holder responsible for planning

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# Summary

Corporate management teams provide leadership, vision and priority setting for areas by shaping the strategic operational direction and investment decisions of local authorities. The implications of these corporate decisions on new investment, infrastructure, development activity, local services and policy delivery are significant. Understanding the spatial implications of the decision making process is key to delivering most of these corporate functions.

In the years following the Second World War the corporate and strategic influence of planners was embedded within institutional structures with Chief Planners Officers (CPOs) considered prominent senior officials in local government. However, following the deregulation of the planning system in the 1980s, many waves of governance restructuring, legislative reform and funding cuts have diminished the corporate presence of spatial planning.

Making the role of the CPOs a more prominent and strategic position within local authorities would improve the perceived value and influence of the profession. But most importantly it would positively influence the outcomes of planning and support good growth. This would also ensure that the spatial implications of other local authority functions are considered, better informing planning decisions and local plans and making the system more effective. By ensuring that planning expertise is considered corporately in local government, the value of place and its preventative upstream impact on public health can be embedded within decision making frameworks for investment and integrated service delivery. An effective planning department plays a critical role in delivering a local authority's corporate objectives alongside wider policy goals, framed by the Industrial Strategy and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>1</sup> If planning is not represented at a corporate level in local authorities then there is risk that that an integrated vision for sustainable growth in an area, in the medium and long term, is not fully realised.

This work explores the recommendations in the 2006 Baker Review to raise the status of CPOs.<sup>2</sup> It also advances proposals set out by RTPI Scotland on the Planning Bill, currently before the Scottish Parliament, which seek the introduction of statutory Chief Planning Officers in each local authority.<sup>3</sup> This study begins to build an evidence base by taking a snapshot of the current state of planning as a corporate function throughout the UK, excepting Northern Ireland.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations. 2015. UN Sustainable Development Goals. Available from: [bit.ly/2HjQmD](https://bit.ly/2HjQmD)

<sup>2</sup> Barket, K. 2006. Barker Review of Land Use Planning: Final Report. Available from: [bit.ly/2JGmqp5](https://bit.ly/2JGmqp5)

<sup>3</sup> RTPI Scotland. 2017. A Statutory Chief Planning Officer in Local Authorities. Available from: [bit.ly/2t03A1C](https://bit.ly/2t03A1C)

<sup>4</sup> The local government system in Northern Ireland was revised in 2015 and does not compare equally with the local government system elsewhere in the UK, in terms of the corporate make up of councils.

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Through a detailed analysis of management structures in 212 local authorities, this study found that only 23% of local authorities surveyed had a head of planning service that reported directly to the local authority Chief Executive. A significant variation in management structures was observed within and across regions. This study found that 9% of local authorities had no clear role assigned to the head of planning service.

This paper is the first stage of a research project, with stage two due to be published later in the year. Future work will explore regional variations in greater detail, the impact of introducing statutory functions, and whether particular service areas can fall under the same remit as a corporate planning role. Regular monitoring of the data will be undertaken by the RTPI as part of our continued efforts to secure the resources that planning requires.

## 1. Methodology

This research looked at the management structure of individual local authorities in London, South East England, North West England, Wales, Ireland and Scotland. It did this by recording the job title and tier in the staff structure of the most senior planning role in each authority. This required a clearly assigned title linked to planning, omitting positions such as 'Director of Place' where planning was less than a third of the roles' remit.

192 local authorities were surveyed in total. In Scotland, Ireland and the English regions, the information was obtained from individual management structures published online where available. If there were no up-to-date organisational charts available online, direct telephone contact was made with the respective planning departments to attain the information. National Park Authorities, Development Corporations and Strategic Development Planning Authorities (Scotland) were not included in the research. In English Regions, both Unitary and District councils were included.

The information for Wales was collected separately from a survey completed by the local planning authorities at the Planning Officers Society of Wales Conference.

## 2. Results

Figure 1: Percentage of the most senior planners within the different tiers of local government, across the English Regions and UK Nations

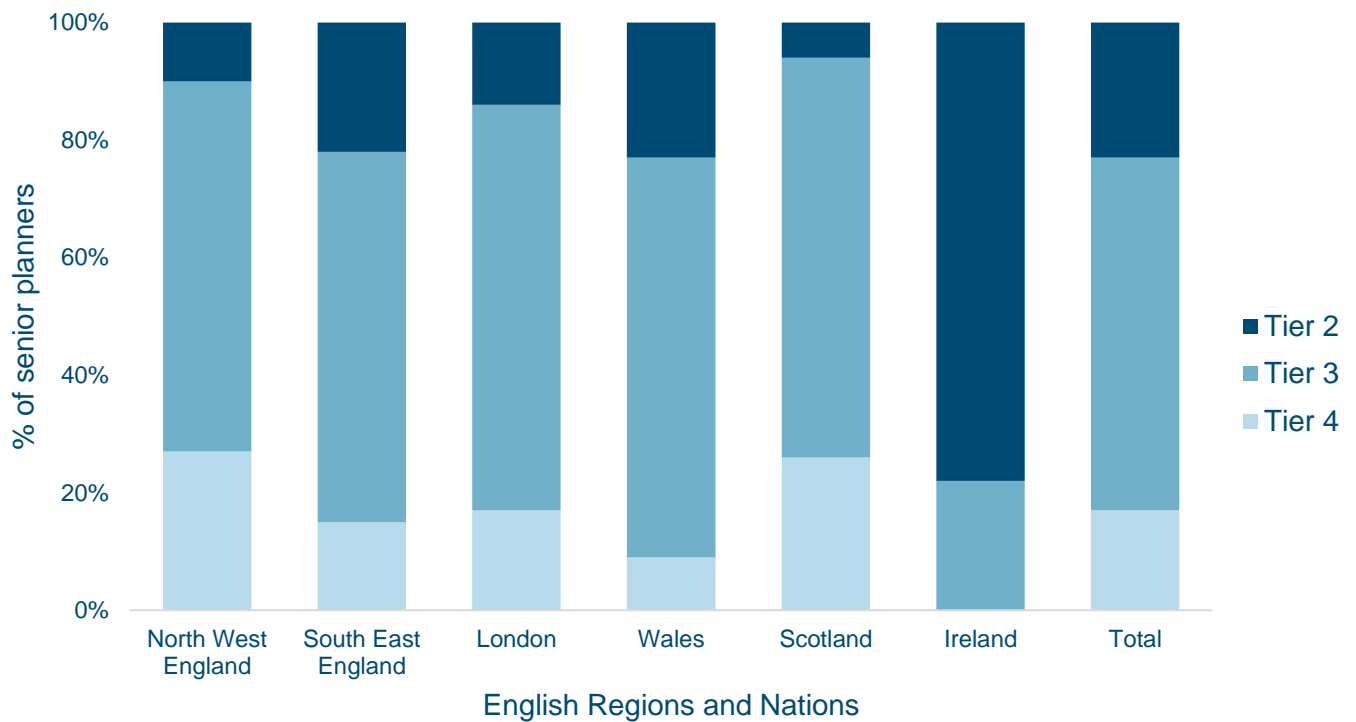
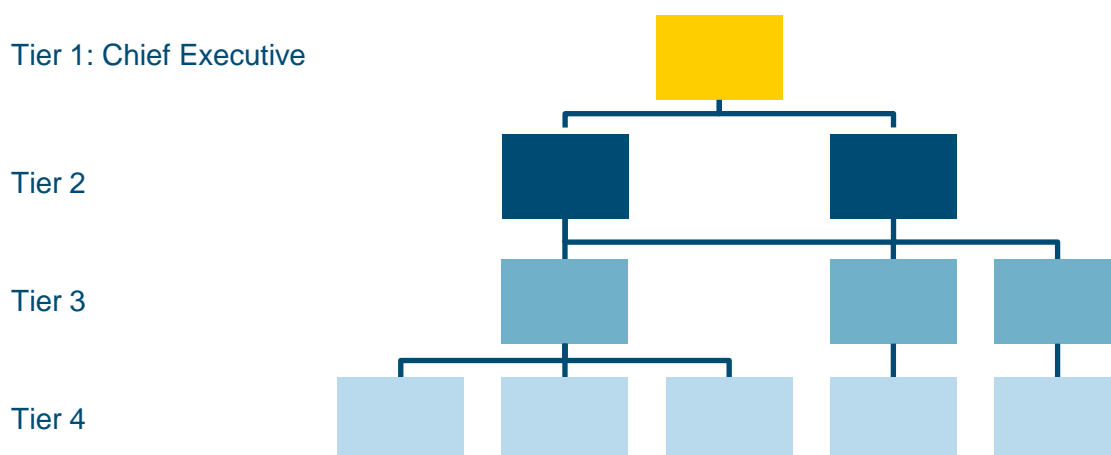


Figure 2: The management structure of local government



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## 3. Further considerations

This work is the first step towards building an evidence base to evaluate the corporate representation of planning throughout the UK and Ireland. Some key thematic areas for further exploration have been identified during this work:

### Split head of planning service functions

This study revealed that 9% of local authorities had no clear role assigned as the head of planning service. In these scenarios often the most senior position was split between head of planning policy and development management. As well as being unlikely to have the desired corporate influence, these planning services may have problems ensuring joined up working practices between the teams. It raises questions about the process by which central government guidance is disseminated, with particular reference to letters sent to CPOs in England<sup>5</sup> and Wales.<sup>6</sup>

### Mixed titles

In this work 60% of heads of planning service had other areas of responsibility within their remit. These included:

- Economic development
- Building standards
- Housing
- Community services
- Regeneration
- Regulatory services and licensing
- Transport

There is a possibility that some of these areas work well being represented alongside planning at a corporate level, but some could add time constraints to the individual in that post and undermine their ability to represent planning effectively at a corporate level. Further work in this area is required.

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<sup>5</sup> HMCLG. 2018. Planning guidance: letters to Chief Planning Officers. Available from: [bit.ly/2MIJKXA](https://bit.ly/2MIJKXA)

<sup>6</sup> Welsh Government. 2018. Dear Chief Planning Officers letters. Available from: [bit.ly/2JKKEOS](https://bit.ly/2JKKEOS)

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## Statutory functions

Further exploration is needed into the functions that CPOs should undertake and whether they are made into statutory requirements. This would include investigating any qualifications deemed essential for the role. In Wales, the RTPI has called for the introduction of a statutory CPO that should be a Chartered Planner.<sup>7</sup> The proposals to amend the Scottish Planning Bill aim to require each planning authority to appoint a CPO. They also outline the functions to be exercised by the CPO and give Scottish Ministers the power to issue guidance on this and their qualifications.

## Regional variations

Extending the investigation to cover all of the English regions would be beneficial in the second stage of this research. This will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the current corporate status of planners in English local authorities. In England, a further comparison between unitary and district councils could also be informative, to see whether the corporate representation of planning is correlated with the functions of the local authority.

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<sup>7</sup> RTPI Cymru. 2017. Principles for Reforming Local Government. Available from: [bit.ly/2LKqVvQ](https://bit.ly/2LKqVvQ)



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