



Awards for Planning Excellence Case Study

**Jonathan Bell, Head of Development Management
Plymouth City Council**

Entry submitted in Feb/March 2022.

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800 word submission

Jonathan Bell is the best strategic thinker in Plymouth City Council. For over 30 years he has personally led a number of award-winning initiatives that have pushed the boundaries of creativity and innovation in how planning can help improve people's lives and create great places.

Jonathan is a key influencer for the Corporate Management Team. He created the Plymouth Plan - a long term strategic plan for Plymouth, owned not just by the City Council but by local communities and strategic partners. The Plymouth Plan is a pioneering approach to public sector policy and is multiple award winning. The plan is digitally based, bringing together social, economic and environmental issues in a way that has not been done before. Jonathan's advocacy for the creation of a single vision and a single integrated, holistic and interactive plan lead to the bold (and brave!) decision by the Corporate Management Team and Cabinet in 2015 to get rid of over 140 different council strategies. All council projects and funding bids are now aligned to the strategic objectives and policy priorities of the Plan. Jonathan has personally championed this approach across the council which has provided the framework for the regeneration of Plymouth in recent years. This was recognised in 2016 by a 'Mention Speciale' at the European planning awards.

Because of his renowned strategic thinking approach, Jonathan has been asked by the Chief Executive to contribute to a number of corporate initiatives over the years including the preparation of the Corporate Plan, regional and national initiatives such as local government reorganisation, the Market Recovery Action Plan in response to the 2009 recession, and a more strategic council-wide approach to infrastructure planning.

Jonathan personally drives continuous improvement with many award-winning initiatives including the Silver Jubilee Cup, in 2005 for the Plymouth Core Strategy, and in 2019 for the City Change Fund. This then led to Jonathan travelling to Washington with the Leader of the Council to attend the Cities of Service Engaged Cities Award Summit. Here, at a dinner hosted by Michael R Bloomberg, Plymouth was announced as one of the winners for its pioneering and innovative approach to engaging communities by distributing CIL funds through crowdfunding. Since then, a Climate Emergency bonus and the Plymouth Climate Challenge event have gone on to win again at the 2021 RTPI awards in two categories.

Jonathan has a keen philosophy for planning which embraces personal championing of quality outcomes. As he said himself in his speech to the 13th European Town Planners Council Biennial: "I passionately believe at its heart planning is an activity which is (or should be) about making a better future for our citizens and our planet; and that planning can be a hugely positive force for change when those responsible for planning have a clear philosophy about why we do planning and the way we do planning". Most recently he has developed an innovative approach to climate emergency planning through a policy document which will push the boundaries of design standards to decarbonise development, ahead of government reforms.

At one time Plymouth was a Planning Standards Authority. Jonathan played a pivotal role in commencing the long journey of improvement. This included developing a matrix-management approach to cross cutting issues such as equality and diversity, health and safety, performance management and strategic budget management. He has established a strategic approach to income generation and service efficiencies which have helped maintain professional planner capacity to deliver on the Plymouth's growth agenda.

As the Head of Development Planning, Jonathan oversees four teams responsible for all aspects of strategic planning. Jonathan places great emphasis on collaborative working with partners and through the establishment, for example, of well thought-through governance arrangements, designed the Joint Local Plan Partnership Board and Management Board which has forged trusting relationships across the three local planning authority areas to drive delivery.

Jonathan is an incredibly caring and thoughtful manager, acting with empathy and compassion, and always looking for positive outcomes for staff, the council and the city. He is a strong advocate of

supporting career development, providing opportunities for staff to learn and expand their skills and knowledge whilst promoting the role and value of planning and planners. He created the innovative departmental 'Learning through Experience' programme covering all aspects of performance that is regularly reviewed by the management team. The ability of Jonathan to think strategically, but also being able to get into the detail, provides invaluable support to his teams. Never afraid to take on new challenges, Jonathan embraces the opportunity to think differently and creatively, providing opportunities for the team to shape new ideas. He is able to communicate his thinking and direction with ease to take everyone on the journey together, recognised by national awards in 2015 and 2016 as Local Authority Team of the Year.

Please note that this case study has been taken from their entry form and so RTPi does not take responsibility for accuracy of contents. Readers are encouraged to undertake further research into the project which is likely to have developed since the time that this entry was written.