



RTPI
Royal Town Planning Institute

**RTPI
Research
Report**

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CHIEF PLANNING OFFICERS

Report 2

The case for the corporate and strategic
influence of planning in local authorities

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1. Executive summary

Status

This report builds on [report 1 of RTPI research](#)¹, which found that only 23% of the 212 local authorities we investigated in the UK and Ireland had a head of planning that reported directly to the Chief Executive. This second report researches why it matters that there are planners at the top table. We conducted 15 in-depth, semi structured interviews with a range of current and past local government senior management staff. These were selected from a representative spread of RTPI regions and nations. We have used case studies to highlight the positive impacts where planning has been placed at the heart of corporate decision making in local authorities.

Our participants identified that the corporate presence of planning within local authorities has weakened during recent decades. They recommended restoring the status of Chief Planning Officers within local authorities, emphasising the multiple benefits this would deliver. We found that Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) have been marginalised in an age of austerity. A recurring theme in our interviews was the need for LPAs to better articulate the value of place-making and the cross departmental agenda that the planning system can deliver if provided with a place at the top table.

Influence

Our interviews emphasised the multiple benefits of consulting planners from the outset of the decision making process around development. Having a Chief Planning Officer at the top table can provide a long-term vision, engagement with communities and certainty for development. Ideas, innovation and conversation were highlighted as key benefits that the best Planners and Chief Planning Officers offered to LPAs. Understanding local politicians motivations was seen as critical to increasing the influence of spatial planning. This means working in tandem with politicians, achieving their 'buy-in' and retaining a strategic long-term view whilst understanding the realpolitik dynamic of the short election timescales and the need for politicians to be seen as delivering. Planners were also seen as particularly well placed to work with and guide politicians in developing long-term strategic visions.

Skills

Participants highlighted how the career growth of talented individuals is at risk of being stifled by the reduced presence of planning within local authorities. This was demonstrated by fewer opportunities for planners to collaborate with other departments such as transport, education,

¹ RTPI (2018) Chief Planning Officers – the corporate and strategic influence of planning in local authorities. Available here: <https://bit.ly/2S43nVJ>

housing and commercial real estate. On top of this, scaling back training budgets is often seen as a quick way to save money. These problems are amplified in LPAs without a clear Chief Planning Officer to represent the profession and make the case for investing in professional development.

Recommendations

1. The RTPI will lead the advocacy role² involving all key stakeholders to formalise the networks of Chief Planning Officers across the UK and communicate the importance of planning in the corporate operations of local authorities.
2. New legislation to require Chief Planning Officers as a statutory function within local authorities would protect the functioning of planning departments and the spatial integrity of corporate decision-making in local authorities. It is up to individual nations to arrive at arrangements to suit local circumstances.
3. Local authorities need to engage planners at the outset of any major development or corporate strategy. Chief Planning Officers should be included in the formation of corporate development groups and corporate management groups.
4. RTPI to work with stakeholders and partners to explore and support the provision of mid-career mentoring and management training development opportunities for planners.
5. RTPI to encourage accredited planning schools to facilitate Chief Planners and Senior Leaders to provide visiting lectures on multi-disciplinary skills for planning and career development, and input into practical projects.
6. RTPI to investigate an extended version of the current Chief Planners mentoring scheme for young planners which could be rolled-out offering additional opportunities for early or mid-career shadowing and development.

² The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI), Local Government Association (LGA), Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), Planning Advisory Service (PAS), Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA), Heads of Planning Scotland (HOPS), Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), Planning Officers Society Wales (POSW), Planning Officers Society (POS), Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport (ADEPT), Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE), Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE)

2. Introduction

This work follows on from [report 1 of RTPI research](#)³, which found that only 23% of the 212 local authorities we investigated in the UK and Ireland had a head of planning that reported directly to the Chief Executive. This study also found that 9% of local authorities had no clear role assigned to the head of the planning service. The response from the RTPI membership to this research has supported our impression that there has been a reduced corporate presence of spatial planning in local authorities in recent decades. Following on from the positive response to the initial work, it is important that we examine opportunities that can be unlocked by reinstating planning at the heart of corporate decision making in local authorities.

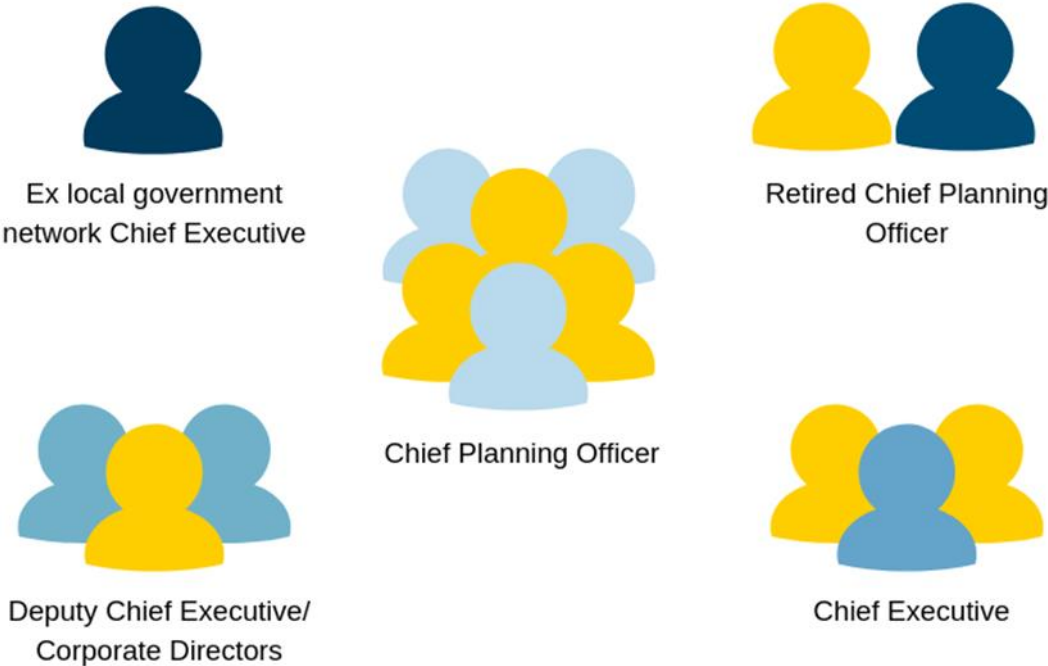
Through in-depth conversations with some of the most esteemed local government leaders throughout the UK and Ireland, this work explores the value that quality leadership and the corporate presence of planning can bring to local areas and sets out key recommendations to achieve this.

³ RTPI (2018) Chief Planning Officers – the corporate and strategic influence of planning in local authorities. Available here: <https://bit.ly/2S43nVJ>

3. Methodology

A series of 15 in-depth, semi structured interviews were conducted with a range of current and past local government senior management staff. They were selected from a representative spread of RTPI regions and nations, including Scotland, Wales, Republic of Ireland, South East, City of London, and South-West Regions.

Interviewees



4. Status

Corporate management teams provide leadership, vision and priority setting for places by shaping the strategic operational direction and investment decisions of local authorities. We asked participants whether the corporate status of planning had, in their experience, diminished over recent decades. Whilst most participants noted regional variation, it was agreed that the corporate presence of planning within local authorities has weakened in recent decades. This represents a missed opportunity to harness the expertise of planning. As one Chief Executive explained:

“The training that a planner has is fundamentally about making connections, networking, seeing the big picture, so they are great skills to add into corporate discussions.” (Chief Executive, Local Authority in England)

There was widespread concern expressed over findings from the first phase of this research that 9% of local authorities do not have a recognisable Chief Planning Officer. Interviewees considered this role to be crucial to aligning development management and development planning teams. Particular concerns were expressed in regions where forms of strategic planning are less formalised, placing particular emphasis on collaboration between the leadership of planning departments.

Reduced local authority budgets and the related series of corporate restructures are seen as the predominant cause of the observed reduction in the corporate status of planning. In local government, many local authorities have had to make significant cuts to their planning departments⁴. For example in England between 2010-11 and 2017-18, core funding for planning functions in local authorities fell by 37.9%⁵. In Scotland, Scottish Local Government Financial Statistics 2009/10 and 2016/17 show planning authorities' budgets decreasing in real terms by 40.8% since 2009⁶.

One participant suggested that during the current tight fiscal environment, planning could improve its status through better demonstrating how it delivers on multiple council objectives:

“I think because of the scale of austerity and the like, [planning could be bolder by] actually being there and helping and being seen to help to get where the council wants it to be.” (Chief Planner, England)

⁴ National Audit Office (2019) Planning for new homes. Available from: <https://bit.ly/2lgEfeC>
RTPI (2017) Progressing Performance: Investing in Scotland's Planning Service. Available from: <https://bit.ly/2UZgsBy>
Wales Fiscal Analysis (2019) Cut to the bone? An analysis of Local Government finances in Wales, 2009-10 to 2017-18 and the outlook to 2023-24. Available from: <https://bit.ly/2EbST2X>
⁵ National Audit Office (2019) Planning for new homes. Available from: <https://bit.ly/2lgEfeC>
⁶ RTPI Scotland (2019) Resourcing the Planning System: Key Trends and Findings 2019
RTPI Scotland research briefing. Available from: <https://bit.ly/2WxNNVr>

Participants indicated that planning departments may not be seen as major revenue generators unlike, for example, property functions in local authorities that produce capital receipts. However, with the appropriate corporate presence, planning can generate significant economic development for local authorities, for example by helping to deliver new housing.

As one retired Chief Planner suggested:

“When cutting budgets is taking place or the resources have been divided out, [we need] a voice there saying, don’t forget the planning service because it is going to deliver you this, this, this. Without that, planning then just becomes a side issue and it gets hit harder than it ought to in terms of any budget savings.” (Retired Chief Planning Officer, England)

“It needs the planners to have the space to get about and make the other departments and the other professionals within the organisations think planning first as opposed to last or too far down the road.” (Chief Planning Officer, Local Authority, Scotland)

At a corporate level, planning can also help deliver major cost savings for local authorities by understanding the spatial implications of decisions made in other departments, and through upstream preventative interventions associated with place-making.

Recommendation

1. The RTPI will lead the advocacy role⁷ including all key stakeholders to formalise the networks of Chief Planning Officers across the UK and communicate the importance of planning in the corporate operations of local authorities.

Chief Planning Officer Amendment, Planning (Scotland) Bill

A proposed amendment has been introduced during Stage two scrutiny of the Planning (Scotland) bill¹ by the Local Government and Communities Committee. A new duty has been introduced for local authorities to appoint Chief Planning Officers in every planning authority in Scotland. It is expected that this amendment will survive Stage three parliamentary scrutiny. RTPI Scotland will work with Scottish Government to help shape the associated secondary legislation and guidance.

⁷ The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI), Local Government Association (LGA), Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), Planning Advisory Service (PAS), Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA), Heads of Planning Scotland (HOPS), Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), Planning Officers Society Wales (POSW), Planning Officers Society (POS), Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport (ADEPT), Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE), Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE)

5. Influence

The influence of planning departments throughout local authorities is important as most corporate decisions have long-term land use implications. This includes looking at spatially appropriate sites for care homes, community hubs, leisure centres and schools. Planning can perform the critical function of aligning transport initiatives, housing strategies and economic development objectives. To ensure that the influence of planning binds together these corporate aims of local authorities, planners must have a central role in the formation of the corporate strategy. Planners must also help to deliver any subsequent work programmes through granting planning permissions, but also by proactively monitoring and assessing land management outcomes.

One Chief Executive argued that:

“Planners should be about ideas, innovation and conversation, and I think that’s really at the heart of what a good planner should do I think, a chief planning officer should do particularly.” (Chief Executive, Local Authority in England)

Many of the participants in this research highlighted the important interface that planning officers have with elected members and how this realpolitik dynamic works in practice.

“You can’t move ahead of the politicians, you can’t move ahead of the public. You’ve got to try and take them with you and that’s what planning is for, it should be about lifting people’s eyes to the horizon and saying “What is this place going to look like?” (Ex-local government network Chief Executive)

“The professional planners make the decisions, but the local authority is a political organisation and if you don’t get on with the politicians you’re going to be in trouble.” (Retired Chief Planning Officer, England)

In particular, Chief Planning Officers are particularly well suited to provide impartial, professional advice to elected members. This could be through briefings for planning committees or longer-term strategic visions for areas through the creations of local plans, corporate documents and decisions associated with major developments. To do so Chief Planning Officers’ need to intimately understand the constraints and political sensitivities which elected members are bound by.

“The members are on a four-or five-year cycle, whereas the renewal is on a 10, 20 or maybe 30-year-cycle. Somebody has to be able to try and keep saying, “Think of the long-term.” (Retired Chief Planning Officer, England)

“The key is the relationship with politicians. It is political, it’s not party-political but I think it’s appreciating the difficult job that councillors have and how they balance that.” (Chief Planning Officer, England)

“Being able to steer your way through the political and departmental structure is actually critical to getting on the senior management table.” (Retired Chief Planning Officer, England)

To achieve sustainable economic development it is important that planning leaders are able to articulate and convey their visions for growth. These narratives must be underpinned by robust evidence. This project identified innovative ways in which planners were helping to construct these narratives, for example with the help of 3D modelling. Through a clear, long-term vision, planning can bring much needed certainty to the development industry⁸. Simultaneously planners sit almost uniquely in their ability to engage with local communities, and through a bottom-up process, integrate the views of communities and their vision of their future places. To do so it is essential that planners are consulted at the earliest stage in the local authorities’ developmental decision-making process and given appropriate resourcing to manage work streams. A back to basics approach was suggested by one participant:

“...understanding that we can contribute enormously to the work that you do if you engage with us much earlier.”(Chief Planning Officer, England)

Recommendations

2. New legislation to require Chief Planning Officers as a statutory function within local authorities would protect the functioning of planning departments and the spatial integrity of corporate decision-making in local authorities. It is up to individual nations to arrive at arrangements to suit local circumstances.
3. Local authorities need to engage planners at the outset of any major development or corporate strategy. The inclusion of Chief Planning Officers in the formation of corporate development groups and corporate management groups is essential.

⁸ This was also a key finding of RTPI’s Value of Planning research: (2014), [The Value of Planning](#), RTPI

Case Studies: Chief Planning Officers Groups

Groups of Chief Planning Officers have established working groups to collaborate and share best practice on planning matters as appropriate. The following examples provide a sample of existing partnerships promoting the role of the planning profession.

Heads of Planning Policy Scotland (HOPS)

Heads of Planning Policy Scotland (HOPS) is the representative organisation for senior planning officers from Scotland's 32 local authorities, two national park authorities and four strategic development planning authorities.

HOPS is a successor organisation to the previous Scottish Society of Directors of Planning (SSDP) which was formed after local government re-organisation in 1975. SSDP was a useful focal point for collaboration and sharing of planning issues, but it tended to be more reactive than proactive. It did however play a key role in the consultation processes for the last Planning Act in 2006 and it was also instrumental in creating, with the Scottish Government, the successful Planning Performance Framework approach which is still in use today.

The primary purpose of HOPS is to:

- Promote the profile of public sector land use planning;
- Support and promote excellence in planning leadership;
- Ensure the delivery of a culture of continuous improvement in planning authorities;
- Provide advocacy and coordination to ensure that planning authorities are properly resourced to deliver quality outcomes;
- Represent the collective and majority views of Scottish planning authorities in responding to national consultations, recognising that individual authorities may submit their own individual response;
- Carry out research and survey work with the assistance of Scottish planning authorities;
- Work towards a planning system which is simplified and streamlined, adequately resourced and fit for purpose.

HOPS has an Executive Committee which oversees its activities, supported by four sub-committees (Development Management; Development Planning; Performance & Practice; Energy & Resources).

The main organisations that HOPS works with include, but are not limited to:

- Scottish Government;
- Local authorities;

- Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE);
- Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA);
- Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI)

HOPS has recently been involved with the new Planning Bill through its various Parliamentary processes. HOPS is essentially run as a voluntary organisation, funded by subscriptions from each local authority. The move to provide secretarial support from the Improvement Service and the more recent appointment of a part-time Planning Manager has helped to further re-position HOPS as a leading planning organisation in Scotland.

Planning Officers Society of Wales (POSW)

The Planning Officers Society Wales (POSW) is the representative body for all heads of planning in Wales' 25 local planning authorities (the 22 Unitary Authorities and 3 National Park Authorities). POSW provides a forum for sharing experience and knowledge and working collaboratively across the 25 planning authorities to seek continual improvement of planning services. POSW works closely with the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), RTPI Cymru and Welsh Government.

The Hampshire and Isle of Wight Planning Officer's Group (HIPOG)

The Hampshire and Isle of Wight Planning Officer's Group (HIPOG) has met for several decades and is attended by the Heads of Planning of the 11 Districts/Boroughs, three unitary authorities, two national parks and county councils in the area.

A guest speaker normally attends and there is a standing item on local plan progress and updates – the intention being to share good practice and flag issues. The group was previously more active in areas such as producing joint planning guidance and joint responses to Government consultations, however, this work has tailed off as resources have become squeezed. Currently the group is conducting joint work around infrastructure needs and a potential strategic framework. The group has also recently 'adopted' joint guidance on climate change adaptation.

Kent Planning Officers Group (KPOG)

The Kent Planning Officers Group (KPOG) meets every other month and includes Chief Planning Officers from the county and district local authorities in the area as well as the Ebbsfleet Development Corporation. The Chief Planning Officer from each authority attends meetings subject to availability.

The group addresses strategic planning matters affecting the county. This has recently included a focus on the planning protocol, low emissions strategy and design guidance.

The group works in partnership with a range of organisations, such as Kent County Council, Kent Developers Group and Kent Housing Group.

Surrey Planning Officers Association (SPOA)

The Surrey Planning Officers Association (SPOA) involves the Heads of Planning service from the 11 local planning authorities and one county council in the area and meets every month. It provides an opportunity to share best practice and strengthen working relationships among the LPAs in the region.

Standing items on the agenda include the London Plan, local plans, Heathrow and the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). Approaches to urban design and the Housing Delivery Test have recently been discussed.

SPOA also provides an arena to promote joined up working by engaging with other local authority departments exploring how planning can further support the delivery of multiple council objectives.

Case Study: Plymouth Plan

First published in 2015, the [Plymouth Plan](#)⁹ is an innovative corporate strategy acting as the council's only approved policy framework - an expenditure and investment programme integrated into an overarching strategic plan for the locality. It began with the ambitions to consolidate over 100 plans and internal strategies across the authority into one interactive web-based corporate plan, owned by the City Council and its partners. The plan also won an [RTPI Award for Planning Excellence for Plan Making](#)¹⁰ in 2015.

The plan is an exemplar in harnessing the strategic and corporate influence of planning. The planning department at Plymouth Council took the lead for the entire process. To do so planners needed to build cross party consensus on achieving growth, understanding councillor's ambitions and developing close working relationships with them. Planners also had to earn the respect of other local authorities and public agencies in order to operate together. A shared vision was developed through an extensive community engagement process and working closely with the private sector. This vision delivers corporate objectives and provides clarity for private investment. The Plymouth Plan leads all corporate planning activity in Plymouth, delivering planning outcomes beyond the local plan and Development Management responsibilities. Most decisions taken by the local authority are now taken within a planning context.

Following adoption of the [Plymouth and South West Devon Joint Local Plan](#)¹¹ in March 2019 policies relating to Plymouth are now embedded in the rest of the Plymouth Plan so that all policies (spatial and otherwise) that relate to the city can be viewed in one place.

⁹ Plymouth City Council (2019). The Plymouth Plan. Available from: <https://bit.ly/2lztB1n>

¹⁰ The RTPI Awards for Planning Excellence 2015. Available from: https://www.rtpi.org.uk/media/2595641/rtpi_awards_online_brochure_final.pdf

¹¹ Plymouth City, South Hams District and West Devon Borough Councils (2019). Available from: <https://bit.ly/2KmmsUj>

Case Study: Ceredigion County Council Development Group

In Ceredigion, the Development Group, exemplifies an innovative way of working within local authorities to improve the corporate influence of planning. This internal group was set up to promote economic development and regeneration opportunities whilst better integrating public service delivery. The group focuses on identifying investment priorities that deliver the council's corporate strategy and identify major corporate reviews and projects that are being prepared by service areas. This includes evaluating and monitoring major internally and externally led projects and proposals, addressing infrastructure requirements and reviewing council assets. The group has a multi-disciplinary set of professionals around the table, including elected members.

Significantly the group has the Chief Planning Officer as the lead officer, thereby ensuring planning has an influence at the very earliest stage in the conception of capital projects. With this early input planning is positioned as a discipline that facilitates sustainable development, helping elected members deliver their intended aspirations for the communities they serve.

6. Skills

Effective leadership requires a range of skills. It is essential the next generation of planners develops these skills in order to champion the influence of planning in wider corporate strategies of local authorities. In this research interviewees were asked to identify the skills needed for leadership in planning. Below are some of the particular needs of the built environment professions and other more generalised transferable skills for local authority corporate management positions:

Built environment and local government skills

- Viability assessments
- Management of political interface

General Management Skills

- Advocacy
- Creating a vision
- Creativity and innovation
- Problem solving
- Building business cases
- Communication Skills
- Budget management
- Delegation
- Negotiation
- Project management
- Interdepartmental working
- Presentation skills/ public speaking

With their undervalued input within local authorities, planners are not getting the necessary breadth of experience working with other departments such as transport, education, housing and commercial real estate. This is likely to be true of planning departments without a specific Chief Planning Officer role. This runs the risk of stifling the career growth of talented planners.

“It’s about enabling individuals to rub shoulders, and all the rest of it, with other people outside, and as you said, with champions, or mentors, or whatever so they can see the bigger picture, see how other people see things, how they see them.”

(Retired Chief Planning Officer, England)

Cutting training support can be seen as an easy way to save money during departmental budget cuts. This may be one of the major contributing factors towards reduced mid-career training in local authorities, for example through less mid-career training opportunities such as Masters of Public Administration (MPAs). Participants told us that the pull of the private sector, with better salaries and better structured management training schemes, was a key factor in taking talent outside of public sector work.

Recommendations:

4. RTPI to work with stakeholders and partners to explore and support the provision of mid-career mentoring and management training development opportunities for planners.
5. RTPI to encourage accredited planning schools to facilitate Chief Planners and Senior Leaders to provide visiting lectures on multi-disciplinary skills for planning and career development, and input into practical projects.
6. RTPI to investigate an extended version of the current Chief Planners mentoring scheme for young planners which could be rolled-out offering additional opportunities for early or mid-career shadowing and development.

Case Study: Mid-career case study – Haringey Council

A number of the posts within the Haringey Council Planning Service have been created across grades, to enable the post-holders to progress from officers to senior officer and on to principal officer level.

Haringey also seeks to identify officers who have the ambition to progress to management roles within the Authority. The current Strategic Applications Team Leader in Development Management, Robbie McNaugher, is one such officer. After establishing Robbie’s career ambitions, which he had set out as part of his APC sometime earlier, Haringey gave him a place on the 2015 Future of London Leaders Programme. As part of this he was provided mentoring from a Chief Planning Officer within another LPA and access to a range of development opportunities. Robbie was then progressed through Haringey Academy’s First Line manager development programme, and given people management responsibility. The course included group work across Haringey and a chance to engage with the Senior Leadership Team within the council including the Chief Executive. In 2017 Robbie was promoted to his current Team Leader position, with responsibility for four planners dealing with major planning applications in Haringey.

Haringey currently have a number of other officers progressing through grades, in higher education on day-release and technical staff being up-skilled to take on professional-level work. Historically, Haringey have not found it particularly easy to recruit high quality, talented planners at higher levels, and thus the decision to 'grown-their-own' was an easy decision to make.

Tribute to RTPI Past President and former Chief Planning Officer John Miller

John Stanley Millar CBE BAarch ARIBA FRTPI, President of the RTPI in 1972/73, died at the age of 94 during 2019. This report recognises the valuable contribution that John made to the planning profession and the role of Chief Planning Officer.

John was born in Liverpool and after studying at the University there, he worked for Liverpool City Council and Lancashire County Council before joining Manchester City Council where he made his name as a leading planner of his era. He became the first City Planning Officer in 1964 at the age of 39 and formed a department that was full of talent and ideas.

In 1973 he was appointed as County Planning Officer at Greater Manchester Council, where for the second time he built a new and successful department. In 1982 he retired early to care for his wife who had developed MS, and his young daughter.

A strategic thinker, a believer in public service and a professional with a strong ethical code, John was a man of vision and ideas who led by example. A huge number of planners owe an enormous debt to this inspirational figure – indeed around 25 of a professional staff of 100 at Manchester City Council later became Chief Planning Officers in their own right.

His passing marks the end of an era, but he will be remembered with gratitude and affection by all who had the good fortune to work with him and to know him.



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