

Chief Planning Officers

RTPI Scotland Thinkpiece

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Context

RTPI Scotland has produced a series of thinkpiece papers to stimulate discussion and debate on topics areas which we will feel need further exploration to support Scottish Government to develop and advance proposals to improve the planning system. We welcome comments and views either direct to scotland@rtpi.org.uk or on social media using the hashtag **#rtpithinkpieces**.

This thinkpiece looks at the role of the Chief Planning Officer, focussing on its:

- Roles and responsibilities
- Qualifications
- Skills and experience

Background

The [Planning \(Scotland\) Act 2019](#) introduced a provision where each planning authority in Scotland must have a chief planning officer. The Act stipulates that the role of an authority's chief planning officer is to advise the authority about the carrying out of "the functions conferred on them by virtue of the planning Acts, and any function conferred on them by any other enactment, insofar as the function relates to development."

A planning authority may not appoint a person as their chief planning officer unless satisfied that the person has appropriate qualifications and experience for the role and in deciding what constitutes appropriate qualifications and experience for the role of chief planning officer, a planning authority must have regard to any guidance on the matter issued by the Scottish Ministers.

The provision obliges Scottish Government to issue guidance to planning authorities concerning the role of an authority's chief planning officer. This paper aims to inform discussion on what the role and experience of the Chief Planning Officer should be to inform this.

Context

The appointment of Chief Planning Officers in planning authorities brings an important opportunity to provide a holistic overview of the communities in that area and to support more place-based working. This should ultimately support the ambitions behind the Place Principle, Town Centre First Principle, twenty-minute neighbourhoods and community wealth building.

Planning can be an important contributor to tackling climate change and achieving the net zero carbon targets set by government. Proactive planning and place-leadership will be needed to maximise the opportunities of a green industrial revolution, while helping vulnerable places navigate through a difficult transition. We believe that more proactive, front loaded and coordinated planning is key to supporting this through the following:

- Meeting the land, housing and infrastructure needs of sectors which can deliver emission reductions, environmental gains, and job growth. This will require strategic planning over wide geographical areas, and close engagement with businesses groups, trade unions, skills agencies, infrastructure providers and investors.



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- Identifying and coordinating the upfront infrastructure funding needed to maintain viability in weak housing markets. Public-sector masterplanning, with close involvement from infrastructure providers, can provide confidence for developers and local communities, and ensure that measures taken to stimulate construction are coupled with the investments needed to deliver sustainability and resilience.
- Planning for mixed use communities with accessible local services, digital connectivity, and networks of green and active transport infrastructure. This investment will capture the benefits of more flexible and remote working patterns, reduce pressure on both local and strategic transport networks, freeing up capacity which avoids the need for costly upgrades.
- Regenerating, revitalising and diversifying town centres and high streets. Maintaining a town-centre first approach by taking a holistic, plan-led approach to the integration of high-quality affordable homes, and the repurposing of vacant commercial space for uses which support community resilience and environmental sustainability.

RTPI Scotland had promoted and lobbied for the introduction of Chief Planning Officers in the lead up to and throughout the Planning Bill's process through Parliament. An initial Think Piece paper was published in March 2017 setting out the case.

[RTPI research](#) has shown the wide-ranging benefits of having a chief planner at the top table in local authorities. Planners are the collaborators. They can 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. The training that a planner has is fundamentally about making connections and seeing the bigger picture; these are invaluable skills to add into corporate discussions. The Chief Planning Officer can play a key coordinating role in delivery of the integrated strategies for the economy, infrastructure, and environment as part of a place-based approach.

Proposed Guidance

We believe that the guidance on Chief Planning Officers should cover a range of areas to ensure that the best person is placed within that role so that they can add value to the corporate objectives and aspirations within their organisation. In turn this can help to meet Scottish Government ambitions.

The areas that Scottish Government should provide guidance on are:

- Roles and responsibilities
- Qualifications
- Skills and experience

The decision of which tier or level a Chief Planning Officer should be appointed to will be at the discretion of individual local authorities. However, given the importance of the role, the RTPI anticipates a level of seniority. RTPI Scotland believes that the introduction of Chief Planning Officers would not necessarily lead to the appointment of new staff, nor have financial consequences for local authorities. This is because local authorities would be able to determine that existing officers meet the requirements of the post of Chief Planning Officer and could take up the positions. The Chief Planning Officer may have other responsibilities beyond the planning service.

A key part of this role will be to ensure that planning is at the forefront of local authority planning and investment plans, positioning planning as an enabler and influencer on the corporate priorities on place making, economic development and infrastructure delivery. This will help to ensure that local authorities take planning and place into account when making strategic decisions about investment, asset management, resources, and integrated service delivery, in alignment with the Place Principle.

The guidance should be published as soon as possible and reviewed every 5 years.

Roles and Responsibilities

We believe that the Chief Planning Officer's responsibilities should be:

- Professional adviser to corporate and political governance of the organisation
- Placemaking champion across the organisation
- Head of profession in the organisation
- Senior responsible officer for the organisation's planning service
- Point of contact for key stakeholders of the organisation on planning and place

Each of these are discussed in turn below.

Professional Adviser

The key role of the Chief Planning Officer should be to provide advice to the local authority as a whole on the spatial and place-based implications of decisions and investments in the short, medium, and longer term. In doing this they will need to ensure that the purpose of planning as set out in the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 "to manage the development and use of land in the long-term public interest" is at the heart of approaches to planning made by the organisation.

The Chief Planning Officer should be the professional adviser to the organisation's officer management team and to Councillors or Board Members in National Park Authorities. Given this, there should be an obligation for other key officers to consult with them on key strategic decisions, at an early stage, particularly on ensuring public engagement is both wide and deep. They should work with the local authority's Cabinet, committees, members, the senior executive team, and the wider community to provide a long-term vision, certainty for development and the necessary join-up between investment strategies at local government level.

The scheme of delegation in the planning authority clearly sets out the responsibilities of officer and councillors though all should be aware of advice set out in the [RTPI Practice Advice Note on Probity in Planning](#). Planning authorities should also identify, agree, and publish and outline of the key areas of work where they will be expected to consult the Chief Planning Officer and the triggers points for Chief Planning Officer engagement.

During decision-making on strategic policy and investment the Chief Planning Officer should ensure consideration of:

- how best to create and develop places to support well-being, community wealth and sustainable living patterns aiming to support net zero carbon ambitions
- the short-, medium-, and long-term implications of decisions made and ramifications for communities, public health, sustainability, and support for new development.
- the subsequent infrastructure needs.
- the impact beyond the immediate area.
- the future physical development issues and
- the future service provision issues.

This would be in relation to any matters that may affect, or may come to affect, the development and use of land and/or be matters relating to community planning under [Part 2 of the Community Empowerment \(Scotland\) Act 2015](#).

The Chief Planning Officer should ensure the provision of wide and deep community input and appropriate professional advice into the discharge of a local authority's statutory functions and participation in strategic planning. This should include:

- the development, public engagement on and delivery of any corporate plans.
- the development, public engagement on and delivery of the public bodies' service plans.



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- the development, public engagement on and delivery of local development plans, design codes and supplementary planning documents.
- the development, public engagement on, and delivery of Local Outcome Improvement Plans, Local Place Plans.
- the management and strategic assets under the control of the relevant public bodies including public engagement on their future and
- the management of the public bodies' estates including health, education facilities, childcare, community facilities and roads and transport.

Placemaking Champion

In acting as a placemaking champion for the organisation the Chief Planning Officer should do the following:

- act as the champion of the Place Principle.
- promote and operationalise policy and practice to support the delivery of twenty-minute neighbourhoods.
- promote and operationalise the Town Centre First Principle to support investment in those areas.
- ensure development plans promote the delivery of high quality, sustainable places.
- support local communities to develop Local Place Plans and
- engage in the development and implementation of Local Outcome Improvement Plans to ensure place-based approaches are embedded in their delivery

The Place Principle

The Scottish Government and COSLA have agreed to adopt the [Place Principle](#) to help overcome organisational and sectoral boundaries, to encourage better collaboration and community involvement, and improve the impact of combined energy, resources and investment. The principle was developed by partners in the public and private sectors, the third sector and communities, to help them develop a clear vision for their place.

It promotes a shared understanding of place, and the need to take a more collaborative approach to a place's services and assets to achieve better outcomes for people and communities. The principle encourages and enables local flexibility to respond to issues and circumstances in different places.

This commitment recognises that

“Place is where people, location and resources combine to create a sense of identity and purpose and is at the heart of addressing the needs and realising the full potential of communities. Places are shaped by the way resources, services and assets are directed and used by the people who live in and invest in them

A more joined-up, collaborative, and participative approach to services, land and buildings, across all sectors within a place, enables better outcomes for everyone and increased opportunities for people and communities to shape their own lives.”

The principle requests that:

“all those responsible for providing services and looking after assets in a place need to work and plan together, and with local communities, to improve the lives of people, support inclusive and sustainable economic growth and create more successful places.”

It commits Scottish Government and COSLA to taking:

“a collaborative, place-based approach with a shared purpose to support a clear way forward for all services, assets and investments which will maximise the impact of their combined resources.”

It is recognised that the implementation of the Place Principle will require a more integrated, collaborative, and participative approach to decisions about services, land, and buildings and that this requires organisations to reflect the core of the principle, working and planning together with our partners and local communities to improve the lives of people, support inclusive growth and create more successful places.

In practice this needs to be operationalised at the local level. The Chief Planning Officer should be engaged in the organisation’s decision-making procedures at an early stage to ensure that the Place Principle is taken into consideration. They should also have a role in championing the principle proactively and challenging decisions where required.

Twenty-Minute Neighbourhoods

Twenty-minute neighbourhoods are a Scottish Government priority with the [Programme for Government 2021/22](#) committing to taking forward ambitions for twenty-minute neighbourhoods that create liveable, accessible places, with thriving local economies, where people can meet their daily needs within a 20 minute walk.

The successful operationalisation of twenty-minute neighbourhoods will require the collaborative work across a wide range of stakeholders in the public sector, private sector, third sector and in the communities themselves. Consideration of twenty-minute neighbourhoods needs applied to a range of public-sector decision-making areas such as spatial planning, community planning, asset management, street maintenance, investment, health, and education service provision.

The Chief Planning Officer is the obvious champion for this corporately and for ensuring twenty neighbourhoods can be delivered on the ground.

The Town Centre First Principle

As with the Place Principle, the Scottish Government and COSLA have committed to the [Town Centre First Principle](#). This asks that government, local authorities, the wider public sector, businesses, and communities put the health of town centres at the heart of decision making. It seeks to deliver the best local outcomes, align policies, and target available resources to prioritise town centre sites, encouraging vibrancy, equality, and diversity. The principle is not a duty, and it is not prescriptive. Taking local needs and circumstances into account, it is about:

- adopting an approach to decisions that considers the vibrancy of town centres as a starting point
- ensuring that the health of town centres features in decision-making processes
- open, measured, and transparent decision making that takes account of medium to longer-term impacts on town centres
- recognising that town centre locations are not always suitable and making sure that the reasons for locating elsewhere are transparent and backed by evidence

The Chief Planning Officer should have a role in ensuring that the principle is considered in decision making in their authority area. This will bring a rigour to the process and transparency on its application.

Local Outcome Improvement Plans

There is also an important role for the Chief Planning Officer in being engaged in the development and delivery of community planning activities including Local Outcome Improvement Plans. The Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 outlines how the new purpose of planning relates to achieving the national outcomes (within the meaning of Part 1 of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015).

Head of Profession

The Chief Planning Officer should act as the lead planning professional in the organisation and therefore ensure that they:

- act as Head of Profession for planners in their organisation and influence key planning, place, and architecture decisions
- must take all reasonable steps to maintain their professional competence throughout their career.

As the manager of a planning services the Chief Planning Officer must ensure that they take all reasonable steps to ensure the RTPI members in that service

- are encouraged and supported to maintain their professional competence
- act within the scope of their professional competence in undertaking the professional planning services they are employed or commissioned to do.
- act with honesty and integrity.
- take all reasonable steps to ensure that their private, personal, political, and financial interests do not conflict with their professional duties and disclose any potential conflicts of interest.
- do not disclose or use to the advantage of themselves, their employers or clients, information acquired in confidence in the course of their work.
- do not offer or accept inducements, financial or otherwise, to influence a decision or professional point of view with regards to planning matters.

Senior Responsible Officer for Planning Service

The Chief Planning Officer should be responsible for:

- Management of development management service
- The production and implementation of development plans
- Contributing to any relevant Regional Spatial Strategy
- The management of enforcement services
- Ensuring staff are fully prepared and supported to undertake their jobs

Point of Contact

The Chief Planning Officer should be the key point of contact for:

- Scottish government and key agencies
- The public
- Scrutiny organisations such as Audit Scotland, the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman
- Relationship with councillors
- Relationship with Scottish Government
- Relationship with Office of the Performance Coordinator

Qualifications

The guidance to be published by Scottish Ministers will set out what constitutes the appropriate qualifications and experience for the role of the Chief Planning Officer to discharge their duties effectively.

RTPI Scotland is of the view that the guidance sets out how any Chief Planning Officer needs to be professionally qualified and have a degree or equivalent level qualification in town planning. This will ensure that they have the skills, knowledge, and expertise to advise on the planning implications of policy and investment decisions made by local authorities.

The obvious benchmark for this would be membership of the RTPI, the professional body for planners. This has been an essential criterion for the recently appointed Chief Planner in Scottish Government.

The RTPI's object, incorporated by Royal Charter, is "to advance the science and art of planning (including town and country and spatial planning) for the benefit of the public". The RTPI supports the development of a learned and reflective membership through accreditation of planning education, setting professional and ethical standards, and providing a programme of support for professional development. This is seen in other local government roles such as the Chief Social Services Officer, which must be a qualified social worker, registered with the Scottish Social Services Council. RTPI Membership as a benchmark would mean that CPOs would have adequate qualifications and experience in planning issues, through the Institute's Assessment of Professional Conduct process. This is built upon several key competencies:

- professionalism and the RTPI Code of Conduct
- the spatial planning context
- identifying and analysing issues
- gathering appropriate information
- identifying and evaluating a course of action
- initiating and implementing a course of action/ dissemination and application of knowledge
- the legal framework
- ethical challenges
- the political framework
- the economic context and
- reflection and review.

Any chartered member would also be bound by the RTPI Code of Professional Conduct which sets out standards in terms of:

- competence, honesty, and integrity
- independent professional judgement
- due care and diligence
- equality and respect
- professional behaviour and
- they are committed to producing a Personal Development Plan that shapes the minimum of 50 hours of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) they are required to undertake every two years.

Skills and Experience

RTPI Scotland wishes to see Chief Planning Officer appointment with a sufficient seniority and experience in both the operational and strategic management of planning services.

It is considered that there is a necessity for Scottish Government to outline the expertise that is required for a person to be appointed as a Chief Planner Officer. However, it is not for Scottish Government to set out the skills they *must* have, but rather to outline the skills that they think will be useful in undertaking the role to help authorities in making their appointment.

Experience

It is considered that a Chief Planning Officer should be able to demonstrate experience in:



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- the effective and efficient management of planning services
- developing and maintaining relationships with elected members
- application of continuous improvement
- leadership and management
- the development, promotion and implementation of the corporate policies and initiatives
- developing and maintaining effective and productive working relationships with external stakeholders

Skills

It is envisaged that important skills for Chief Planning Officers on top of their technical and professional skills would be focussed around:

- Skills to enable change including negotiation and conflict management; partnership working; stakeholder relationship management and listening and communication
- Skills to deliver change such as people management; monitoring and evaluation; project planning and management; organisational development and planning and financial management
- Skills to initiate and promote change including strategy formation, leadership, risk taking and enterprise, creative thinking, political awareness, and judgement

The Royal Town Planning Institute is the champion of planning and the planning profession. We work to promote the art and science of planning for the public benefit, have 2,100 members in Scotland and a worldwide membership of 26,000.

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