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Skills in Planning Research Paper: Summary of Findings and Actions

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This research paper was commissioned by **Skills Development Scotland**, the national skills body supporting the people and businesses of Scotland to develop and apply their skills.

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The research was undertaken by **EKOS**. Established in 1993, EKOS is a leading independent consultancy practice specialising in economic and social research. Working across a broad portfolio, we help our clients to deliver economic growth and promote social well-being.

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The research is published by **Partners in Planning** a collaboration that aims to:

- build the capacity we need to deliver quality places that promote wellbeing, sustainable communities and inclusive growth
- pull together the skills, knowledge and behaviours of those working with Scotland's planning system to maximise their contributions to achieving these outcomes
- promote high quality and fit for purpose planning education and lifelong learning to support planning in Scotland

The members of Partners in Planning are:

- Royal Town Planning Institute
- The Improvement Service
- Heads of Planning Scotland
- Scottish Government
- University of Dundee
- Heriot Watt University
- University of Glasgow
- PAS (Planning Aid for Scotland)
- Scottish Planning Consultancy Forum
- COSLA
- Key Agencies Group
- Scottish Young Planners' Network
- Homes for Scotland

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The purpose of planning is to manage the development and use of land in the long term public interest.

Planning (Scotland) Act 2019

Key Findings and Actions

Introduction

This research paper has been prepared on behalf of Skills Development Scotland (SDS) and Partners in Planning (PiP) to review the skills challenges and gaps within the planning sector in Scotland. We have examined numerous sources of evidence (legislation/policy review, baseline and consultation) to identify the scope, nature and drivers of these issues.

Bringing together this evidence and taking on board the insights and reflections of the sector, this paper outlines a wide range of actions for PiP, the RTPi and wider stakeholders/partners to take forward to help address and mitigate these issues.

The Scottish Planning Sector – Key Data and Trends

Workforce and Employment Trends

- in contrast to the important role it plays within the everyday lives of people, communities, businesses, etc the planning sector is relatively small - the workforce consists of around 1,600 employees across Scotland. There has been an estimated decline of -5% since 2014, mainly driven by a decline in local government;
- the public sector has been a key employer and destination for graduates for many years and accounts for 60% - 69% of employment, although the balance now seems to be shifting slightly as the impact of public sector efficiency measures and downward pressure on frontline service budgets takes effect. Central government and the private/third sectors are now playing an increasingly important role as a source of employment;
- the sector is forecast to grow up to 2030 (+11%), which is greater than the overall Scottish economy, however, the absolute numbers are modest, 130 additional planners;
- the workforce is relatively gender balanced, with females making up around 40% of the workforce; and
- the sector/profession faces some significant short to medium term demographic challenges with an ageing workforce coupled with a lack of younger workers and graduates entering the sector.

Local Authority Profiles

- planning departments within the local authorities appear to be experiencing a challenging operating environment, with reducing budgets and headcount, increasing workloads and demographic/succession planning challenges;
- across the sector there is an estimated replacement demand of c. 500 planners over the next 15 years. In addition to the numbers that will need replaced through retirement, the majority of these will likely be senior and more experienced planners. This will potentially create a knowledge gap within the profession as this expertise and experience is lost (this will likely be most acutely felt within the public sector); and
- while employment in the public sector has been falling for a number of years (-22% since 2013/14) it is unlikely that planning departments will experience any further notable workforce decline or contraction without experiencing a significant knock on effect upon service delivery. There is a threshold (in terms of employment/headcount)

below which the sector could not operate and consultation suggests that further budgetary reductions/cuts would have further negative impacts.

Education Skills and Training provision

- looking at the supply side, while there are 23 courses across seven institutions (10 of which are RTPI-accredited) that offer planning related education, the total number of courses has decreased and the majority are postgraduate courses;
- while the number of students enrolling and graduating has shown positive growth (albeit from a small base), the number and proportion of international students has also increased. It is unclear whether this is as a result of decreasing demand from indigenous students, increasing demand from international students, or universities seeking to increase tuition fee income (it is likely a combination of these factors). Over the medium to longer term, a sustained reduction in the number of indigenous students qualifying/graduating could have significant negative impacts within the sector - increased competition to recruit from a shrinking pool of graduate talent; and
- planning graduates are highly employable, and this is an attractive selling point for the sector with nine in ten ending up in employment or further study six months after graduating. In addition to local government, the construction and real estate sectors are common destinations for graduates.

The Planning Sector Post-Covid

The planning sector has not been immune to the impact of Covid-19 and it has created a number of short-term operational challenges (e.g. stalled development, delays in processing applications, public consultations going online, etc). The pandemic has also created some more structural challenges in terms of local governments' future fiscal capacity and international students deferring their studies (potentially jeopardising the commercial viability of some courses).

While the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic will be felt across many aspects of daily life and the economy for a number of years to come, we also need to start looking beyond the immediate challenges and begin discussing and agreeing the strategic role that the planning sector can play in supporting the recovery.

The Advisory Group on Economic Recovery (AGER) are working to develop Scotland's response and identify priorities for intervention/action. The initial report, *Towards a Robust, Resilient Wellbeing Economy for Scotland*¹, was published in June 2020. There are 25 recommendations and we have noted those which we believe the planning sector has the greatest role to play in terms of support, facilitation, and delivery.

An investment-led recovery - The UK and Scottish Governments should commit to securing significant increase in access to capital investment to support the recovery. This should maintain the Scottish Government's commitment to a Mission to raise infrastructure investment and it is imperative that the Scottish National Investment Bank opens this year.

Enterprise and regional economic development - the economic development landscape in Scotland should pivot to a more regionally focused model in order to address the specific new challenges of economic recovery. This model should be tasked to drive delivery of place-based and regional solutions, especially the City-Region Growth Deals.

¹ Towards a Robust, Resilient Wellbeing Economy for Scotland, see [here](#)

Planning and regulation - the Scottish Government, regulatory bodies and local authorities should review their key policy, planning and consenting frameworks, especially for key infrastructure investments such as marine renewables, to accelerate projects.

Digital Infrastructure - the UK and Scottish Governments should mobilise investment in Scotland's digital infrastructure, covering broadband and mobile networks, to build resilience and enhance exports.

Prioritisation and delivery of green investments - the green economic recovery is central to recovery overall. The Scottish Government now needs to establish a priority on delivering transformational change with clear sector plans, where the coincidence of emissions reductions, the development of natural capital and job creation are the strongest.

People, place and community - the Scottish Government should support a renewed focus on place-based initiatives, building on lessons learned from initiatives on Community Wealth-Building. It should also accelerate investment in housing, in particular through the Scottish National Investment Bank.

The Four Capitals - to promote an approach to economic policy that values all of Scotland's assets, the Scottish Government should consider adopting a Four Capitals framework in forming its future economic strategy, and reporting against it.

Consultation Feedback

We completed 20 interviews with PiP Steering Group members and wider stakeholders across national and local government, key agencies, the RTPI, private sector, third sector and the planning schools/universities.

Current Demand

Overall, the "market" for planners is relatively small when compared with other built environment professionals such as architects or surveyors and demand has varied across different sectors (local government, national government/key agencies and the private sector).

As the main employer of planners, within local government the demand for planners is intrinsically linked to budgets which have seen year-on-year decreases. As a result, one of the clear trends is for roles/positions to be mothballed across existing teams.

The scope of demand has remained fairly consistent across all grades/levels with the 'middle tier' (e.g. team leader and senior planners with 10+ years' experience) in higher demand across all sectors (although challenges more pronounced in the public sector). Conversely, within central government, the key agencies and private sector demand has increased.

Future demand

Consultees found it difficult to predict the scope and scale of any future demand - this uncertainty will be amplified due to the Covid-19 pandemic with contraction predicted in the short-medium term.

Externally, demand will be driven by policy/legislation and initiatives such as the City Region/Growth Deals, major infrastructure investment and delivering against housing targets.

It was noted that the statutory requirements/duties of the new Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 will increase the need/demand for resources (financial and staffing). The RTPI has estimated that the potential cost to the public sector to deliver these duties is £12m to £59m over the next 10 years².

Recruitment Challenges

Across local government most consultees identified that they have had issues in terms of the quantity and quality of candidates. Consultees provided recent examples of posts taking six+ months to fill and adopting a “grow your own” approach due to a lack of good quality external candidates.

More specifically, consultees reported widespread challenges with recruiting at the middle management, team leader level (quality and quantity of candidates) - which generally requires both professional expertise and experience of working within a corporate/political environment.

Skills Challenges and Shortages

Some of the main drivers of these observed skills challenges/shortages were considered to be:

- awareness of opportunities - planning does not seem to be part of the taught curriculum to any great extent and not understood or promoted by careers advisers and possibly gets “lost” in the crowd amongst other built environment professions;
- image of the profession - over recent years a “blurring” across the built environment professions has meant that planning does not have its own distinct identity and become the “hidden profession” within the wider built environment. In addition, as the primary employers of planners, local authorities are regarded as increasingly challenging environments to work in due to downward budgetary pressure;
- routes into the profession – recent changes adopted by the RTPI to widen and simplify (accredited education/training) routes into the sector have been well received and there is emerging support for additional work based/vocational training programmes to further broaden the reach;
- linkages with the planning schools – there are limited and variable linkages between the planning schools/universities (as the key suppliers of graduates) and local government (as the key employers of graduates); and
- the introduction of dual accredited courses and the need to ensure that the provision appeals to, and attracts, international students has led to a level of homogenisation and dilution within the curriculum.

Skills Gaps

The sector felt that there were some gaps within the skills base that need addressed and areas identified for further training/continuous learning support included:

- core planning, technical and knowledge skills:
 - principles of good design
 - development finance and viability of proposed developments

² Financial Implications of Implementing the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019, see [here](#).

- how planning “fits” with other services (e.g. Community Planning, economic development) and particularly its role in place-making and contributing to wellbeing (e.g. health, quality of life); and
- employability skills:
 - project management
 - conflict resolution
 - team working
 - operating in a corporate/political environment
 - critical, creative and strategic thinking.

Future Skills Gaps and Training Support Needs

There are three areas (driven by changing legislation and policy) where stakeholders felt further support is likely required to ensure that actors in the sector have the skills and training to help deliver these national priorities, these include:

- implementing the new Planning (Scotland) Act;
- climate change; and
- digital transformation.

Strategic Action Framework

The aim of this Strategic Action Framework is to support PiP (as the lead body) to co-ordinate an effective response amongst key partners and stakeholders to address current (and future) skills gaps and challenges facing the planning sector in Scotland.

Our research has identified two core challenges/issues that require collective and collaborative action.

The Challenges

1. Meeting replacement and expansion demand

Evidence identifies that over the next 10 - 15 years the planning sector will have demand for an additional 680 - 730 entrants into the sector (comprised of 550 - 600 replacement demand and 130 expansion demand).

The research has shown that challenges exist at every stage along the supply pipeline: the image/brand of planning; awareness and understanding of the potential career opportunities (particularly among young people); the availability of university level teaching provision and throughput of indigenous students; increased competition for talent; and diversification of graduate destinations / career choices.

This has led to increased competition for graduates, decreasing graduate retention rates (non-indigenous students leaving Scotland upon completion of their studies), difficulties recruiting for vacant posts (across all grades/levels and specifically within local government) and demographic challenges within the workforce (an ageing workforce due to a lack of new talent entering the sector).

The evidence and data suggests that the sector may struggle in the future to attract and retain a sustainable workforce.

2. Ensuring that the workforce has the skills and experience required to deliver policy priorities

The data shows that many experienced planners will exit the sector over the medium term (e.g. retirement), and with this, a significant amount of experience and understanding of the wider role, relevance and importance of planning as a professional discipline may be lost.

In addition to delivering essential statutory services, planners and the planning sector have an increasingly important role to play in supporting Scottish Government and partners deliver a wide range of evolving place, economic development and sustainable development policy priorities.

Partners need to be proactive in ensuring that those operating in the sector and the next generation of planners have access to appropriate levels of resources and training/development support to respond effectively to current and emerging priorities.

It is therefore vital that partners commit resources to implement collective action so that the planning sector can support the development of a sustainable pipeline of talent to meet the demand of employers, and ensure that the existing workforce has the necessary skills and experience to deliver a sustainable planning service and respond to Scottish Government policy priorities.

Implications of Inaction

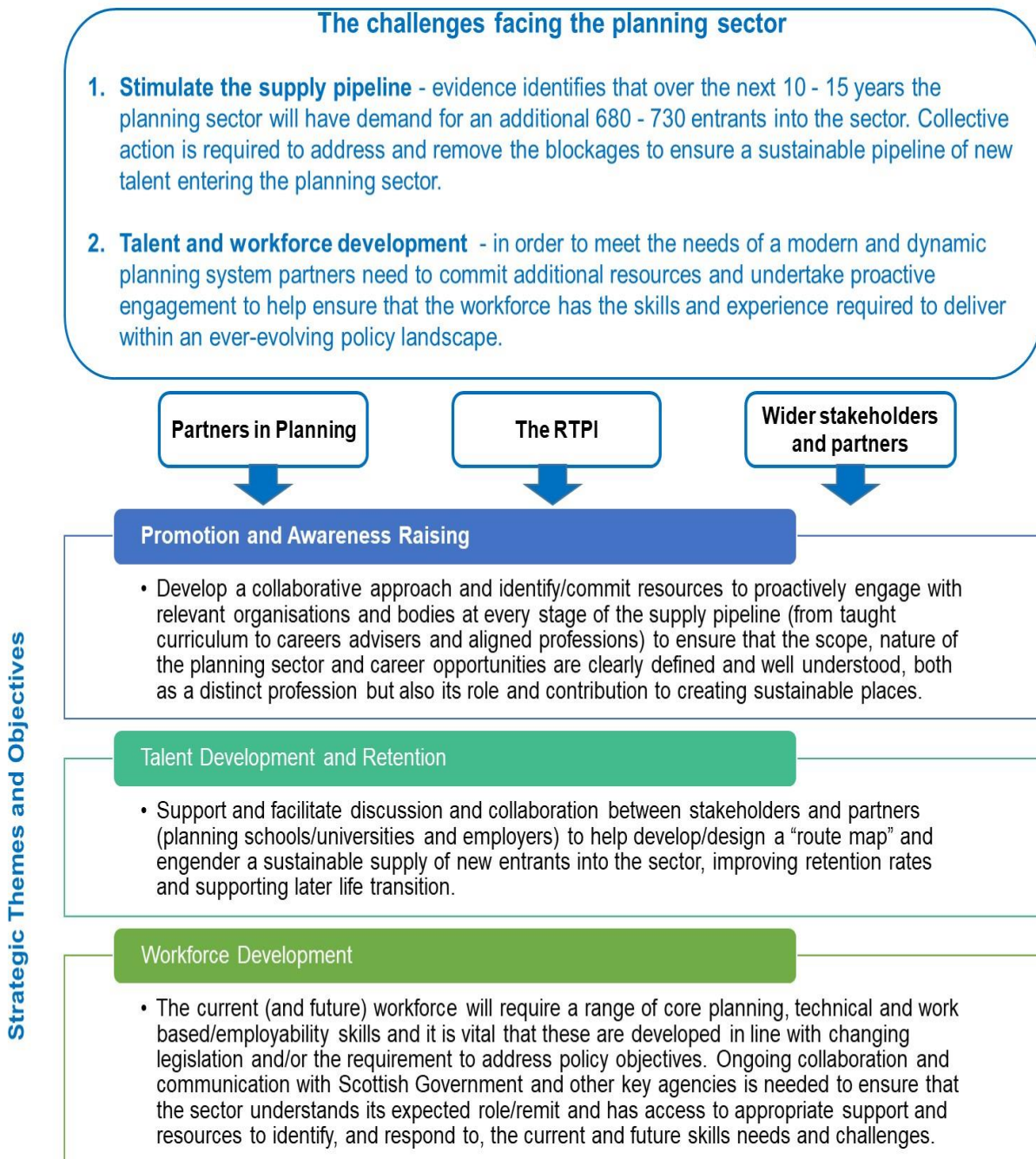
It is worth noting that the challenges facing the sector have intensified over a number of years and are likely to become more acute in the future due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The implications and potential impact of inaction that could arise will be seen/experienced at both the micro and macro level.

Over the short to medium term the impacts will be felt most acutely within the public sector where challenges with recruitment and attracting new entrants could negatively impact service delivery. This is both in terms of struggling to meet their statutory duties (e.g. the Planning (Scotland) Act has identified a number of new duties/responsibilities) but also the impact of reduced resources/capacity on the quality of service provided (e.g. delays in processing applications, reduced income from planning fees and tax base and the potential costs of having to participate and respond to appeals, etc).

The longer term macro level effects of inaction are harder to understand and quantify. However, given the important strategic role of planning (which may become more prominent to help support economic recovery and restructure in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic), failure to address skills challenges and gaps could negatively impact upon the sector's ability to support delivery of a range of national policy priorities. This may include for example, achieving net zero emissions by 2045 and new housing targets (affordable and socially rented accommodation).

Figure 1: Strategic Action Framework



Strategic Theme 1: Promotion and Awareness Raising

Objective: Develop a collaborative approach and identify/commit resources to proactively engage with relevant organisations and bodies at every stage of the supply pipeline (from taught curriculum to careers advisers and aligned professions) to ensure that the scope, nature of the planning sector and career opportunities are clearly defined and well understood, both as a distinct profession but also its role and contribution to creating sustainable places.

Inputs - Strategic Lead and Resources: The promotion and awareness raising actions should be led by the RTPI with support provided by PiP, HOPS and Scottish Government. However, the responsibility for promoting and championing the sector lies with a number of bodies and actors, including careers advisers and schools.

The additional engagement and advocacy activity will require partners to leverage and/or commit additional resources to support these actions.

Priority Action S1 (1): Review and understand the external perception and image/brand of the wider planning sector amongst key stakeholders with a view to developing a promotional campaign/intervention to publicise/advocate a stronger, more compelling and distinct message and narrative for the sector.

Action S1 (2): The planning sector should investigate opportunities to collaborate and work on targeted promotional campaigns with other sectors, groups and firms in aligned professions within the built environment/place.

Action S1 (3): Better utilise existing and established programmes such as the RTPI future planners' initiative to engage further with the curriculum (focus on secondary education) and careers advisers.

Action S1 (4): Continue to engage with the Scottish Government through forums such as PiP and HOPS to ensure planning is part of the national discussion.

Outcome: The “brand”, image and reputation of the planning sector is enhanced/improved amongst a wide range of key actors (individuals, aligned professions, careers advisers and taught curriculum) which helps to stimulate interest in, and support a strong pipeline of new talent.

Strategic Theme 2: Talent Development and Retention

Objective: Support and facilitate discussion and collaboration between stakeholders and partners (planning schools/universities and employers) to help develop/design a “route map” and engender a sustainable supply of new entrants into the sector, improving retention rates and supporting later life transition. The actions under this theme have been designed to address the main drivers of skills shortages and blockages within the supply pipeline.

Inputs - Strategic Lead and Resources: The talent development and retention actions will be led by PiP and the RTPI to review the development of additional work based/vocational training opportunities. The RTPI plans to undertake a review of its education policy in 2021 and it is recommended that these actions could/should be incorporated within this wider review.

HOPS and the planning schools/universities will lead on developing approaches to establishing closer strategic linkages.

Priority Action S2 (1): The planning schools/universities to consider approaches to encourage and attract Scottish students onto (accredited and non-accredited) planning courses in order to help achieve a sustainable balance in terms of indigenous and international students coming through the pipeline. The impact of Covid may present a short term opportunity to attract more indigenous students (e.g. as “replacement” for those international students that defer their studies). This is only a short term solution and going forward the focus needs to be on growing the total numbers coming through the education system in a sustainable way (both indigenous and international students).

Priority Action S2 (2): Consider opportunities to adapt and enhance existing provision to develop a vocational/work based learning programme over the short to medium term as an immediate solution to developing the routes into the sector with a potential longer term aspiration for a new/augmented Apprenticeship scheme to support talent development. Partners should also consider how appropriate the current offering is for “career changers” in aligned professions.

Action S2 (3): Consider opportunities and approaches to strengthen the linkages, relationships and lines of communication between the planning schools/universities (as the key suppliers of graduates) and local government (as the key employers of graduates).

Outcome: Developing new opportunities and opening up the pathways/routes for studying (such as work based learning) will help ensure that the education offering is fit for purpose to support a modern workforce, and through working collaboratively across partners, that there are clearly defined routes and opportunities into employment and training. This will help support the sector meet the replacement and expansion demand for new talent and address the identified skills shortages.

Strategic Theme 3: Workforce Development

Objective: The current (and future) workforce will require a range of core planning, technical and work based/employability skills and it is vital that these are developed in line with changing legislation and/or the requirement to address policy objectives.

Ongoing collaboration and communication with the Scottish Government and other key agencies is needed to ensure that the sector understands its evolving role/remit and has access to appropriate support and resources to identify, and respond to, the current and future skills needs and challenges.

The actions under this theme will target and address the current and emerging skills gaps within the workforce and help to better align the supply side (education/training providers) with the needs of the demand side (employers).

Inputs - Strategic Lead and Resources: Scottish Government has a key role to play in informing the future support/training needs, with actions taken forward by a wide range of partners (possibly through development of a new skills/training needs advisory group) and the support of advisory bodies (e.g. Zero Waste Scotland). PiP are best placed to lead on this strategic objective, however, we would highlight that the organisation is comprised of members that participate on a voluntary basis, and delivery of this objective will likely require commitment of funding/resources to help support (sustained) ongoing engagement between partners to undertake the “horizon scanning” work.

The succession planning activity will be led by individual authorities and Regional Partnerships with support from HOPS.

Priority Action S3 (1): Establish a Scotland-wide advisory group that specifically looks at the training and skills development needs of the sector and helps to develop/inform the planning school/university curriculum.

Action S3 (2): Prepare a formal “ask” of the Scottish Government to provide greater guidance and clarity on the expected/required role of the planning sector to support delivery of emerging priorities:

- **Action S3 (2a):** Addressing the climate emergency;
- **Action S3 (2b):** Digital transformation and improving service delivery;
- **Action S3 (2c):** Supporting inclusion and community wellbeing; and
- **Action S3 (2d):** Planning (Scotland) Act 2019.

Action S3 (3): Succession planning - local authorities (working collaboratively if appropriate) should develop workforce planning strategies and undertake internal reviews/audits that identify the scale of replacement (and expansion) demand, and the necessary competencies and employee development needs to ensure continuity of service.

Action S3 (4): Planning authorities should look into collaborative approaches to address short term or specialist skills challenges and gaps such as developing and procuring a pool of shared and/or specialist planning resources on a shared service model or other basis.

Outcome: The planning workforce has the technical and thematic skills and experience to support the delivery of a wide range of place, economic development and sustainable development policy priorities.