

East of England Chief Executives Forum

Report on the Recruitment & Retention of planners in the East of England

Summary

This report provides an update on the project to improve the recruitment and retention of planners in the East of England. It includes key recommendations to take the project forward.

A project team from the National LGA and East of England LGA, sponsored by the Chief Executive of St Albans City & District Council, have been working with councils and other stake holders to identify and understand the issues that councils are facing.

To date the project has been delivered in three phases:

1. Phase 1 – Identifying the challenge – this initial phase included an in depth survey of all councils in the East of England. The survey report has been published to stakeholders.
2. Phase 2 – Understanding the problems – this phase of the project took place through interviews with councils and stakeholders
3. Phase 3 – Developing solutions – a stakeholder event was held to seek consider existing solutions and input in developing the solutions to remaining issues and to take these forward.

From the survey, which had a response rate of 79%, it was clear that the East of England was significantly lacking the capacity and skills to deliver the region's growth agenda. The key issues were

- Lack of capacity** – At the time of the survey there were 114 vacancies across the region
- An ageing workforce** – The sector is not recruiting enough new planners / graduates
- High turnover and retention issues** – Survey respondents and event delegates cited a lack of development and career progression opportunities within their authorities. In addition the higher salaries on offer from the private sector are drawing planners away from local government
- Lack of experienced senior planners** – There is a lack of planners coming into the sector and a lack of funding to pay for learning & development
- Quality of recruitment** – Process and candidate reach - many applicants are put off by the lack of flexibility in local government recruitment processes and job role and design.

Through phase 2 and 3 of the project it was evident that councils and their partners were delivering some innovative initiatives to try and resolve the local issues they faced. However, it became clear that these were done in isolation and could have a negative impact on neighbouring councils. It was also evident that although the issues are very live in the East of England it is a cross-regional challenge which is particularly acute across London and the wider South East.

There is an urgent need to work across regional boundaries and the project team recommend the following:

1. **For James Blake, Project Sponsor to write to all CEXs in the region advising them of the event and the proposed actions.**
2. **To establish a regional stakeholder group drawn from the planning event with clear accountability and governance, reporting into the East of England Chief Executives Forum. This group will take forward the regional actions detailed in the report and support sub regional / county and individual actions through peer learning.**

3. **That the group, with the support of the National LGA and East of England LGA develop a regional action plan that reports regularly to the East of England Chief Executives Forum.**
4. **That the group investigate establishing a Place Agency* for the East of England in conjunction with the wider work for London and the South East.**
5. **Establish a Memorandum of Understanding through the regional stakeholder group that sets out the commitment of councils in the region to work together.**
6. **The group explore a collaboration across the wider south east to tackle the broader issues across the three most widely affected regions.**

*The Place Agency is a proposal for a 'Teach First for Planning' to put talented planners, architects and urbanists on frontline placements in local authorities. The Place Agency offers local authorities hand-picked, highly motivated and specially trained placemaking practitioners for flexible placements at affordable rates, cross-subsidised through private sector sponsorship. It will boost public sector planning capacity; support collaborative planning and distribution of resources across authorities; and develop a new generation of placemaking professionals committed to working with communities to create better places.

Underpinning all the recommendations is the need for commitment from councils and other stakeholders to explore solutions, pool resources and share learning.

Background

Recruitment and retention of planners and other professional roles such as accountants, lawyers and engineers in the East of England is an issue that has been brought to the attention of both the National LGA and the EELGA when in discussion with member authorities.

The specific problem is having an adverse effect on many council's ability to deliver key services. With the on-going challenge to budgets, the growth agenda and an increase in demand for these services there is an urgent need to improve the situation.

Initial research has identified that there are a number of contributing factors to this problem, such as the current competitive job market with many private sector organisations recruiting experienced planners/professionals. This is exacerbated by proximity to London, where similar roles command a much higher salary and benefits. In addition, the local government workforce generally is aging but again this is more prevalent in planning and professional roles. The increase in demand due to the upturn in development applications is causing further pressure.

It is also recognised that this is not only a problem for the East of England or indeed a new one. Those regions that surround London, in particular the South East face similar challenges and actions have been taken in the past to address. In 2005 a similar project in the East of England identified similar problems. In 2006 a report published by the then Employers Organisation for local government (now the LGA) sought to identify the problems and recommended action be taken. Using funding from the then Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) solutions were put in place to help increase the supply of qualified planners in the region as well as promote the profession in schools, colleges and universities.

In the current climate and given the financial pressures councils face, there is a need to fully understand the problem faced, to learn from the previous work, current solutions and for new and more innovative and efficient solutions to tackle the challenges.

Phase 1 – Identifying the challenge

Identifying the challenge – this initial phase included an in depth survey of all councils in the East of England

A survey was sent out to all councils in the East of England regarding the recruitment and retention of planners with a 79% response rate. This demonstrated that it was a significant issue to most councils and revealed that in October 2015 there were 114 planning vacancies across the East of England. Key survey findings included;

- There is a real focus on the East of England Growth Agenda – devolution, housing targets, regeneration and economic growth etc
- Demand for services is increasing and due to the current state of play there is concern re service performance, loss income, missed opportunities and challenges from developers
- Workforce reduction – in planning but also in councils generally.
- Loss of experienced staff (demographics/retirements)
- Investment in long term training reduced – which may be a possible contributor to low morale
- High demand for staff “brain drain from some parts of EoE” to SE and London or the private sector all of which offer higher salaries

Phase 2 – Understanding the problems – this phase of the project took place through interviews with councils and stakeholders

Following the survey, interviews took place with key council groups and stakeholders. This allowed for the issues raised through the survey to be discussed at a more in depth level and provided clarity around some of the struggles councils were facing. It also highlighted some examples of good practice and potential solutions that could be shared across the region. The conversations with stakeholders demonstrated the buy in and support that there is from professional bodies, further education colleges and universities across the region. To build on this support and maintain momentum a stakeholder event was arranged with the aiming of coming together to agree actions proposed some solutions.

Phase 3 – Developing solutions – a stakeholder event was held to seek input in developing the solutions to take forward.

The 53 delegates that attended the event were a mixture of Planning and HR professionals from councils across the East of England plus other stakeholders e.g. Universities, Colleges and professional bodies.

The event was chaired by the project sponsor James Blake, Chief Executive of St Albans City & District Council with the breakout sessions facilitated by Martin Hutchins from the Planning Advisory Service.

The aim of the event was to check understanding of the current issues, share existing solutions and help to facilitate some further solutions for the region where problems remain unresolved.

Actions to be taken forward

Discussion and feedback from the event indicated that delegates were keen for a stake holder group to be set up to take forward and oversee actions suggested at the event. The stakeholder group was to include representatives of;

- Planning officers
- HR officers
- PAS
- RTPI
- Further Education Colleges
- Universities

- EELGA
- LGA

One role of the group would be to look at what can be done in the short, medium and long term at all levels. It was agreed that the key to changing the status quo was to work together and share solutions rather than to compete with each other / work in isolation. Pivotal to setting up the group is finding additional resource and capacity to deliver any of the proposed solutions.

It was suggested that actions would be split into those that could be taken by;

- Individual councils
- County or sub- regional groups
- The Region as a whole
- Multi-regional/National collaboration

The table below gives a sense of the indicative areas for action which will be developed further through the action plan drawn up by the stakeholder group.

Key Issue	Individual Councils Actions (where appropriate)
Lack of capacity	Work collaboratively with other councils to recruit shared posts or specialist positions.
	Planners/HR to see if the technicians within their councils want if they want to be trained / Look into internal recruitment or secondments
	Working with HR to redesign work roles/allocation of work e.g. Flexible working
High turnover and Retention issues	Planners to talk to their HR teams re CPD training and what support can be offered.
	Planners to think about how they can sell themselves internally and externally in a more targeted way
	Work with HR colleagues to consider offering career progression roles to attract and retain staff.
Ageing workforce / High turnover and Retention issues	Work with HR to look at pay & reward / salary sacrifice schemes
	Work with HR to consider Flexible working/retirement
Ageing work force	Develop more formal relationships with Universities and Colleges to ensure that there are appropriate courses available for incoming talent into the sector
	Work with HR to ensure that there is Talent pipeline development via apprenticeships, grow your own another schemes
Quality of recruitment	Have conversations with HR about flexibility in recruitment. Explore different ways of recruitment to attract those that might have been turned off by traditional local gov recruitment.

	<p>Make use of recruitment websites – advertising jobs for free. Link to be shared</p> <p>Consider work experience/apprenticeship routes into planning. How can we work together on this. Suffolk Councils example.</p>
Key Issues	County / Sub regional Actions
Ageing workforce and lack of capacity	Explore more around apprenticeships as above– Suffolk example
	Promote planning as a profession - via PLOTR, Careers day (Suffolk example)
	Speak to RTPI and colleges about increasing joining up and creating options to attract people into the profession.
	Consider sharing specialist posts or services between councils
Retention & High turnover	Share L&D CPD opportunities so as to maximise the range of courses available

Key Issues	Regional actions
All	Set up a regional co-ordinating group to oversee and implement an action plan.
Ageing workforce / lack of experienced planners	Explore setting up an Place Agency for the EE (This includes wider south East) See attached document
Lack of capacity / ageing workforce	Create a career pathway from work experience, through apprenticeships, technical qualifications.
	Graduate apprentice scheme for the region.
	Work with universities and RTPI to lobby for a Graduate conversion course to planning in a year
	Explore flexible working/retirement to retain expertise in the sector whilst attracting new talent in.
Ageing workforce / lack of capacity / retention & high turnover	A recruitment MoU for planning (similar to social care) to include review of pay and benchmarking of pay data to help retention
	Consider setting up a Planning academy similar to social work
	Set up a Planning CPD group (as EM) to ensure that there is continuous learning and development.

Attraction of new recruits / increase retention & mitigate high turnover	Regional recruitment campaign focussed on Pathways to planning roles to include a new way to recruit planners in councils (includes working with schools, tackle recruitment process issues and promote Place Agency and Graduate apprentice scheme)
Retention & high turnover	Development programmes to support progression into senior planners / Head of service for existing talent.
Lack of capacity	Engage Elected members
Increase in demand	Explore increased customer “self-serve”/ channel shift/ technology enabled solutions

Resources

The work of the stakeholder group is to implement the suggested solutions and actions to address the issues of recruitment and retention of planners. This will be challenging to deliver without commitment from councils, stakeholders and additional resources. For the situation to change there is a need for commitment, pooling of resources and sharing resources across the region.

To help take this forward the LGA Workforce team and EELGA can provide some support to the stakeholder group and to developing the solutions that need to be implemented.

Recommendations

The aim of the event was to test the findings of the initial survey which highlighted the problems councils were currently facing re recruiting and retaining planning staff. The discussion at the workshop in Cambridge demonstrated that these issues were still high on the agenda for many delegates and they welcomed the work that the LGA and EELGA were doing to take this forward.

The recommendations that the East of England Chief Executives Forum are ask to approve are;

1. **That James Blake, Project Sponsor write to all CEXs in the region advising them of the project and the proposed actions.**
2. **To establish a regional stakeholder group with clear accountability and governance, reporting into the East of England Chief Executives Forum that will take forward the regional actions detailed in the report and support sub regional / county and individual actions through peer learning.**
3. **That the group, with the support of the National LGA and East of England LGA develop a regional action plan that reports regularly to the East of England Chief Executives Forum.**
4. **That the group investigate establishing a Place Agency for the East of England in conjunction with the wider work for London and the South East; and**
5. **That the group establish a MOU that sets out the commitment of councils in the region to work together.**
6. **The group explore a collaboration across the wider south east to tackle the broader issues across the three most widely affected regions.**