

Growing your own planners

As more of the current workforce moves to retirement and there is competition for new recruits, how can we 'prepare the ground' for the next generation of planners? asks Andrew Close

The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) is the professional body for town planning in the UK and the largest institute for planners in Europe. We've kick-started work on new pathways into the planning profession to diversify and improve access and address the pipeline through two new activities: bursaries and apprenticeships.

We know investment in on-the-job training and degree education through day-release part-time postgraduate degrees has worked well in the past. There has been a recent uptake in this model: growing – or converting – new planners from other disciplines or careers.

The RTPI's Board of Trustees therefore went on the front foot and started a bursary fund to help universities 'sow the seeds' for choosing planning as a career. Now in its third year, the bursary has attracted undergraduates from architecture and geography but also from publishing, history and even zoology! The reach of the scheme is reliant on contributions from the sector, so if you're interested in CSR and sponsorship please contact careers@rtpi.org.uk

The issue of capacity was not lost on the recent Communities and Local Government Select Committee on the homebuilding industry in listening to oral evidence given by the RTPI's head of policy. The Committee recommended that authorities "must show a commitment to this planning and ensure there are incentives and support in place for employees that are seeking further training and formal planning qualifications, such as those facilitated by the RTPI." The Housing White Paper recently discussed options to "boost LPA capacity to deliver" and "address skills shortages" and these issues are not new. Demand and supply of planners often fluctuates with development cycles and spending rounds.

So how can the planning industry 'plant more perennials' and increase numbers of planners? We know that planners working in private consultancy are concerned about knock-on impact on infrastructure delivery and want to work together with the public sector to ensure a strong planning system. There are indications of difficulties in attracting, or retaining, staff in both sectors. Our research in North West England showed that two thirds of councils are worried about meeting statutory duties and rely on goodwill of professional staff.

So as well as bursaries, we're coordinating activity on a new scheme combining on-the-job training with degree education. The intention is to support employers paying the new apprenticeship levy to use those funds to attract talented young people into town planning. The first step was securing recognition from government for a Chartered Town Planner degree apprenticeship in March 2017.

A degree apprenticeship for planning should mean school leavers and some graduates can earn a wage while being sponsored to complete a RTPI-accredited degree without paying large



student fees. Employers and universities offering RTPI-accredited planning courses should be able to start to train the first apprentices from September 2018. Our existing education routes to professional membership of the RTPI will continue.

We are being guided by an employer group and supported by a wider consultative group of other employers, universities and training providers. Reflecting the various ground conditions across the planning 'landscape', the project is co-chaired by planners from both the public and private sectors. Working together is important "at a time when recruitment in the planning industry is extremely challenging this provides a fantastic opportunity to develop and support local people wanting to work in planning" (co-chair Philip Ridley, Head of Planning & Coastal Management at Suffolk Coastal and Waveney District Councils). Apprenticeships could open up "a healthy pipeline of town planners to help deliver jobs, growth and homes." (co-chair Richard Lemon, Director of Planning at CBRE).

So what are the next steps for 'cultivation'? We're tasked with developing the learning outcomes, knowledge and skills and an end-point assessment with professional recognition through the RTPI APC process.

The next twelve months will be a busy and key period for the programme to gain the necessary government approvals. The RTPI has so far been contacted by over 160 employers expressing interest in employing apprentices. Registrations on the RTPI's current technician apprenticeship course for 16-19 year olds have also doubled this year. So the investment 'fertiliser' and support is looking strong for later in 2018 once the scheme is up and running! n

Andrew is responsible for Institute-wide education policy and accreditation procedures, student advice and support including the new RTPI Bursary project, member's lifelong learning and CPD monitoring and standards, and the RTPI Future Planners volunteer initiative to promote planning as a career choice to young people.



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