

# Are you properly qualified for the job?



The RTPI has urged local councils to ensure that their heads of planning sit at a senior level, but if you really want to get ahead in a London borough you will need to be a money person says Andy Rogers

At last year's Planning Convention, the RTPI presented a paper bemoaning the lack of Chief Planners in local authorities, where once the head of a planning department would have been a fully-qualified architect or town planner with a senior position in the hierarchy. The RTPI's research found that across the country only 23 per cent of the local authorities surveyed had a head of planning reporting directly to the chief executive, while 9% had no top-level individual responsible for planning at all. So what is the current position in the London boroughs?

First, it is worth noting that senior appointments seem to change constantly, with promotions and/or retirements moving people around as the structures of executive posts are varied and reimagined. This sometimes makes continuity difficult to achieve and, as the planning world has noted with recent shifts of government planning and housing ministers, leads to a lack of long-term experience. It also means that many department heads are described as "acting" or "interim".

As I argued in an article published last year in the *Architects' Journal*, anybody working with development control over many years will know that the best planning department is always one that has a good and experienced leader at its head. And while historically Chief Architects and Planners knew that local planning works much better for housing provision than national policy and is focused on place-making in preference to revenue-raising, today local authority Chief Executives and those running planning departments are very often qualified as accountants, having experience not of planning but in finance, albeit with an emphasis on regeneration.

I have listed a few of the positions notified on London borough websites and in the Planning and Environment Reference Guide found at the end of this august publication, which is ever-changing. For example Alice Lester, noted as the Head of Planning, Transport and Licensing in **Brent Council** and of course a qualified town planner, has already (as readers of *The Planner* magazine will know) been moved to Regeneration, Growth and Employment; while the listed Director of Planning at the City of Westminster is a telephone number,

not a person\*. Also I understand that Richmond and Wandsworth have amalgamated many of their services, which possibly makes the definitive responsibility for planning unclear.

**Ealing Council** has a Director of Regeneration & Planning - also listed as (Interim) Director for the Environment, Housing and Regeneration - whose qualification is "BA(Hons) in French and Hispanic Studies" and a Chief Executive with key experience as head of policy at the Audit Commission. Paul Najsarek, their Chief Executive, is apparently a financier.

**Enfield Council** has a Head of Planning Policy, an Assistant Director of Planning, Highways and Transportation, a Head of Development Management, a Planning Decisions Manager and a Transport Planning person, at least two of which are qualified Town Planners (not sure about the others). The qualifications of their Chief Executive are not clear.

The Director of Regeneration, Enterprise and Skills at **Greenwich** is Pippa Hack, who has a degree from the London School of Economics and Political science, with Assistant Director of Planning Victoria Geoghegan, who qualified in geography and planning at Birmingham. Their Acting Chief Executive is an accountant.

The Head of Planning Regeneration at **Hammersmith and Fulham** is listed as John Finlayson, but he is now (since July 2018) Head of Development Management at the GLA: the website apparently has no named planners in executive posts, but Ieuan Bellis (Team Leader Growth and Place - qualifications unknown) may have taken over from John. The qualifications of Hammersmith and Fulham's Chief Executive are not known.

The Chief Executive of **Haringey Council** is qualified in Economics, International Politics and Modern History. Lyn Garner is listed as Strategic Director of Regeneration, Planning & Development, but she left in January 2018 to go to the **London Legacy Development Corporation**. Dan Hawthorn, apparently with a degree in Philosophy and Psychology, is now Director of Housing, Regeneration and Planning.

**Hounslow Council** has a Chief Executive with

degrees/diplomas in Biology, Physical Geography, Town Planning and Public Administration, while the Strategic Director of **Housing, Planning and Communities** is qualified in Urban and Regional Economics and Planning and their Head of Development Management has an Environmental Planning MA. Is this the exception that proves the rule?

Lesley Seary is listed as Chief Executive of **Islington Council**, but she stepped down in April - no replacement at the time of writing. Karen Sullivan (surely a qualified planner and *Building Design* contributor) is Service Director of Planning and Development and Ashwin Prabhu (no information) is listed as Team Leader for Planning and Projects.

The Chief Executive of **Southwark Council** is Eleanor Kelly, a qualified accountant. Also listed are Deborah Collins, Strategic Director for Environment & Social Regeneration (formerly at HMRC), and Ian Smith, Director of Environment & Leisure, but they both left the Council at the end of 2018: Caroline Bruce will soon replace them but does not have responsibility for planning and there is no indication on the Council website of who does...

It is often extremely difficult to pin down the actual qualifications of those in charge of planning in London: many of those listed have comprehensive Linked-In or similar profiles and are clear about their experience and education. But a very significant number do not. I guess the message from my (albeit cursory) research is this: if you really want to get ahead in a London borough, forget about a planning or design qualification - you will need to be an accountant or financier. ■

\* But try *Barbara Brownlee*, Executive Director of *Growth, Planning and Housing*?

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