

Note: This case study is extracted from the Good Development Management report, published in June 2019 on the [PAS website](#).

London Borough Southwark Council – Graduate Scheme

Summary  	
Wanted to...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversify skills across the service • Drive up efficiency and balance out skills and experience
Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expanded the number of staff at junior grades • New staff now rotate and must demonstrate competencies in each team before moving on • Senior staff given new responsibilities for mentoring and training
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruitment - attracting new staff - 140 applications for the 10 annual graduate places • Retention - most graduates have been promoted to planner • Active partnerships with several university planning schools • Training benefits all staff, not just new starters • Increased attractiveness of roles • Senior staff free to focus on work appropriate to their level of experience • More capacity for improving the service and innovation
Learning / risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operational and practical implications of getting a large group of new starters up and running on the same day • Ensuring that recruits understand the need to be flexible and prepared to work across different parts of the service • Senior managers need to be seen to be 'championing change' and listening to and helping staff through initial issues and 'bedding in'

Introduction

The London Borough of Southwark undertook a range of actions focused on expanding the number of officers dealing with planning applications. This included officers in the planning policy team taking on planning applications. One of the most significant changes introduced was the new graduate scheme.

What they did

Prior to introducing the graduate scheme, the Council only had five graduate planners and described the team as having a top-heavy structure. Graduates typically start in development management or another team doing fairly basic work. An assessment also found that many senior planner resources were focused on administrative tasks, as there weren't enough junior staff to delegate to.

As well as shifting the balance of experience, the authority also wanted to attract staff from a wider range of different backgrounds - bringing a greater diversity of opinion, experience and dynamism into the authority. The shift of balance of experience across the department has also allowed the service to reduce costs.

Following the graduate appointments, a team leader was given responsibility for running the scheme. Graduates on the scheme either carry out a range of work across the whole planning department or rotate through different teams, typically taking in at least three or four different aspects of the planning service. Either route gives exposure to work across the service.

The graduate scheme is underpinned and supported by a regular schedule of performance management meetings

and a dedicated training programme. The latter is centered on enabling applicants to complete the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) Assessment of Professional Competence (APC). Monthly training sessions also help develop professional knowledge, are led by a mix of planning service and external planners and include topics such as design (how to 'read a road'), flood risk (role of the flood risk register) and legal updates from a leading chamber.

Getting eight new graduates up and running at once has its challenges. Some need additional support on the basics of office work and administration, and it needs the understanding and cooperation of existing staff. It is also important to be clear at the recruitment stage about what the programme entails. Recruits need to understand that they will move teams periodically and will be working across different parts of the service, so they need to be prepared to be flexible and embrace the change and challenges.

An initial concern amongst existing staff, was that the new balance of experience in the team may lead to the quality of the service dropping. Senior Managers are aware of this perceived risk and are actively committed to making it work, by supporting and involving team leaders in feeding back how the scheme is working and identifying improvements in their service areas.



Southwark Council Offices. Photo © Stephen Craven (cc-by-sa/2.0)

Results and Learning

Initial teething issues aside, the scheme is popular, with 140 applications for the 10 annual graduate places. This has been boosted by active partnerships with several university planning schools including Sheffield University, University College London and Westminster University. Recent joiners to the scheme are given the time to visit recruitment events to present their perspectives.

As with any graduate scheme, some planners do leave as part of natural staff 'churn', but most have stayed at the authority. Promotion from graduate to planner roles is performance based and not automatic. After approximately 18 months of joining the scheme and having completed rotations across the

department, most graduates have been promoted to planner.

The results for existing team members have been similarly positive. A by-product of the scheme has been an expanded range of training available to existing staff and the opportunity to train and mentor graduates. Initial scepticism has given way to a more positive feeling, now that the scheme is shown to work and make the service more efficient. Team leaders and senior planners are now free to focus on work appropriate to their level of experience. They have more capacity to get involved in improving the service. The capacity to innovate at this level has led to new ideas and better communication, including the Council's ambitious 'tech in planning' focus which includes a new online portal launching this year.