

**POLICY RECOMMENDATION**

# **Institutional Capacity**

**Policy Recommendations for Embedding Built-Environment Skills in Local Government. Public Practice**

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**Public Practice cohort of built environment professionals. *Public Practice***

The paper sets out policy pathways for embedding planning, design and urbanism skills within municipal teams to strengthen long-term institutional capability. By advancing multidisciplinary capacity, cross-boundary collaboration and locally tailored workforce reform, it directly supports the CSCC's mission to enable coordinated, climate-resilient and inclusive housing delivery across the Commonwealth.

## Executive Summary

Cities across the Commonwealth face growing pressures to deliver housing, climate resilience and inclusive growth, yet many municipal governments lack the in-house skills needed to translate ambition into delivery. This paper recommends a strategic, place-based approach to strengthening local government capability by embedding planning, design and urbanism expertise within municipal teams. Drawing on lessons from the UK, including Public Practice's experience, it sets out scalable and transferable approaches centred on skills gap analysis, locally tailored interventions, multidisciplinary working and cross-boundary collaboration. Implemented effectively, these approaches can rebuild institutional capacity and improve long-term urban outcomes.

## Policy Problem

Cities across the Commonwealth are experiencing rapid urbanisation alongside intensifying climate, housing and infrastructure pressures. Municipal governments are increasingly expected to deliver compact, climate-resilient, well-designed places that support economic growth and social equity. However, many local authorities lack the in-house professional capacity to respond effectively to these demands.

In particular, there are persistent shortages of planning, urban design, architectural and place-based skills within municipal teams. Where expertise does exist, it can be fragmented, overstretched or disconnected from decision-making and delivery. This limits municipalities' ability to translate strategic ambitions into high-quality outcomes on the ground, engage communities meaningfully, and coordinate action across sectors and scales. Current approaches to capacity building are often short-term, project-based or externally driven and have struggled to deliver the high-quality long-term outcomes required.

## Objective

To strengthen local government capacity in the built environment by embedding planning, design, and urbanism skills within municipal teams, enabling cities to deliver high-quality, sustainable, and inclusive urban development. The recommendation seeks to create scalable, transferable approaches for workforce development, knowledge sharing, and collaborative delivery, ensuring that municipalities are equipped to respond effectively to rapid urbanisation and long-term strategic challenges.

## Recommendations

### 1. Recommendation 1 – Map and address skills gaps

Identify gaps in both supply (e.g., availability of architects, planners, and urbanists) and demand (municipal needs), and link workforce pipeline issues to local authority capacity shortfalls. Use this evidence to target capacity-building interventions where they are most needed.

### 2. Recommendation 2 – Localise capacity-building approaches

Design flexible, context-specific programmes that respond to local realities. Some municipalities may require targeted upskilling of existing officers, while others may benefit from immersive placement programmes or externally specialist skills supported teams, tailored to their local governance and resource contexts.

### 3. Recommendation 3 – Adopt a multi-disciplinary approach

Ensure built environment interventions draw on expertise across architecture, planning, urban design, climate, infrastructure, and social development. A holistic, multi-disciplinary approach strengthens decision-making and supports integrated, sustainable outcomes.

### 4. Recommendation 4 – Strengthen cross-boundary collaboration

Facilitate knowledge sharing and joint working across municipalities and regions, enabling lessons learned, best practice, and resources to be shared efficiently. Build networks to support continuous learning and align strategies across neighbouring authorities and central governments.

# Rationale

## Overview and context of Public Practice

Public Practice is a UK-based not-for-profit organisation, founded in 2017 to address the critical shortage of planning and placemaking skills in local government. It focuses on the people, skills and systems the public sector needs to respond to complex place-based challenges, including affordable housing delivery, climate adaptation, regeneration and inclusive growth, recognising that these challenges are not purely technical or financial, but also organisational and workforce-related.

A core component of Public Practice's approach is its key service, the Associate Programme, which helps local authorities strengthen placemaking teams by recruiting mid-career built environment professionals into public sector roles. Associates are placed in roles matched to their skills and experience, and provided with learning and development training, alongside joining a cohort of peers to enable shared learning and support. The programme not only provides critical short-term capacity by transferring diverse skills, but also builds long-term capability by supporting Associates to improve decision-making processes and shape new organisational ways of working.

Since 2017, Public Practice has partnered with a wide range of local authorities across England, each with diverse needs and workforce challenges. By providing additional capacity, it has supported councils in delivering projects in housing, climate action, regeneration, and design quality, while helping built-environment professionals find long-term, impactful careers in the public sector.

Lessons from this work provide transferable insights for strengthening municipal capability across Commonwealth contexts, which build the case for the recommendations set out above.

## 1. Map and address skills gaps

Decades of declining public-sector capacity have left local authorities facing critical shortages in the expertise needed to deliver high-quality, sustainable, and inclusive places. Data collected by Public Practice consistently highlights these gaps in the UK:

- **Recruitment challenges:** Local authorities report difficulty attracting candidates with the right skills, alongside ongoing funding constraints.
- **Skills shortages:** The most significant gaps are in digital and data literacy, design skills (including architecture, urban design, and masterplanning), and sustainability expertise (including ecology, climate adaptation, and landscape architecture).
- **Workforce attrition:** Around 10% of current officers are expected to retire in the near term, further reducing in-house capacity.

Despite a strong supply of graduates from UK architecture, planning, and landscape programmes, public sector roles are perceived as less attractive due to lower salaries, limited professional respect, unclear career pathways, and constrained development opportunities. This misalignment between candidate supply and public sector demand has created a structural gap, limiting municipalities' ability to attract the right skills in-house and often forcing them to rely on expensive external consultants.

In a Commonwealth context, supply (sector experts) vs demand (municipal needs) will differ in terms of the skill sets required and the gap in early and senior-level leadership career opportunities. Starting with the data is therefore critical to assess where an intervention is required.

## Recruitment Challenges

Figure 1: Recruitment plans

Comparing the number of roles to be recruited against the percentage of respondents who stated they need these skills.

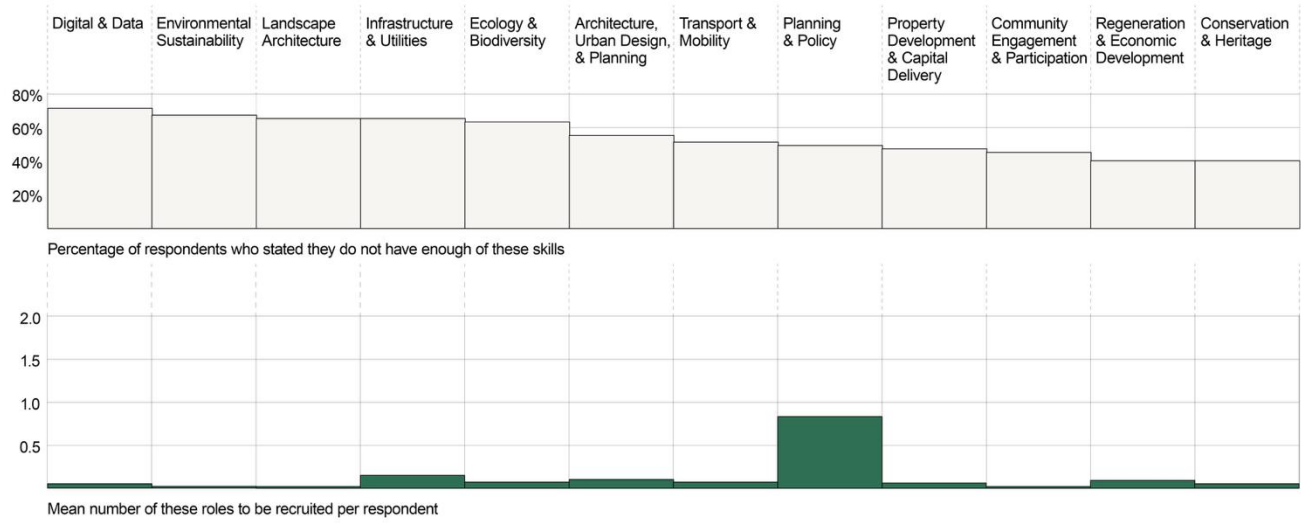


Figure 1: Public Practice Recruitment and Skills Survey 2025

## 2. Localise capacity-building approaches

Effective capacity building requires approaches that respond to local contexts, needs and institutional capacities rather than one-size-fits-all solutions. Different local governments and regions face unique structural, economic, and political constraints, and capability interventions must be tailored accordingly.

Several practice examples from around the world demonstrate how diverse modalities of embedding expertise can strengthen local government capacity:

- **Upskilling existing officers:** In the UK, programmes such as those developed by Future of London or the Planning Advisory Service, focus on building the skills of current municipal officers through structured training and peer learning. These initiatives emphasise internal capability uplift where authorities have foundational skills but need deeper, more specialised expertise.
- **In-house innovation units:** Bloomberg Philanthropies' Innovation Team (i-team) programme supports cities in establishing dedicated multidisciplinary units within city halls. These teams bring skills in data analysis, design thinking, collaboration and project delivery directly into municipal administration, helping city officials tackle complex challenges and embed new practices within existing systems. I-teams have been established in over 80 cities globally, demonstrating how in-house innovation capacity can be sustained and scaled.
- **Skills or leadership networks:** Networks such as the Resilient Cities Network and the Chief Resilience Officer model embed specialised skills roles focused on long-term planning and climate adaptation within municipal structures, driving coordinated approaches across departments and regions. These models show how embedding strategic functions can enable integrated responses to systematic stresses.

These examples illustrate that localisation is not just about *where* interventions are delivered, but about *how* they are designed:

- In some contexts, authorities may need targeted training and professional development to expand what existing teams can do.
- In others, placing dedicated, multidisciplinary teams within government can catalyse new processes, strengthen cross-departmental collaboration, and embed innovation practices.

In a Commonwealth context, programmes must be shaped around skills gaps, local governance norms, resource realities and cultural expectations to ensure relevance and sustainability. It is important to recognise and plan for different modalities, and a blended approach of interventions might allow Commonwealth cities to strengthen their capability in ways that fit their unique institutional and social conditions.

### 3. Adopt a multi-disciplinary approach

Addressing complex, place-based challenges requires more than traditional planning expertise. High-quality, equitable, and sustainable city development depends on teams that integrate urban planners, architects, masterplanners, landscape architects, ecologists, climate specialists, and data analysts, alongside experts in community engagement and governance.

A multi-disciplinary approach enables authorities to:

- **Embed design thinking and place-based solutions** into policy and delivery, which in the UK context relates to 'local plans' or delivering high-density housing
- **Integrate climate adaptation, sustainability, and ecological resilience** into urban development;
- **Break down silos across municipal departments**, ensuring cross-departmental collaboration and more holistic decision-making;
- **Strengthen evidence-based strategic planning** through diverse technical and experiential perspectives.

Public Practice has worked with multiple councils in England to establish and support such multi-disciplinary teams. For example, Public Practice has:

- Helped authorities restructure planning and regeneration teams to include design, sustainability, and engagement roles alongside planners, enabling more holistic masterplanning.
- Has helped authorities bring Associates in-house with different specialisms to work across departments to transfer skills, foster collaboration, and encourage joined-up working.
- Supported councils to develop new ways of working that embed multi-disciplinary decision-making, ensuring that knowledge and expertise are shared across teams rather than confined to individual roles.

This approach recognises that urban development challenges are interconnected: housing, transport, green infrastructure, and climate resilience cannot be effectively addressed solely by planners.

In a Commonwealth context, the urban development challenges will be similar. A multidisciplinary strategy, therefore, equips local authorities with the breadth of expertise needed to deliver integrated, resilient, and innovative outcomes.

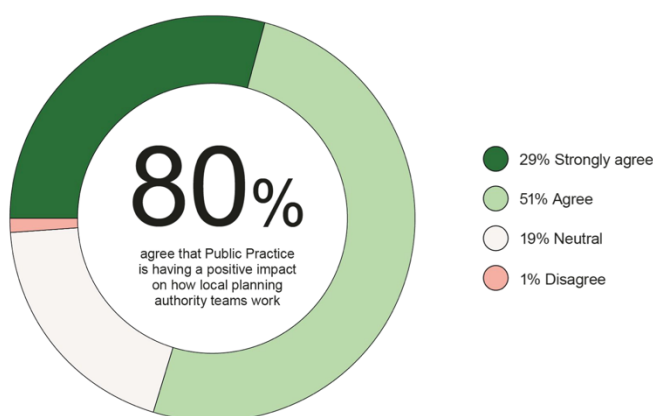
#### 4. Strengthen cross-boundary collaboration

Complex urban challenges rarely respect municipal boundaries. To deliver effective place-based outcomes, local authorities must collaborate across departments, neighbouring authorities, and sectors, sharing lessons, tools, and evidence.

Public Practice's experience demonstrates that peer learning across the cohort is critical to building sustainable local government capability. These networks help authorities:

- Share knowledge and best practice on strategic planning, design standards, and delivery methods.
- Accelerate organisational learning by observing successful interventions in other contexts, reducing duplication of effort.
- Foster mindset and behavioural shifts, encouraging officers to think systemically, collaborate beyond silos, and adopt innovative, adaptive approaches.
- Build confidence and resilience to implement complex, long-term visions even amid resource or policy constraints.

#### Influencing Practice of public sector placemaking and ways of working



“An Urban designer was brought into a live planning case. They were able to challenge assertions being put forward by the Developer. It was down to their own skills and personality that we were able to make meaningful changes to the design of the Developer, giving the design more imagination than it had at first”.

Line Manager

Source: Line Manager anonymous end of programme feedback, 69 respondents from cohorts 3 to 9 inclusive

#### Public Practice 5-year impact report, 2023



Through the programmes, Public Practice combines technical knowledge transfer with the development of relational and adaptive skills, supporting officers to navigate political, social, and organisational dynamics while embedding evidence-based approaches. Practical tools include facilitated peer learning sessions, field trips, structured reflective exercises, and mentoring, enabling knowledge to flow horizontally across teams and vertically through organisational hierarchies.

In the Commonwealth context, there will also be the need to embed cross-boundary collaboration to ensure that new knowledge, insights, and innovations do not remain isolated. This collaborative way of working will need to cascade across local and regional authorities, creating systemic improvement in the planning and delivery of resilient, inclusive, and high-quality places.

## Implementation Considerations

### 1. Test-and-grow approach

Public Practice's experience demonstrates that building sustainable planning and placemaking capacity requires a phased, adaptive "test and grow" approach rather than a single, large-scale intervention. The model began at a small scale, working with the Greater London Authority (City Hall) to embed skilled professionals within specific teams in councils and to develop structured learning and support alongside live projects.

This programme's incremental approach allowed interventions to be tested, refined, and adapted in response to real institutional conditions, political contexts, and capacity constraints. Over time, this created the confidence and evidence base needed to scale more widely, without over-specifying solutions at the outset.

Crucially, this phased scaling highlights the importance of linking local implementation with some degree of central coordination. As an independent not-for-profit, Public Practice has been able to operate flexibly, respond quickly to local authority needs, and provide neutral oversight, helping to bridge gaps between local delivery realities and national policy objectives.

Importantly, replication in other contexts does not require adoption of an identical model. The core principle is adaptability: implementation can be shaped as a local, regional or national mechanism depending on governance structures, market conditions and workforce availability.

### 2. Institutions

Multiple institutions have a role to play in successful implementation:

- **Municipalities** can identify priority challenges, host embedded roles, and integrate new skills into existing teams and ways of working.
- **Regional planning** bodies or combined authorities can support shared models, pooled resources and cross-boundary learning.
- **National governments** can provide policy alignment, funding mechanisms and legitimacy, helping to scale effective approaches.
- **Independent delivery partners** can act as facilitators, coordinators and knowledge brokers: undertaking research, designing programmes, supporting learning, and maintaining consistency while remaining responsive to local needs.
- **Sector partners**, such as professional bodies, can provide credibility, while private sector developers can provide funding and investment in the programme.

In the case of Public Practice, this approach has been undertaken over the last decade:

- Initial set-up and seed-funding from the **Greater London Authority** (City Hall) to test a pilot programme.
- Partnerships with **Homes England** (an arms-length body of central government), enabling experimentation with regional-level pilot programmes.
- Close engagement with **central government (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, MHCLG)**, securing grant funding, ensuring alignment with national reform agendas and supporting wider adoption across local authorities nationally.
- Collaboration with **professional bodies** (e.g. Royal Town Planning Institute, RTPI) and sector partners to strengthen credibility, standards and workforce pathways.

This combination of local ownership and external coordination has been critical to sustaining impact.

### 3. Financing

Costs typically include:

- Salaries for embedded professionals
- Programme design and delivery (training, workshops, peer learning)
- Programme management and evaluation
- Operational costs for the not-for-profit (overheads, salary costs, etc)

As a not-for-profit independent organisation, Public Practice's business model relies on a mix of grant funding, income revenue and sponsorship funding. If an intervention were run from within a government body, operational costs would be streamlined.

### 4. Risks and mitigation

Key risks include:

- Insufficient local buy-in or unclear expectations from municipalities
- Misalignment between local priorities and national policy agendas
- Retention challenges once specialist skills are embedded
- Funding constraints within the public sector context
- Political change buying into the need, solution and programme delivery.

Mitigation strategies include early and ongoing stakeholder engagement, clear articulation of roles and responsibilities, structured onboarding and support, the development of talent pipelines to ensure continuity beyond individual placements, staying politically neutral and not becoming a campaigning body.

## Expected Outcomes

### Short-term outcomes

- Improved access to specialist planning, design, sustainability and data skills within municipal teams
- Clearer workforce plans and role definitions aligned to local place-based priorities
- Increased confidence among officers and decision-makers to engage with complex spatial, climate and community challenges

### Medium- to long-term outcomes

- Stronger multidisciplinary collaboration across planning, housing, transport, climate and regeneration functions
- Reduced reliance on short-term external consultancy for core public-sector functions
- Improved ability to attract, develop and retain built-environment professionals in the public sector
- More resilient local institutions capable of delivering high-quality, inclusive and sustainable places over time
- Stronger alignment between national policy ambitions and local implementation outcomes

## Monitoring and Evaluation

**Monitoring:** Programme impact should be tracked through indicators such as increased local capacity, improved policy or placemaking outcomes, and retention rates of embedded professionals. Reporting can be structured to inform both local authorities and any central oversight body, with regular review points to adapt the approach as needed.

### Key indicators

- Number and diversity of skilled professionals embedded within municipal teams
- Retention rates of professionals following placements or programme completion
- Feedback from line managers on impact, integration and skill transfer
- Participant feedback on learning, confidence and professional development
- Evidence of improved place-based outcomes (e.g. stronger plans, improved design quality, more integrated strategies), captured through qualitative impact stories

**Reporting responsibility:** Monitoring and reporting should be shared between delivery partners and participating authorities, with summaries provided to any central or regional coordinating body.

### Review timeframe:

- Initial review at 6–12 months to assess early impact and integration
- Ongoing annual reviews to adapt programme design, scale effective approaches and respond to changing policy or workforce conditions

## Call to Action

National, regional, and municipal governments are encouraged to take immediate steps to rebuild in-house capability in planning, design, and placemaking. This includes commissioning skills gap assessments, piloting locally appropriate capacity-building interventions, and allocating seed funding to test and scale embedded workforce models.

By acting now, governments can move beyond short-term capacity fixes and invest in the institutional capability required to deliver high-quality, climate-resilient and inclusive cities over the long term.

**This Policy Recommendation was written by Ms Pooja Agrawal, Chief Executive Officer, Public Practice, by way of contribution to the work of the Commonwealth Sustainable Cities Coalition, March 2026.**



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