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Public Sector Capability & Institutional Systems

Strengthening the public sector's capability to improve everyday places: Public Practice

Public Practice demonstrates how strengthening municipal skills and institutional capacity can improve delivery of climate-resilient and inclusive places. By embedding multidisciplinary built-environment professionals within local authorities and supporting retention through structured development, it offers transferable lessons for Commonwealth cities seeking to build long-term public sector capability for sustainable urbanisation.



Public Practice Associates Programme. *Public Practice*

1. Executive Summary

Local governments are increasingly expected to deliver well-designed, climate-resilient and inclusive places, yet many lack the in-house professional capacity to respond effectively. In the UK, persistent skills shortages, constrained recruitment processes and high workforce attrition have left planning and placemaking teams under-resourced at a critical moment.

Public Practice focuses on the people, skills and systems the public sector needs to respond to these complex place-based challenges. Operating as a not-for-profit since 2017, it works with local authorities to recruit and retain skilled built environment professionals, diversify public sector teams, and improve professional practice. Its approach combines targeted recruitment through the Associate Programme¹ and Jobs Board, ongoing learning and peer support, in-depth research into workforce challenges, and advocacy to improve perceptions of public sector careers.

This case study demonstrates that addressing public sector skills shortages requires more than filling vacancies: it requires embedding multidisciplinary expertise within teams, supporting practitioners to succeed, and reshaping how public service careers are valued. Investing in long-term capability, rather than short-term capacity, can strengthen municipal institutions and offer transferable lessons for Commonwealth cities seeking to build resilient public sector teams to support sustainable urbanisation.

¹ Associate Programme: <https://www.publicpractice.org.uk/calendar/associate-programme>

2. Context and Challenge

Planning and placemaking teams in the UK are under-resourced, struggle to attract talent and find it difficult to retain skilled professionals. Poor perceptions of public sector careers, unclear recruitment pathways and limited development opportunities compound these pressures at a time when councils are expected to enhance performance.

The Public Practice Recruitment and Skills Survey 2025² identifies persistent workforce challenges:

- **Finding the right people:** 68% of officers report difficulty attracting and recruiting professionals with the right skills.
- **Recruitment constraints:** Over 55% of authorities have no recruitment budget; more than a third of roles take over four months to fill, and one in ten recruitment attempts fails entirely.
- **Skills shortages and misalignment:** The most significant gaps are in digital and data literacy, design skills (including architecture, urban design and masterplanning), and sustainability expertise (including ecology and landscape architecture). Recruitment activity is often misaligned with these priorities, further entrenching gaps.
- **Workforce attrition:** Around 10% of current officers are expected to retire in the near term, while 28% plan to move to another public sector organisation, and a further 10% intend to leave the public sector altogether.

These challenges are not unique to the UK. Across the Commonwealth, rapid urbanisation and intensifying climate, housing and infrastructure pressures are placing similar demands on municipal governments. As CAA research highlights, in many countries, there is a shortage of built environment professionals; in the UK, skills are more often concentrated in the private sector. Despite different origins, the result is similar: insufficient in-house capacity to deliver well-designed, climate-resilient and inclusive places. This case study demonstrates one approach to addressing that gap.

² Public Practice Recruitment and Skills Survey 2025: <https://www.publicpractice.org.uk/reports/recruitment-skills-report-2025>

3. Approach or Experience

Public Practice was founded in 2017 as a not-for-profit organisation to address the critical shortage of planning and placemaking skills in local government. It grew out of the Greater London Authority, supported by partners across the public, private and third sectors. Since 2022, it has received £1.8m in national government funding to expand its impact across England.

Public Practice 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. Its Theory of Change is structured around three areas: Recruit People, Influence Practice and Celebrate Sector.

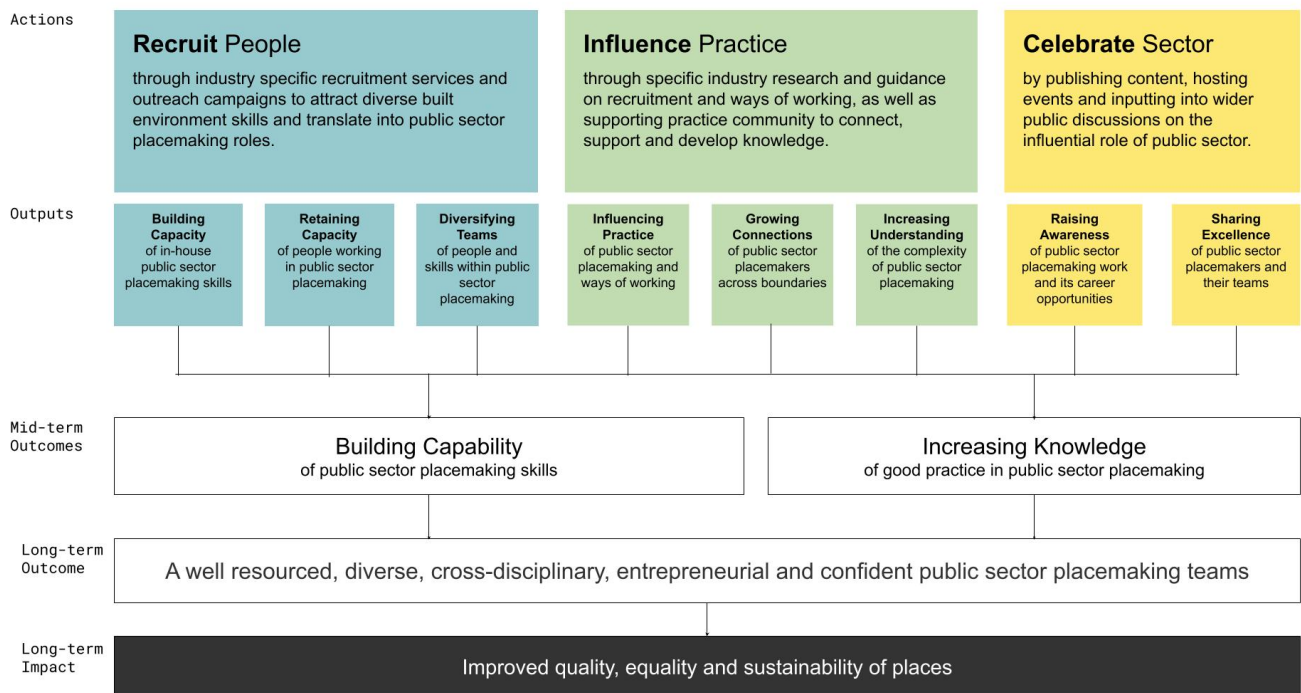


Figure 1, Public Practice's Theory of Change

Recruit People

Public Practice's flagship Associate Programme strengthens placemaking teams by recruiting mid-career built environment professionals into public sector roles. Rather than addressing short-term capacity gaps alone, the programme builds long-term capability. Each placement combines:

- A public sector role matched to the Associate's skills and experience
- A tailored learning and development programme to support the transition into public service
- A peer cohort that enables shared learning, support and professional networkssector altogether.

Associates are employed directly by host authorities for a minimum of 12 months (although some are hired on longer fixed-term contracts or permanent ones, the requirement to work with Public Practice is a minimum of 12 months), embedding new skills and diverse perspectives within teams. At the end of their placement, the authority employer often works with the Associate to extend their roles, or make them permanent.

Influence Practice

Alongside recruitment, Public Practice builds insight into workforce and skills challenges through research, including surveys and officer roundtables. It convenes officers through events and peer networks that promote place-based learning and design-led thinking, strengthening professional connections and embedding improved processes in everyday practice.

Celebrate Sector

Public Practice works to improve perceptions of public sector careers and highlight the value of placemaking work already underway. Through advocacy and storytelling — including its magazine Public Notice — it showcases practitioners' impact, challenges misconceptions about public service and helps attract new talent into local government.

4. Insights and Lessons

To date, Public Practice has filled 400 roles and worked with over 100 local authorities across England. More than 3,000 built environment professionals have applied to the programme, with 92% coming from outside the public sector.

Targeting candidates beyond traditional public sector pipelines has enabled Public Practice to attract expertise from private practice, consultancy, academia and related fields. Taking a broad view of “placemaking skills” has been critical: for example, candidates with backgrounds in architecture or urban design are placed into planning roles, helping authorities build more multidisciplinary teams.

Mini Case Study: Associate Impact in Practice

Associates have helped local authorities embed in-house design capacity, improving both design quality and team confidence in day-to-day decision-making. In Derby³, an Urban Design Planner introduced collaborative design tools and visual approaches that transformed internal discussions around scale, massing and public realm quality, enabling colleagues to articulate design considerations more clearly.

In North Hertfordshire⁴, an Associate reframed the masterplan approval process, led weekly design surgeries and helped guide six strategic sites through Full Council endorsement, strengthening confidence and long-term quality frameworks. In Canterbury⁵ and St Helens⁶, Associates steered major housing proposals toward improved layouts and landscape quality while fostering stronger cross-team collaboration. Across authorities, Associates have strengthened internal capability and supported better placemaking decisions earlier in the process.

However, attracting talent alone is insufficient to deliver lasting change. Public Practice combines recruitment with structured support, learning and peer networks that help Associates become effective quickly and remain in the public sector over time. As a result, 74% of Associates are still working in the public sector two or more years after completing the programme. Retention is critical to building resilient teams: Public Practice’s 2025 survey found that 48% of officers plan to retire, move organisations or leave the public sector altogether, creating significant workforce instability. By strengthening confidence, support and professional culture, the programme helps retain talent while enabling Associates to act as confident change-makers within their authorities.

While constraints such as limited budgets and institutional inertia remain, Public Practice demonstrates that targeted recruitment combined with ongoing development and sector-wide learning can strengthen public sector placemaking capability in a sustained and scalable way. Learnings that can be transferred to alternative international contexts experiencing similar skills shortages.

³ Derby: <https://www.publicpractice.org.uk/impact-story/derby-urban-design-planner-impact-story>

⁴ North Hertfordshire: <https://www.publicpractice.org.uk/impact-story/derby-urban-design-planner-impact-story>

⁵ Canterbury: <https://www.publicpractice.org.uk/impact-story/canterbury-urban-design-officer-impact-story>

⁶ St Helens: <https://www.publicpractice.org.uk/impact-story/canterbury-urban-design-officer-impact-story>

5. Key Takeaways

- **Skills and systems:** Public sector placemaking challenges can be improved by focusing on filling skills gaps and improving systems.
- **Widening the pool:** Broadening definitions of “placemaking expertise” helps unlock new talent pools and build multidisciplinary teams.
- **Retention:** Recruitment alone is insufficient; structured support and peer networks are critical for retention and long-term impact.
- **Long-term capability:** Embedding professionals within local authorities and providing the right support builds institutional capability, with the potential to reduce reliance on short-term solutions.
- **Research and data:** Research and practitioner insight help support workforce planning with real, skills needs data.
- **Challenging perceptions:** Changing perceptions of public sector careers is essential to sustaining future capacity, rather than just focusing on raising awareness.

This Case Study was prepared by Pooja Agrawal, Chief Executive of Public Practice, by way of contribution to the work of the CSCC Housing Action Group, March 2026.



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