
Implementing Plans for Transport and the Built Environment: Addressing the Short Term Skills Gap in Local Authorities

This briefing sheet describes a short study for the County Surveyors Society (CSS). The study's aim was twofold – to identify the nature and extent of skills problems facing local authorities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in delivering strategies for improved transport and to draw out possible measures for addressing these problems.

Background

In its 1998 Transport White Paper, the UK Government set out a new policy framework for the delivery of a better transport system. A major role was identified for local authorities, to whom prime responsibility was delegated for implementing many of the measures and new initiatives proposed. As part of its £180bn Ten Year Plan to deliver on its policies, Government has also made substantial new funding available to local authorities.

A significant change of emphasis and scale in transport delivery, a different policy agenda, new legislation and devolution of responsibility for delivery have placed substantial requirements and expectations on local authorities. From this has arisen a major concern, namely that *local authorities may not be adequately resourced in terms of staffing levels and skills to deliver.*

This concern over staffing levels and skills is something echoed across the transport profession. For example, the Transport Planning Skills Initiative (TPSI - established by the Transport Planning Society – www.tps.org.uk) has been assessing specific concerns for transport planning across public and private sector employers and looking at training and education initiatives to begin addressing the problems. The CSS study differs from the TPSI in two key respects – firstly it is focused only on *local authorities* and secondly it is concerned with the skills shortage facing *transport delivery* which includes a number of functions, only one of which is transport planning.

Methodology

The principal approach for the study was a survey among CSS member authorities, complemented by a review of related initiatives and issues. A questionnaire was despatched by email to 88

member authorities in January 2003. Non-responding authorities were subsequently followed up by telephone, leading to further questionnaires being completed. These were complemented by short telephone interviews in some cases. Overall 41% of member authorities returned a completed questionnaire, and a further 16% provided information by telephone in a short structured interview, giving a total return of 57%.

Key Findings

Across the transport delivery functions in local authorities, transport policy and planning accounts for about 9% of staffing; highways management and maintenance accounts for well over half. Nearly one in every twelve local authority posts associated with transport delivery is vacant. Staff shortages in transport policy and planning are significant but vacancies among highways staff exceed the total of vacancies in all other functions.

Across functions it is felt that, since the introduction of Local Transport Plans (or equivalent), the number of vacancies has increased alongside problems of staff retention. There is widespread agreement that the expansion in the scale and breadth of activities required for delivery of local transport has increased significantly the need for transferable skills; these are generally needed by staff in technical areas as well as those in transport planning and management. Demands for both technical and transferable skills are heightened by the growing number of small but sometimes complex and even controversial local schemes that require careful design and management to deliver.

These shortages have had a significant impact on the ability of CSS member authorities to deliver transport schemes. The causes are complex but essentially reflect pressures to meet deadlines, so that 'silo working' becomes more common, reducing teamworking and the strategic thinking that current policies call for.

A further consequence of the skills shortage is evidence of some overall decline in staff morale. This too reflects increased pressures on existing staff from a larger programme, and also questions over personal worth; this is frequently linked to

perceptions of individual salary levels. Further, local authority employment has a poor image compared to the variety of work offered by consultancies in the same field; and consultancies usually pay higher salaries.

All geographical areas face problems but high income areas (e.g. South East, Avon, West Midlands and North West) have serious problems as do remote rural areas (e.g. Devon and Cornwall).

Many local authorities have a higher proportion of older staff and therefore face a potentially significant loss of staff over the coming years, and most of these, whatever their status, will have considerable experience which cannot easily be replaced.

A range of initiatives across local authorities to address problems of staff recruitment and retention is evident:

- A third of authorities are reviewing their advertising of vacancies both to address the issue of poor local authorities' image and to target prospective candidates more effectively.
- A quarter of authorities make use of consultancies to fill significant vacancies. While these can offer real benefits in a good partnership, concern exists that employing consultants to address the short term problem could further strengthen their ability to offer attractive and well-paid jobs, thus adding to the longer term staffing and skills problems for local authorities. Additionally, many private sector agencies supporting local authorities are identified as themselves having significant problems of skills shortage. Concern is also expressed that consultants' work can vary in quality. In-house staff time is still required for effective monitoring.
- A quarter of authorities also make use of agency staff, usually as a stopgap measure, but in general agency staff tend to offer lower quality and commitment and do not add to the permanent skills pool.
- Most authorities recognise the importance of training and about half of them have identified specific initiatives to improve training and continuing professional development for staff.
- Some authorities are investigating or pursuing payment of market supplements in various forms in relation to both new and existing staff. However, there is some concern that use of supplementary payments in certain cases can cause a general loss of morale among other staff.

Some of these initiatives have provided a useful measure of success at the local level, and they justify further development across local transport authorities. However, as even the successful authorities recognise, such initiatives on their own fall far short of solving the very serious problems which local transport authorities face in recruiting

and retaining enough skilled staff to carry out their transport delivery responsibilities.

Authorities stress that, in spite of the welcome increase in funding for transport delivery, this has created a demand for more staff resources and hence much higher staff costs - something that Government has not addressed. The poor or non-existent image of the transport profession is seen as a major constraint on gaining new staff and the Government's "wavering commitment to transport" is considered to be reducing confidence in the profession and hence reducing potential interest in entry. There is a general view that the real benefits of careers in transport should be promoted on a national basis, especially among young people, on similar lines to the campaigns to bring people into nursing and teaching.

The study reveals overall that the skills problems facing local authorities are serious and immediate. Effective delivery of integrated transport is being significantly compromised.

A number of recommendations emerge from the study including:

- establishment of a local authorities' forum to coordinate good practice in relation to staff recruitment, development and retention;
- presentation of a strong case to central Government for real changes in the regulatory, planning and funding regimes within which local authorities undertake their transport responsibilities; and
- establishment throughout local authorities of a comprehensive system of career development, perhaps in partnership with other bodies involved in transport delivery, as well as academic and professional bodies.

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Final report available from the CTS website.

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