

Constructing Building Integrity: Raising Standards Through Professionalism

Industry Factsheet: Town Planners

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Overview

This fact sheet summarises the integrity system framework for town planners. In Australia, the work of planners is governed by legislative and policy frameworks set by State and Territory governments. While town planners must adhere to these statutory requirements, there are currently no profession-specific Acts, Regulations or statutory codes relating to their professional conduct. Planning is not a registered profession, membership of the Planning Association of Australia (PIA) is not compulsory, and many planners working in the public and private sectors are not members of PIA. As a result, statutory oversight of the ethical and professional standards of town planners remains relatively limited.

PIA and its state divisions are primarily responsible for setting, monitoring and promoting professional standards for member town planners. PIA has a robust governance framework (policies, strategic plans and advocacy platforms), a detailed code of conduct, and stringent professional accreditation processes in place for becoming a registered planner. As a rapidly growing profession, town planners face a range of challenges about the most effective pathways for future professional development, as outlined in the PIA 'State of the Profession' report (PIA 2023b).

The fact sheet will outline the goals, values, and professional standards of town planners before summarising the various ethical challenges that the profession faces in Australia. It should be read in parallel with the final industry report [Constructing Building Integrity: Raising Standards Through Professionalism](#), which describes the full scope of this work, methods used and recommendations, as well as the supplementary resource document that outlines the integrity system maps (high-level and detailed) for town planners.

Goals and values of peak professional bodies

The peak professional organisation for town planners is the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA). The *PIA2031 Strategic Plan* outlines that the association's mission is to 'inspire planners and elevate their role in shaping Australia's future [by] **championing the value of planners, leading the profession, strong advocacy and contemporary education**'. (PIA 2021, p.3)

PIA's professional identity is framed around five core values:

- Planning is fundamental to the creation of communities which embody and exemplify fairness, equity and access
- High-quality design is crucial to creating successful and livable neighbourhoods, towns, regions and cities
- Planners are indispensable to balancing the current and future needs of our built and natural environments
- PIA is apolitical, but at every opportunity will lobby all spheres of government to 'do their part' to support great planning
- Planners' expertise should be recognised and respected (PIA 2021).

In addition to advocating for its members and acting in the public interest, PIA places a strong emphasis on developing **more efficient, ecologically sustainable, socially equitable and publicly accountable planning frameworks** to address some of the key challenges that Australian towns, cities and regions will face in the coming decades, including **population growth, housing affordability, and climate change** (PIA, n.d).

The town planners interviewed for this research also placed significant importance on public interest considerations and the impact that their work has on communities and environmental sustainability:

'the triple bottom line approach has always been a good ethical balance. If you are economically making a fortune out of it and socially and sustainably it's terrible, it's skewed the wrong way'.

- Interviewee 2

However, they were largely ambivalent about the role that formal statements of professional values (such as codes of conduct) play in their day-to-day ethical decision-making as town planning professionals:

'if I was to guess what they were, they're probably things that are somewhat instinctive anyway'.

- Interviewee 1

Integrity system analysis - town planners

As outlined above, the integrity system for town planners that shapes the profession's identity has various strengths and weaknesses. This section outlines the integrity enablers that promote high ethical and professional standards, and the various ethical tensions that can negatively impact town planners in various aspects of their work.

Integrity enablers

Education & training: Qualification standards include a tertiary degree (bachelor and/or post-graduate), which is typically required by most employers of town planners. Registered planners are also required to have at least five years of professional experience and demonstrate an additional set of professional competencies.



Strong professional associations: In the absence of statutory professional codes for town planners, PIA plays an important regulatory role in setting ethical and professional standards, accrediting degrees, providing training, CPD and registration pathways for members, and advocating for their members.



Detailed code of conduct: The PIA Code of Professional Conduct (CoPC) is detailed and covers 17 ethical values and professional standards that were identified in the research. It also has guidance notes that outline further expected ethical behaviours and professional standards.



Statutory planning frameworks: The planning industry in Australia is highly regulated. Planners in the public and private sectors work within legislative and policy frameworks set by State and Territory governments, with more detailed plans, policies and regulations developed and applied by local governments and other authorities. In addition to state-based Planning and Local Government Acts and Regulations, there are statutory planning authorities in all examined jurisdictions (QLD, NSW, VIC and WA) that monitor the application of planning legislation.



Ethical tensions

Minimal regulation of professional standards: While planning is highly regulated in Australia, there are no Acts, Regulations or statutory codes of conduct that are specific to town planners.



Status of the profession: Interviewees noted that voluntary regulation and low public awareness can create ambiguities over the professional standing of town planners.



Registration requirements: While Registered Planner is the highest grade of PIA membership that is available (after detailed assessment) to planners with at least 5 years' experience, only two States (SA and NSW) require it of planners performing certain functions.



Collaboration challenges: While planners often coordinate the involvement of various cognate professionals, this is rarely a statutory obligation.



Integrating profitability, quality and ethics: The interviewees stated that statutory planning frameworks were not always effective in meeting 'triple-bottom-line objectives' by prioritising economic interests over environmental and social factors. However, while statutory plans do not typically regulate design and construction details, they can influence the viability of developments and hence the quality of outcomes.



Key findings

The research (desktop reviews of academic and ‘grey’ literature, interviews, and integrity system mapping) found that while the planning profession is highly regulated and PIA plays a central role in setting ethical and professional standards for planners, the **lack of regulatory oversight** of professional standards, **voluntary accreditation** and registration, **limited visibility** of the profession and various **systemic pressures** creates ethical challenges that impact professionalism and reduce public trust.

Key ethical risks and challenges that were identified in the desk research and interviews include:

- an **overall shortage of planners** is leading to increasing workloads and time pressures that can work against professional standards
while planners are not responsible for developing detailed design and construction standards, they can be **perceived negatively as part of the wider set of built environment professionals** responsible for poor outcomes
- the implementation of planning policies is not always perceived as achieving an appropriate balance between **economic, social and environmental considerations**, which can call into question the professional values of planners.
- **public and community understanding of planning is typically limited** and can lead to criticism of the professional standards and principles of planners (Watson, 2013)
- resistance of some planning professionals to integrating **technology/AI** into their work due to concerns over its impact on professional practice (PIA, 2024).

Interviewees noted that these ethical challenges can arise in various organisational settings, including the public sector (government, local councils), multi-profession companies, and private firms.

Interviewee 3 stated that while organisations were doing their best to promote high ethical and professional standards by ‘*doing a values refresh and encouraging people to work together*’, the planning profession needs to do more to call out and address instances of unethical behaviour and professional misconduct. Interviewee 2 also emphasised that improving standards in organisations requires enhanced

monitoring, compliance, and quality assurance mechanisms to improve collaboration and productivity and to increase the success rates of construction projects.

Another theme to emerge from the research is that the planning profession is currently grappling with **how to meet the growing demand for town planners** while dealing with a range of economic (workforce/supply shortage, covid-driven downturns), environmental (climate change, rapid urbanisation) and social (housing crisis) challenges. Since 2006, the planning profession has grown by 82% and there are now at least 13,691 planners in Australia (PIA 2023b). However, the PIA ‘State of the Profession’ report found that despite this increase, there continues to be an undersupply of planners into the profession to meet that demand in Australia. Further consultation found that expanding accreditation pathways, broadening core skills requirements and increasing graduate cohorts may address these shortages while also improving professional standards (PIA 2024).

Interviewees also identified an overall **lack of accountability** as a key barrier to achieving higher professional standards in the industry:

‘unfortunately, people continue to fail to take ownership of issues. The assets guys are pointing to planning and planning are pointing to the assets guys...nobody is actually saying ‘I will take ownership of this and I will see it through’.

- Interviewee 3

Interviewees also highlighted various collaboration challenges for planners, especially during the development phase of a project. They noted that **cross-professional collaboration was often lacking** within their profession and in the construction industry as a whole:

‘people tend to get siloed, and they tend to do it themselves, individually as well as professional cohorts. And then you end up having engineers who will only think about the core engineering things that they believe are important and planners doing the same, and it’s a struggle I think for all of our professions to work in an integrated way’.

- Interviewee 3

Pathways to action

These challenges suggests that in addition to further strengthening education/training and CPD requirements and enhancing PIA's role in self-regulating the profession, more effective regulatory monitoring and oversight is required to address the needs of a rapidly growing industry operating in a complex built and natural environment (see below).

RECOMMENDED PATHWAYS TO ACTION

It is recommended that the following actions (which are derived from the main recommendations that are outlined in the *Final Industry Report* and profession-specific findings) are taken to address the ethical tensions and further strengthen the integrity enablers for town planners:

Education, Training & Accreditation (*Final Industry Report* Rec. 3)

- PIA should continue to develop the accreditation framework for tertiary undergraduate and postgraduate and other courses to better promote the career opportunities of planners and attract more new entrants into the profession at a time when demand for qualified planners is increasing.

Regulatory Framework (*Final Industry Report* Rec. 4)

- PIA continues to explore with all States and Territories the case for becoming a regulated profession and expanding the statutory role and recognition of registered planners.

Professional Associations (*Final Industry Report* Rec. 5)

- Expansion of PIA CoPC Guidance Notes to consider a wider range of ethical and professional challenges and include exemplary case studies on how they might be addressed.
- Development of additional CPD offerings by PIA that explore in greater detail: (a) the practical implications of 'public interest' factors, 'good planning outcomes' and 'ecologically sustainable development/triple bottom line' considerations, (b) how these might create challenges for practising planners in the public and private sectors, and (c) how planners might deal with these ethical/professional challenges.
- Greater promotion by PIA of the CoPC, ethical advice service ('Ethi-Call'), and complaints processes to ensure its members are fully apprised of the ethical challenges they might face as practitioners and how they might deal with them.
- PIA should continue to work with cognate professional bodies to improve the capacity of their members to work effectively and ethically in multi-disciplinary teams.

These suggested pathways to action are aimed at improving the integrity systems for town planners and also complement PIA's overarching goal, as outlined in the 'State of the Profession' report, to address the supply-demand imbalance that will impact the industry in the coming decades (PIA 2023b, p. 111).

FURTHER READING

Planning Institute of Australia (2021) *PIA 2031 Strategic Plan*. <https://www.planning.org.au/documents/item/7743>

Planning Institute of Australia (2023a), *PIA Code of Professional Conduct*.
<https://www.planning.org.au/documents/item/6014>

Planning Institute of Australia (2023b), *Planners in Australia: State of the Profession Report*.
<https://www.planning.org.au/documents/item/12628>

Planning Institute of Australia (n.d.), *Find a PIA Policy or Submission*.
<https://www.planning.org.au/find-a-policy-resource>

Planning Institute of Australia (2024), *Pia Foresight: Anticipating Future Trends Shaping Planning*.
<https://www.planning.org.au/documents/item/12967>

Watson, V. (2013). The ethics of planners and their professional bodies: Response to Flyvbjerg. *Cities*, 32, 167-168.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2013.04.003>

Vigar, G. (2012). Planning and professionalism: Knowledge, judgement and expertise in English planning. *Planning Theory*, 11(4), 361–378.

PROJECT RESEARCH

Additional research arising from the project (including the Final Industry Report) can be found at:
<https://www.griffith.edu.au/law-futures-centre/institute-ethics-law-governance/our-research/construction-building-integrity>

CITATION

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