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Research Officer

**Royal
Geographical
Society**
with IBG

Advancing geography
and geographical learning



Job title: Research Officer

Organisation: Royal Town Planning Institute

Location: London but there are also opportunities with RTPI Cymru, RTPI Ireland, RTPI Northern Ireland and RTPI Scotland

How did you get to where you are now?

At school I always enjoyed subjects which were multidisciplinary, my two favourites being Modern Studies and Geography. I loved the way they helped me look at the different components of a topic and critically think about it in different ways. When it came to applying to university, I knew that I wanted to go, but I had a difficult time deciding what to apply for. I decided to take a year out to think about what I really wanted to study and spent a year with the charity Project Trust where I taught English in a secondary school in Malaysia. I loved experiencing and learning from the many cultures and religions within Malaysia and experiencing the diversity of landscapes across the country.

This experience helped me understand that what really drives me is learning how big concepts like capitalism, globalisation, colonialism and climate change shape everyday lives and places differently. This is when I decided to apply for an undergraduate Geography degree at The University of Edinburgh. During the first two years I studied a mix of Human and Physical Geography modules and then specialised in Urban Geography while studying on Erasmus exchange at the University of Amsterdam.

After graduating, I wanted to find a way of bringing together the theoretical knowledge I gained into policy

and practice and found that the MSc in Urban and Regional Planning at Herriot-Watt University was a great way to do this. This one year post graduate degree in town planning developed my ability to think spatially and cross disciplinary working with other students helped me understand how the built environment professions worked together to create places.

After graduating I worked in Glasgow as a planning consultant for a private property company and then moved to London for a job with AECOM in stakeholder and community engagement. At the beginning of 2020, I started my job in the London office of the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) as a Research Officer, focusing on planning and climate change.

What skills and characteristics do you need for this role, apart from geographical knowledge?

Firstly and I would say most importantly is a wide ranging interest in planning and a passion for people centered place-making. It is also important to have an understanding that good planning is key to delivering better places and tackling some of the biggest challenges we are facing today including the climate and ecological emergency.

In terms of skills, excellent written & oral communication skills and the ability to write well & convincingly for a range of audiences, communicating research to non-specialist audiences is key, as is engaging and learning from RTPI members across the UK on a range of topics. Organisational skills are equally important including project management and the ability to be self-motivated and work autonomously.

What you are responsible for, what you might do in a typical week?

Urban planning is a highly topical question these days with media discussion of housing, high speed rail, green belts and the critical role of planning to address the climate and ecological emergency. My current role is therefore very varied which I love. A large part of my role is carrying out research on planning and climate change and I recently published a report '[Place- Based Approaches to Climate Change](#)' which explored how collaborative working between departments in local authorities can mainstream climate action within planning.

Other responsibilities include: conducting research and analysis into different areas of planning and policy such as climate change, climate justice and community engagement; managing and

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commissioning research projects; planning and organising the RTPI Research Awards; disseminating research including to practitioner and policy maker audiences through written briefings, reports and presentations and liaising with RTPI members on specialist areas.

Was there anything particularly useful that helped you get into this role?

My accredited degree in Urban and Regional Planning was a great way to begin a career in planning. An accredited degree is the first step towards becoming a Chartered Town Planner and it is important to consider whether or not the degree you are studying is accredited by the RTPI. A list of accredited universities can be found on the RTPI website [here](#).

There are different routes into the planning profession and university is not the only option. The RTPI has recently launched an apprenticeship scheme where you can work and study at the same time. More information on routes into the planning profession can be found on the RTPI website [here](#).

In addition to my degree, another useful stepping stone to my current role at the RTPI was an internship that I did with RTPI Scotland in their Edinburgh office after I graduated which helped me build a broad knowledge of planning policy and practice.

How does geography feature in your work/ what difference does it make?

An understanding of geography is a formative part of my role and helps me put people and place at the centre of my research and policy work. An understanding of geography helps me put climate justice and place-based solutions at the centre of how I think about climate change.

It also helps me think in the 'whole systems' way which is required; how things like transport, energy, housing, economics, governance and, crucially, individual and social behaviours and attitudes shape how we interact with the places and environments around us and encourage certain behaviours including driving unsustainable emissions.

For some inspiration on how we can use an understanding of geography and planning to shape better places, read our recent report on how to [Plan the World We Need](#).

What advice would you give to someone wanting to go into this career?

Get in touch with different planning consultancies and local planning authorities while at university and find out about internship opportunities. Writing a dissertation can also help give you specialist knowledge in an area so it is a good idea to line this up with possible future career interests if possible. The skills needed to work in the planning profession are also changing and in the coming years my prediction would be there will be a greater need for planners who are carbon literate and have an understanding of climate adaptation and mitigation

measures and who can engage communities in the big decisions that must be made around this. There is also an increasing focus on technology and plan tech and skills in digital and GIS are useful.

Why did you choose geography?

I chose a Geography degree because it gave me the flexibility and creativity to study lots of different topics and ideas and find out where my more specialised interests lay. Crucially, it has helped me understand the changing environment that we live in today and my planning degree has given me the practical skills that I can use to help tackle the challenges that these changes bring.

*** This interview was undertaken in 2021 and was correct at the time of publication. Please note that the featured individual may no longer be in role, but the profile has been kept for career pathway and informational purposes.**