

CAREER BRIEF – URBAN PLANNING



Information current as of May 2026

1. What this role actually is

Urban planning is about shaping how cities, suburbs, towns and regions function. It involves planning land use, housing, transport, infrastructure, public spaces, environmental protection and long-term growth.

Environmental planning overlaps with urban planning where the built environment meets natural systems. This can include climate change adaptation, disaster resilience, coastal management, street trees, public spaces, bushland interfaces, ecosystem impacts and environmental values.

Day-to-day tasks may include:

- assessing development applications
- interpreting planning schemes, zoning and codes
- consulting with councils, developers, communities and other professionals
- preparing reports, plans, policy advice and recommendations
- reviewing environmental or social impacts
- contributing to master plans, transport strategies, housing strategies or major projects

2. Where this role typically works

Urban and environmental planners commonly work in:

- local councils
- state government departments
- planning consultancies
- property development companies
- infrastructure and transport organisations
- environmental consultancies
- universities and research organisations
- large organisations with property portfolios, such as retailers or infrastructure owners

3. What the work involves: real tasks and realities

Planning is not just “approving or rejecting buildings.” It can range from small development assessments to long-term city-shaping projects.

Real work can include:

- checking whether a proposal fits the planning scheme
- assessing height, density, parking, access, stormwater, public realm and environmental impacts
- negotiating with developers or councils before formal applications
- balancing community concerns with housing, infrastructure and growth pressures
- working through slow approvals, compliance layers and competing stakeholder interests
- translating big visions into street-level decisions

Less visible realities:

- a lot of reading, writing and interpretation
- significant bureaucracy, especially in government
- public consultation and stakeholder management
- balancing what is ideal with what is legally, politically and financially possible

- dealing with conflict, especially around development, density, traffic and environmental impacts

4. Skills that matter in practice

Technical skills

- planning law and policy interpretation
- land-use planning
- zoning and development assessment
- GIS and digital mapping
- environmental impact understanding
- urban design awareness
- transport, infrastructure and housing systems knowledge
- report writing and evidence-based analysis

Transferable skills

- communication
- negotiation
- stakeholder engagement
- systems thinking
- analytical thinking
- problem solving
- written clarity
- public presentation
- collaboration with architects, engineers, lawyers, developers and communities

5. Pathways into the role

Typical Australian pathways include:

- Bachelor degree in urban planning, regional planning, town planning, urban and environmental planning or similar
- accredited postgraduate planning qualification for career changers
- related degrees followed by a planning master's, such as geography, environmental science, architecture, property, economics, sociology or built environment fields

Education to employability link: An accredited planning qualification gives employers confidence that graduates have covered core professional knowledge, which can make entry into planning roles more straightforward than relying on a general degree alone.

6. Labour market reality

The labour market appears favourable, but not evenly distributed by location, seniority or specialty. Jobs and Skills Australia lists **18,800 employed Urban and Regional Planners**, with **median weekly earnings of \$2,316** and **81% working full-time hours**. It also lists key industries as Public Administration and Safety, and Professional, Scientific and Technical Services. ([Jobs and Skills Australia](#))

PIA reported that Urban and Regional Planners were added to the Core Skills Occupation List in December 2024, stating this was intended to help address national demand and planner shortages.

Constraints:

- smaller profession, so networks matter
- some regional areas may offer broader experience but fewer local peers
- private sector demand can slow when development slows
- government roles may be stable but bureaucratic
- graduate opportunities depend on location and course pipeline

7. Career progression

Possible progression:

- Graduate Planner
- Development Assessment Planner
- Strategic Planner
- Environmental Planner
- Senior Planner
- Principal Planner
- Planning Manager
- Director / Head of Planning
- Consultant / Specialist Advisor
- Academic, researcher or policy specialist

Possible specialisations:

- transport planning
- social planning
- environmental planning
- climate adaptation
- development assessment
- strategic land-use planning
- master planning
- housing policy
- infrastructure planning
- regional planning
- stakeholder engagement

8. This role may suit you if:

- you are interested in cities, places, communities or the environment
- you like big-picture thinking but can work with rules and detail
- you can balance competing interests
- you communicate clearly
- you enjoy solving practical problems
- you are comfortable with policy, maps, plans and reports
- you want a role with social, environmental and economic impact
- you like working with different professionals and stakeholders
- you want a career with several possible specialisations

9. This role may NOT suit you if:

- you want fast decisions and constant visible results
- you dislike bureaucracy, regulation or compliance
- you do not enjoy writing, reading or interpreting policy
- you struggle with community conflict or competing opinions
- you want a purely creative design role
- you dislike compromise
- you want work that is mostly outdoors or hands-on
- you need every project to have your name visibly attached

10. Sources and reliability

This brief is based on:

- practitioner insights from the podcast transcript with Dr Tony Matthews
- general Australian labour market and career pathway information

- Jobs and Skills Australia occupation profile data
- Australian Bureau of Statistics ANZSCO occupation classification
- Planning Institute of Australia pathway and workforce information

The practitioner insight is valuable because it reflects lived professional experience, but it should not be treated as universal across every planning job, employer or location.

11. Currency statement

Information is current as of May 2026.

12. Next steps for exploration

Useful exploration tasks:

- compare accredited planning degrees and master's programs
- review local council planning job ads
- speak with a development assessment planner and a strategic planner
- attend a Planning Institute of Australia student or young planner event
- look at a local council planning scheme to see the real language of the work
- compare planning with architecture, environmental science, surveying, property and civil engineering

More career exploration resources at [curatedcareers.com.au](https://www.curatedcareers.com.au)