

Planning Peer Review Report

Executive summary

In May 2023, the council invited the Local Government Association (LGA) to conduct a Peer Review of its Planning service. The LGA in turn commissioned the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) to undertake the review. PAS carried out the review as 'critical friends', with the intention of helping to identify areas of improvement to create a more unified and resilient planning service. The final PAS report is attached at Appendix 1.

The Peer Review team made 18 recommendations. These can be grouped in following areas:

1. Service structures
2. Governance arrangements
3. Management, staff and culture
4. Learning and development
5. Process and decision making

To inform the process, the Peer Review team were presented with detailed background information about how the different parts of the service are carried out, what works well and areas where improvements are being considered. They were supplied with data about performance, customer feedback, decision making and governance arrangements. They observed Planning Committee meetings and held face-to-face sessions with senior management, Cabinet members, staff, planning agents, local councillors, Planning Committee members as well as other stakeholders such as consultees and town/parish councils. The conclusions reached were made having gathered data from different sources to challenge the validity of what they were being told.

The full findings from the Planning service peer review are set out within a report that includes 18 recommendations. It is a matter for the council how those recommendations will be taken forward. PAS has offered support and a further visit in six months' time to review progress.

This report seeks to bring to the attention of Environment Select Committee the findings of the Planning service peer review and asks that the initial officer response to the recommendations be noted.

Proposal

The Environment Select Committee is asked to note:

- 1) the findings of the Peer Review, recognising the challenges that the service faces in order to create one of the best performing planning services in the country; and
- 2) the initial officer response to the recommendations.

Reason for proposal

Given the nature of the issues raised, it is appropriate that the Environment Select Committee be given the opportunity to consider the Planning service peer review report's recommendations and the intended officer response.

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Planning Peer Review Report

Purpose of report

1. To update Environment and Select Committee on the findings of the May 2023 Local Government Association Planning Service peer review and to set out officers' initial response to the suggested recommendations.

Background

2. In May 2023, the council's Planning service invited an external peer review to look at how it conducts its different planning functions. The review was carried out by the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) on behalf of the Local Government Association (LGA). This review was not an inspection or audit. PAS were asked to conduct the review by the council as 'critical friends' as part of its journey to create the best possible planning service – one that is more unified, customer focused and resilient.
3. The Peer Review was presented with a detailed position statement alongside many other documents and performance data. The team spent four days on site in Wiltshire which included two full days of meetings, focus groups and committees with various councillors, staff, and stakeholders including town and parish councils, external consultees and planning customers. They focussed on five broad themes covering:
 1. Vision and leadership
 2. Service Performance & Management
 3. Community engagement
 4. Partner engagement

5. Achieving outcomes

4. Feedback from the review identified that the organisation was open and honest and ready to embrace change. The final report summarises what the Peer Review team have been told and what they have witnessed, and the resulting recommendations.

Main considerations for the committee

5. As one of the largest and most diverse planning authorities in the country, Wiltshire has the potential to set the benchmark for how planning services are delivered in local government. The volume of work and substantial workforce (compared to others) creates the potential for the planning service to be one that other councils ought to aspire to replicate. While there is lots of excellent work taking place, for various reasons, some parts of the Planning service is under-achieving, with examples of slow-decision making, poor customer service and inefficient practices. Gaining a better understanding of these issues to allow improvements to be made was a key driver for inviting a Peer Review.

6. The Peer Review team identified many positives in the way the council operates and noted that there was openness and self-awareness about the need for improvement to its planning service. The report noted that there is clear senior political and management ambition for change, but this needs to be dealt with as a corporate priority with clear plans and responsibilities for making improvements happen.

7. The report makes 18 recommendations for the council to consider as part of making the planning service more unified and resilient. These recommendations can be seen on page 5 of **Appendix 1**, and they can be grouped into five areas.

- Service structures. Report makes recommendations about how the officer structures are arranged, in particularly within Development Management, moving away from the 'pre-unitary' arrangement of having area teams that correspond with the former district council boundaries. The report recommends improved ways of arranging services (such as the interaction between planning, economic development and urban design) to better align the service to council priorities.
- Governance arrangements. Report makes observations about the inefficiency of Planning Committee structure, which is aligned to pre-unitary district council set up. Concerns raised about number of officer decisions overturned (causing reputational and financial problems for the council), how meetings take too long and how speaking arrangements are in favour of those objecting to planning applications. Recommendations made about reducing the number of committees, changes to the scheme of delegation (call-in arrangements) and procedural changes to how meetings are run.
- Management, staff and culture. Observations made about management capacity, especially within Development Management and how teams work in a 'silo' culture, arranged around area teams linked to former district council areas. Recommendations made that cultural and structural change be

addressed through a corporate transformation project approach. Also recommendations made to strengthen capacity in some areas and review opportunities for staff career progression and succession planning.

- Learning and development. Observations that some parts of the service struggle to retain staff. Also, that users of the service and decision makers are not properly trained in planning issues. Recommendations made that a learning and development programme be developed for elected members and town/parish councils. Recommendations made about better information sharing with local communities, for instance by producing a planning service newsletter, making use of existing meeting arrangements. Recommendation about improved learning from customer feedback.
- Process and decision making. Observations that processes are not consistent and best practice is not being shared properly across the service. Recommendations made to review all processes.

Initial Officer Response

8. The peer review report is comprehensive and picks up on all the issues and challenges that would be expected. Some of the findings are expressed in strong terms, with suggestions made about the impact current practices are having upon service reputation and how existing arrangements are affecting the council's finances. The fact that the service is not geared up to provide the best possible service to support business investment and local community interests needs addressing as soon as possible.

9. The report makes some helpful suggestions about how changes should be dealt with as a corporate transformation programme to ensure that improvements are overseen at senior officer and member level. It also makes suggestions about how some of the larger development projects should be monitored by senior officers and members to make sure that relevant people are briefed and that informed decisions can be taken.

10. There is a strong commitment to making the Planning service one of the best in the country. To achieve this aim, officers are committed to implementing as many of the Peer Review recommendations as possible to deliver lasting improvements.

11. More detailed work now needs to be completed to explore the options further and determine how the council is able to respond to the specific recommendations.

Environmental impact of the proposal

12. This report has no direct implications for energy consumption, carbon emissions or associated environmental risk management. As changes are made to the service, any environmental implications impacts will be considered and mitigated.

Equality and diversity impact of the proposal

13. There are no known equalities impacts arising direction from this report. As changes are made to the service, any equalities impacts will be assessed and mitigated.

Risk assessment

14. No decisions are being taken as a result of this report, other than for Environment Select Committee to note the recommendations being made by the Peer Review panel.

Financial implications

15. There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

Legal implications

16. The purpose of this report is to allow Environment Select Committee to consider the recommendations from the Planning peer review. No commitment is being made to any changes to the service or how decisions are made. There are therefore no legal implications arising directly from this report.

Options considered

17. At this stage, Environment Select Committee is being asked to note the findings of the Planning service peer review. No options are being presented as to how the recommendations will be taken forward at this stage.

Conclusion

18. The Planning peer review has provided a comprehensive assessment of how the service is being delivered. The recommendations are robust and based on evidence from a number of sources. Environment Select Committee is asked to note the findings of the peer review report and the initial officer response. Further consideration will be given to how these recommendations will be taken forward.

Background papers

None.

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Planning Peer Review Feedback