



Planning Service Peer Challenge – Final Report

Lancaster City Council

Interviews: 7th to 10th November 2022

Final Report: 3rd January 2023



1.0 Executive Summary

This report sets out the findings of a planning service peer challenge (the review), organised by the Local Government Association (LGA) with the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) at the request of Lancaster City Council (the Council).

It is the review's findings that the Lancaster City Council planning service is performing very well in many areas, during what has recently been and will continue to be very challenging times with responding to the challenges of service delivery during the covid pandemic, high volumes of work and challenging resources. The service's present good performance provides a strong base for an increased focus on the delivery of key developments in the area.

The Council is recognised nationally as a good example of producing local plan policy, particularly regarding the recent review of the local plan in response to the Council's declaration of a climate emergency. With corporate support the service has managed to reduce a backlog of planning applications that had built up during the recent Covid pandemic, whilst maintaining good planning decision making. It continues to deliver an enforcement service despite an increase in cases, whilst facing resourcing challenges. Many local planning services across the country have not been as successful in these areas and the Council's planning service should be highly commended for this.

The service does face a key issue of how it can work proactively and pragmatically to support the delivery of development in the area, acting alongside local partners to move from allocations in the local plan into planning approvals to the delivery of development on the ground.

There are exciting development opportunities in the area with the University, the large site at South Lancaster, the Canal Quarter, the Morecambe Bay Eden North project and Mainway Estate developments, to name just a few and the delivery of these opportunities is paramount.

It was very evident from the teams' interactions with staff, councillors, communities, partners and developers during the review that there is a genuine passion for the place and a desire to deliver the best for the area. Senior planning officers are highly regarded, both from inside and outside of the council, as are the staff within the service.

The complex political position of the Council having no overall party control is widely recognised by officers, members, and others externally, provides healthy challenge to the planning service. The review acknowledges that the planning service is also working within what can sometimes be a challenging two-tier administrative structure. However, local members and officers are working very well together within the service, as well as within the planning committee and with the leadership of the Council.

Throughout the planning service there needs to be an improved recognition that it is an integral part of the wider council, that the Council's priorities are also priorities for the service, and that planners have an important role in delivering them. There are examples of this occurring, including the recent local plan climate emergency review, but this needs to be extended into other areas of work within planning policy, decision making and delivery.

In particular, the Council's present and reducing land supply position highlights the increasing challenge the authority is facing in delivering development in the area. This delivery challenge must be considered to be the challenge owned within the planning service. Both the planning service & regeneration service need to work together to focus on delivery and unpick some of the issues that are causing sites to stall. This is highlighted in the delivery challenges of the key South Lancaster site and the related highways and infrastructure funding issues with the County Council. Apparent within this situation is a need to review the present stance on developer contributions which is not clear.

The County-District relationship needs to be strengthened to ensure delivery, with the aim of building a shared sense of ownership and risk between the County Council and Lancaster City in order to find common ground and move this key site forward.

Highways and infrastructure are key to unblocking the present situation around South Lancaster as well as other sites in the area and this needs to be owned corporately, with site delivery supported through multi-disciplinary project teams for each priority site, a roadmap to delivery and clear milestones that are supported by re-focusing planning knowledge and capacity, problem solving & pragmatism. The authority can also focus work with local developers to bring forward previously developed land and other small sites to help move them through the system and improve the land supply position of the council. Planning will not be able to lead on everything, but it has capacity to push, support and enable. Development delivery is fundamental to delivering the local plan and wider council priorities.

It should also be recognised that the planning sector is in challenging times, so the service needs to be more pragmatic rather than aspiring to a “perfect planning” approach which whilst laudable, is not aiding delivery. Prioritising work to use limited resources wisely will be key; recognising that “good planning” is about delivering the right outcome and the planners need to be prepared to take a step back and think “is this the right answer for getting things delivered?”. The service and the planners need to agree how it uses its limited resources best in aiding delivery.

The Council’s enforcement team is valiantly working through the increase in enforcement cases and, following completion of the current recruitment process, it will need to prioritise the planned review of the service. This should give experienced officers more time to undertake the vital work of stepping back from the case work and reviewing the present enforcement process, modernise and digitise the process, update the Enforcement Charter and communicate a new and improved service to the public, key community groups and councillors.

A council’s planning committee is a shop window of a council and often the most visible form of a council’s decision making. The Council’s committee is working well. The members of the committee and officers work respectfully and professionally with each other. The committee does at times appear to be quite long, with very detailed presentations, seeing some uncontentious applications. The committee process could be made more accessible to the public and the service should look to deliver more support and training to planning committee members.

A good relationship between the chair and the committee’s lead planning officer is essential to facilitate an excellent planning committee and the council should look to further build and support this key two-way relationship of trust and understanding. Developing a clear forward plan for items coming to the committee with a regular chair’s briefing and discussion with the committee’s lead planning officer will help this. This needs to occur well in advance of a committee meeting for any required actions to be undertaken. This is an addition to the wider pre committee briefing that already occurs.

It was not apparent what role and impact the non-decision-making member Local Plan Review Group has. The material shared with the group was considered very long, very detailed, described as “impenetrable” by some or presented too late to enable meaningful feedback oversight or a steering role.

Within the local area there are a large variety of interesting and challenging planning requirements and areas. The planners have a role in demonstrating their understanding of this diverse geography and its communities to local people. It is clear to the review team that the planners do understand the diversity and complexity of the area and the passion they have for the area but this was not always reflected in the views of external groups. It is a challenge for officers to engage with all the external groups of the different areas within the limits of each team’s capacity. However, this needs to be built into the service’s work; informing, supporting, advising and bringing the communities with the service on its journey is key and needs to be undertaken.

There are lots of interested local developers, inward investors, and partners in the area that the service should look to harness their interest, capacity and the pride for the area. The service should be pro-active and reach out to them, re-establishing the agents’ forum that has been missed since the pandemic.

Finally, the long-term resilience of the planning service must not be forgotten. It has been very successful in recruiting and supporting junior planning officers through to more senior positions. This “grow your own” approach and supportive environment is a key strength during these times of limited experienced planners nationally. The review highlighted a desire from many within the service to continue this supported process and strengthen the links across the whole planning. There is much that the Council and the service should be very proud of in its present work. There is a strong pride for the place and the work that is being undertaken. There needs to be a concerted focus from the council through the Planning & Regeneration services working together with partners to unpick some of the issues on delivery. The review team believe that the skills are held with the Council already but need to be focused on the issue.

2.0 Recommendations

R.1 Throughout the planning service there needs to be an improved recognition that it is an integral part of the wider council, that the Council priorities are the priorities of the planning service, and the important role that the planning service has in delivering them.

R.2 Delivery must be the challenge in the planning service. Both the planning & regeneration services need to work together to focus on delivery and to unpick some of the issues that are causing sites to stall in delivery. Working corporately across the City Council to support the establishment of multi-disciplinary project teams for each priority site, developing a roadmap to delivery and clear milestones that are supported by a re-focused planning service using the knowledge and capacity, problem solving & pragmatism skills.

R.3 Work with Lancashire County Council to undertake an immediate deep dive into the delivery challenges of the key South Lancaster site and the related highways and infrastructure funding issues. The County-District relationship is a delivery issue, so to build a shared sense of ownership and risk between Lancaster City and the County Council, find common ground and move this key site forward

R.4 Review the Council’s present approach on developer contributions and establish if the current approach will maximise the opportunities now and in the future.

R.5 Recognise that “good planning” is also about delivering the right outcome. The service needs to think more pragmatically rather than aspire to a “perfect planning” approach or solution. This means taking a step back to recognise “is this the right answer for getting things delivered?”. It also includes prioritising work to use resources wisely; the service and the planners can take some risks in how limited resources are utilised, recognising what can be reduced in order to allow things to progress. This should include moving from detailed policy development, reducing the number of internal consultees, establishing standing advice, having more communication rather than detailed internal consultee comments, reducing the length of committee reports, conditions and presentations – freeing up officer time to focus on helping delivery.

R.6 Undertake the planned review of the Council’s enforcement service to strengthen the present enforcement process, modernise and digitise the process and update the enforcement charter. Clearly and widely communicate a new and improved engagement processes to public.

R.7 Introduce some practical changes to the planning committee:

- consider live streaming the committee meetings to increase public accessibility,
- re-draft the chair’s introduction to better clarify the processes and procedures that will be followed at the meeting and include an introduction of who is present
- discuss with members ways to better manage speaking time instead of the present unlimited number of speakers able to present at committee, and
- consider reviewing the scheme of delegation to reduce number of items going to committee so only those that require the committee input into are decided at committee.

R.8 The service should work closely with the members to give more support and training to planning committee members. This should include:

- an increase in the number and variety of training sessions for committee members around key topic areas,
- having informal “catch up” meetings with officers and committee members to review decisions, appeal outcomes and progress of delivery against Local Plan,
- a requirement that all committee members, including substitutes, attend an annual training session.

R.9 Recognise and support the essential two-way relationship, trust and understanding between the chair and the committee’s lead planning officer. Develop a clear forward plan for items coming to the committee with a regular chair’s briefing and discussion with the committee’s lead planning officer.

R.10 Review and update the terms and the purpose of the Local Plan Review Group with members before embarking on any further policy production.

R.11 The service should improve its communication with both internal and external partners, including the public. Building on the work of the Community Connectors role, help and support the Parish and Town councils and community groups to better engage with planning through access to training with local councillors, regular briefings and updates along with other partners, delivered in language that is accessible and not planning jargon heavy, helping them to recognise the knowledge of the diversity of the place held by planners.

R.12 Be pro-active and reach out to developers, inward investors, or partners. Re-establish the agents’ forum and look to set up a partners’ board or forum to help deliver the local regeneration and growth agenda.

3.0 Background and Scope of the Peer Review

This report sets out the findings of a planning service peer challenge, organised by the Local Government Association (LGA) with the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) at the request of Lancaster City Council (the Council). Peer challenges are managed and delivered by the sector for the sector. They are improvement orientated and are tailored to meet the individual council’s needs. Designed to complement and add value to a council’s own performance and improvement, they help planning services review what they are trying to achieve, how they are going about it, what they are achieving, and what they could improve.

The aim of the peer challenge was to assess the operation of Lancaster City Council’s Planning service (the service) and how it can respond to the present and future challenges.

The review has focused on:

- The recognition of the role of the Council’s planning service to deliver and support the Council’s strategic priorities and deliver the growth ambitions for the area,
- the perception of the service from within the service, the council, communities, and partners,
- how the service - including the Council’s Planning Committee, is performing, engaging with councillors, communities, and wider stakeholders, and
- how the service is delivering outcomes for the area.

The review took the form of an analysis of data and information relating to the operation of the Planning Service. The review team watched the Council’s Planning Committee meetings on 10th October and 7th November 2022. It reviewed key documents and supporting material produced by the Council and undertook interviews from 7th to 10th November 2022 with councillors, senior managers, and staff from both inside the planning service and other parts of the council, parish and community representatives, external consultees, developers, agents and partnering local authorities.

This report is structured around the headings of:

- **Vision and leadership** - how the authority demonstrates leadership to integrate planning within corporate working to support delivery of corporate objectives.
- **Performance and Management** - the effective use of skills and resources to achieve value for money, and the effectiveness of processes (and the roles of officers and members) in decision-making on development proposals – including how the Council’s **Planning Committee** is functioning.
- **Community and Partnership Engagement** – how the authority works with partners to balance priorities and resources, understands its community leadership role and community aspirations, and uses planning to help deliver agreed priorities.
- **Achieving outcomes** - how well the service leverages national and local planning policy to deliver the sustainable development and planning outcomes its community requires.

Local Government and planning services across the country are presently in very challenging times, with extensive resourcing difficulties that are expected to continue into the future. The review occurred at a time that the Government’s Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill is progressing through parliament to set future national planning policy, give details of any future changes in the national planning process and set out how the service will have to respond over the coming years.

The Council and the service has responded positively to the challenges of continuing to deliver services during the recent covid pandemic. The service has worked hard to continue to deliver the Council’s planning function with updated policy produced, reduction in the backlog of planning applications in the system and responding to the increased volume of enforcement cases during this period and should be highly commended for this.

Within the local area there are a large variety of interesting and challenging planning requirements and issues: the historic nature of the city; the Special Area of Conservation (SAC) designation; Special Protected Area status (SPA) and Ramsar site of Morecambe Bay; national ferry port; nuclear power stations; market towns; the Forest of Bowland and Arnside and Silverdale Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB); part of the Yorkshire Dales National Park; numerous conservation areas and listed buildings; and green belt designation. There are also lots of exciting development opportunities with the University and buoyant student population, large development site at South Lancaster, the Canal Quarter, the Morecambe Bay with Eden North and Mainway Estate developments, to name just a few.

It is evident from the teams’ interactions with staff, councillors, communities and partners during the review that there is a real genuine passion for the place and a real desire to deliver the best for the area.

The team recognises that the planning service is working within what can be a challenging two-tier administrative structure as a district council with the county council.

The complex political position of the Council of having no overall party control, a Green party council leadership and cabinet positions, Labour and Conservative party committee chairs, as on the Planning Committee, Liberal Democrats and a number of local Independent party representations on the council provides a healthy challenge to the planning service and is widely recognised by officers, members, and others externally.

The peer team was made up of serving and former council officers and councillor from local authorities from across the England and a PAS review manager.

The review team members were:

- **Louise Wood** - Service Director for Planning & Housing, Cornwall Council
- **Nicola Sworowski** - Forward Planning, Housing Strategy and Development Manager, East Riding of Yorkshire Council
- **Adele Morris** - former Councillor, Southwark Council, Liberal Democrat.
- **Garreth Bruff** – Planning Advisory Service

- **Steve Barker** – Planning Advisory Service, Peer Challenge Manager

We commend the Council for inviting in the review and its open and transparent approach to hosting the review. The team would like to thank officers and members at Lancaster City Council and everybody they met during the process for their time and positive contributions.

4.0 Detailed Feedback

4.1 Vision & Leadership: how the authority demonstrates leadership to integrate planning within corporate working to support delivery of corporate objectives.

Throughout the review the team have found an engaged and happy staff from across the service, who have communicated a consistent pride in the area and a strong desire to get stuff done. There are high levels of professionalism, with a commitment to deliver a good service. At the senior leadership level, as with other areas of the service, members are respectful and supportive of the officers and speak highly of the work of the Heads of Planning, Policy and Development Management.

The Council has shown their faith in the planning service though making more resource available to aid fixing the backlog of planning applications and progressing the policy work of the service. The new Chief Executive wants to establish and deliver the strategic direction and priorities for the council and sees the role of the planning service as a key driver for delivering them, and the service needs to embrace this.

Throughout the Planning Service there needs to be an improved recognition that it is an integral part of the wider council, that the Council's priorities are their priorities, and that planning plays an important role in delivering them. We heard from within the planning service that "they" (i.e., the corporate people and other services) do not always empathise with planning, that there "... doesn't seem a willingness to understand the planning approach" from the wider Council. In response, we would challenge back "is the planning service willing to understand the wider issues?". No planning service is ever an island, it is an important part of the wider council organisation. There is a need to better recognise, own and embrace the Council's priorities, recognising its key role in delivering them. The planning service is often a public shopwindow for the Council and its therefore critical that the recommendations that are made are outcome focused. The recent review of the local plan to respond to the Council's declaration of climate emergency is a great piece of work and is a great example of how planning can intrinsically link to the corporate priorities.

The political leadership of the council should also be commended for making and supporting the decision to continue with the local plan at examination and undertaking an immediate review to update it to respond to the council's declaration of a climate emergency. Even though the authority is still in the final part of the examination process of the reviewed local plan it appears to be going well and other councils are looking at the work of the council in this area to learn from.

Other services speak highly of the planning service but there were also suggestions that the service should engage further and be more flexible towards supporting and working with other areas of the council. We believe the service has an opportunity to be more focused on being a delivery agent through the planning process of the aims of the council, moving to making more pragmatic decisions, delivering outcomes rather than focused on planning process, brokering discussions between departments to get to the right decision.

There are some great development opportunities in the area with the University, the South Lancaster growth area, the Canal Quarter, the Morecambe Bay Eden North and Mainway Estate developments, to name just a few, but the primary focus for the service must be delivery.

The Council and partners have highlighted throughout the review that there are tensions with Lancaster Council and Lancashire County Council regarding moving the South Lancaster growth area forward. This needs to be pragmatically resolved together with the County for everyone to move forward. This is covered in more detail in other areas of the report, but the issue needs to be owned at the corporate level for this

to occur and the authority should undertake a deep dive into delivery at South Lancaster and the transport issues. Go back to base principles and work together to find a solution. Apparent within this situation is a need to review the present stance on developer contributions which is not clear. The County and District are going to have to work collectively together on this and there is obviously useful skills and knowledge within the planning policy team to support this work to establish if the current approach will maximise the opportunities now and in the future for the area.

The Council also has some great land and building assets. There needs to be clear strategy and approach to move forward to maximise alongside and supporting the development opportunities in the area.

The Council is leading the way in terms of embracing climate emergency, and moving towards delivering sustainable growth, and being a role model for others local authorities to follow. The service has shown that it is good at producing planning policy, good at managing decision making on applications and it now needs to focus on delivery.

4.2 Performance management: the effective use of skills and resources to achieve value for money, and the effectiveness of processes (and the roles of officers and members) in decision-making on development proposals – including how the Council’s Planning Committee is functioning.

It is the review team’s opinion that Lancaster City Council is delivering a good planning service. This is recognised by many people that we interviewed. Each of the planning service areas of Enforcement, Policy and Development Management are spoken about very positively and held in high regard by many within the Council and there is an acknowledgment by many of the staffing and resource challenges in the department.

Staff from planning policy, development management and enforcement services spoke about how much they enjoyed working for the authority, as they felt valued and supported, that there was a feeling of pride about the area. This is reflective of the low levels of staff “churn” and a number of returning staff within the service; “the best place they have ever worked”.

The team were particularly impressed by the level of positivity, skills and understanding of the Technical Support Team. This team is well staffed and motivated to improve the performance of wider service. As such, it will be an important source of resource in helping to implement several recommendations in this report, particularly in terms of improving outward facing communication and assisting with the review of enforcement.

The service is performing well against the national planning performance regime for speed and quality of planning decision making, with a very low number of complaints and appeals compared to other local authorities. The service continued to perform well throughout the challenges of the Covid pandemic and should be commended for this.

The service has managed the reduction of the backlog of planning applications whilst maintaining performance levels and was supported by the Council with access to extra resources to achieve this. The hard work to fix the backlog of applications has been widely recognised during the review and the Council and hard work of the Development Management service should be commended for this.

There does appear to be a high usage of Extensions of Time (EoTs) on major and non-major applications to support the performance over the last two years. It has become common practice across most local authorities to use EoTs to maintain performance following their extensive use during the covid pandemic period, mainly on householder applications, as numbers increased and reduced resources and changing work partners have brought delays. However, the authority wants to be clear that they are using them in a proper manner and not becoming reliant on them to protect performance in the long term.

It should be recognised that the planning sector is in challenging times, so the service needs to be more pragmatic rather than aspiring to a “perfect planning” approach which whilst laudable, is not aiding delivery. Prioritising work to use limited resources wisely will be key; recognising that “good planning” is

about delivering the right outcome and the planners need to be prepared to take a step back and think “is this the right answer for getting things delivered?”. This should include moving from detailed policy development, reducing the number of internal consultees, establishing standing advice, having more communication rather than detailed internal consultee comments, reducing the length of committee reports, conditions and presentations – freeing up officer time to focus on helping delivery.

The Council’s enforcement service is valiantly working through the increase in enforcement cases and following the recruitment process that is presently underway, it needs with some importance to prioritise the planned review of the service. This should give experienced officers more time to undertake the vital work of stepping back from the case work and reviewing the present enforcement process, modernise and digitise the process, update the *enforcement charter* and communicate a new and improved engagement processes to the public, key community groups and councillors.

The service needs to think about how it is going to prioritise its work to use the resources wisely – is now the opportunity to do a bit less policy and a bit more delivery?

The Council’s worsening 5 year housing land supply position is of concern. It has continued to drop year on year from 2019 when the local plan was adopted at 6.9 years, to a present position of 2.2 years. Even though the Council is not presently being challenged with speculative applications and increased appeal losses and might not do so due to the land designations in the area, the worsening position is a direct symptom of the delivery challenge that the authority is facing. The service, working with the Regeneration team, needs to focus on how it can work to deliver both small and large stalled sites stuck in the system, and work with local developers to bring forward sites but especially previously developed land and small sites to help move them through the system and improve the land supply position of the council.

The service has been very successful in recruiting and supporting junior planning officers through to more senior positions. This “grow your own” approach is a key strength during these times of limited planners nationally. There are some strong relationships across the different elements of the planning service but these can be strengthened through closer understanding and access between planning teams with a recognition of the complete planning service; policy – Development Management – delivery.

The review highlighted a desire from many within the service to continue this supported process and strengthen the links across the whole planning service through consideration of recognised a single office base for the whole planning team, with highlighted days in the office.

The review took the opportunity to view two sessions of the Council’s Planning Regulatory Committee (the committee), on the 10th October and 7th November. We recognise that there are a variety of ways that planning committees can operate across the 300+ planning committees in England, and that individual councils have often good reasons for why they deliver their planning committee in the way that they do.

When viewing a planning committee, we look at the principles of:

- is the process of decision-making clear for the public to understand?
- is it making the best opportunity to be accessible to the public?
- is the council making the best use of its resources in making its decisions at committee?
- is it presenting a confident and professional approach to decision making by the council? and
- is it making good clear decisions?

It should be recognised that a council’s planning committee is a shop window of a council as the most visible form of a council’s decision making. Delivering good decisions not only allows good development to occur in the area but also impacts on the perception of a council by both the public and businesses in the area.

The physical layout of the committee is good for the public viewing of the committee, with recognition of committee members sitting in the arc of seating in front of the top table with name plates, although these

which were not always directly viewable from the public gallery. The chair of the committee and officers on the top table do have name plates but they are not particularly readable from the public gallery, and there is no introduction of who the officers and members in the room are. We think it would be helpful for the lead planning officer to be sitting with the committee chair to be able to advise and support them during the committee.

The presentations are viewable on the two large screens placed at the front and rear of the committee room. The audio of the room is ok when the microphones were used or working, which appeared to be intermittent in the two sessions viewed. When not used hearing members comments throughout the session was challenging, and this was noted by members of the public in the gallery during the sessions that we attended.

The Council should consider streaming the planning committee to give the public greater access to the proceedings of the committee. It is now a minority of councils that are not continuing to stream their committee meetings following all councils doing so during the covid pandemic. We appreciate that there can be practical limitations from rooms and some council chambers that host committees, but it feels like a retrograde step to move back from the great work that occurred in making the committee more accessible over the last couple of years.

The planning committee follows a process that is acceptable with objectors and supporters presenting, including the applicant and ward councillor, each of which can speak for a maximum of 3 minutes. These are followed by the case officer presentation of the item, with committee members having an opportunity to ask questions before a motion is proposed and seconded by committee members and then voted on. The order of the process at the committee is a bit unusual -usually the case is presented first by the case officer, followed by presentations by the public, then questions and the vote taken. However, there are no "right and wrong" rules about the order of business and the councils process is acceptable and understandable.

There is a clear explanation available on the Council website about the process for participants, but it would be helpful for the committee chair to give a brief explanation at the start of the process that will be followed at the meeting to give clarity to the attending public, for whom this will most likely be the first time they have attend a planning committee.

The Council allows an unlimited number of speakers, which is unusual within planning committees. This ability for the public to present is welcomed by members we spoke with as they felt it gave the community a voice in the process. Our view is that it could have the potential to become very repetitive, extending the sitting time of the committee extensively and not adding information to the process. Most committees will limit public presentation to between one and three objectors and supporters.

The limit of three minutes per speaker would be considered a reasonable length of time to present. The Council's own information for the public on *Participation at Planning Regulatory Committee* states that: "At 2½ minutes the speaker will be advised that there are 30 seconds left, and that they should begin to bring matters to a close." We were not aware of any 30 second warnings be given during the committees we watched, where there were examples of public presentations running out of their allotted time.

We recommended that there should be a discussion with members of the committee about how there might be potential to better manage public speaking time at the committee.

The Council receives on average 38 major applications and 735 non majors in a year. 70 applications were called to committee over the last year which is about 9% of all applications. This averages almost 6 applications per committee, varying from between one (September) to nine applications (July & November). We have not looked at the complexity of the cases but 9% of all applications going to committee would be considered a high amount, and nine applications being seen in one session would be considered very high and even the average of six would be considered more than most other local authorities. The committee is sitting from between 15 mins to 6 hours in a session, with an average of 2.5 hours. The latter would not be considered unreasonable, but 6 is excessive.

Having high numbers of applications being discussed at a single committee and the committee sitting for very long periods does not allow the committee to function at its best as a key decision-making body for the Council, not giving ample time and focus from the committee members and officers supporting them.

The Council's requirement for applications to be called to committee is that any councillor can call any application into committee if there is a highlighted planning reason to do so. The number of applications being called to committee is higher than other authorities' planning committees and so we wonder if members are pushing things to committee that do not warrant committee time. Of the two committees we viewed **we would suggest that there appear to be cases at committee that do not warrant having a committee decision on.** We also noted that there were situations where Development Management had sent items to committee that were not justified in the team's opinion, and the reasons for this could potentially be reviewed.

It is worth the Council regularly challenging if the correct applications are being seen at committee, as well as reviewing decisions that are made both at the committee and as delegated decisions. Committee time is valuable and takes a lot of officer and member time to resource, as well as the public and applicant time. This time should be used on the applications that will have the biggest impact on the area.

The case presentations delivered by the case officers at the committee are appreciated by the members of the committee. **Having case officers present their own cases is helpful not only in having the best knowledge of the case available at the committee but helps build the relationships between the committee members and the planning officers and builds experience and confidence in the case officers.** However, it was felt that on a couple of occasions the chair or the officers could have been **more forceful in bringing members' and the speakers' attention back to the specifics and the purpose of the application before them.**

The presentations given are well delivered but very long and detailed. The presentations should only require to be a summary of the application, highlighting the key points of the case, with case officers having confidence that committee members have read their committee papers prior to the meeting and not requiring detailed information.

It was apparent that the members of the committee worked respectfully with each other and the chair from across the multiple political parties of the Council, with no obvious political lines being drawn. The chair of the committee was respected by both the other committee members and officers.

The planning officers are well respected and treated professionally by the committee members in the meetings and were considered helpful by planning committee we spoke with.

Officers are professional and responsive to questions that are raised by the committee members and the interactions between officers and members appear professional and courteous.

The Council should take the opportunity to further build the trust and relationship between committee members and planning officers through formal briefings for committee members and more informal opportunities to ask questions in advance of a committee to better enable quality decision making. This would also include further developing the essential two-way relationship, trust and understanding between the chair and the lead planning officer of the committee.

The role of the councillor on committee is important and challenging and access to training, as well as support from planning officers, is essential for members to fulfil the role well.

The service should work closely with the council members to give more support and training to planning committee members. This would be welcomed by members. This should include informal opportunities to share information between officers and committee members, to ensure that any required information will be available when the committee sits to enable quality decision making, alongside an increase in the

number and variety of more formal training and briefing sessions for officer and committee members around key topic areas, to review decisions, appeal outcomes and progress of delivery against Local Plan.

We strongly suggest that a requirement that all committee members, including all members who can substitute on to the committee, have to attend an annual training session.

The relationship between the chair and lead planning officer of the committee is essential towards an excellent planning committee and the council should look to further build and support this two-way relationship of trust and understanding between these key individuals. Developing a clear forward plan for items coming to the committee with a regular chair's briefing and discussion with the lead planning officer of the committee will help this. This needs to occur at a time in advance of a committee sitting for any required actions to be undertaken. This is an addition to the wider all party pre committee briefing that already occurs on the Friday prior to the committee sitting on the Monday.

The role of the planning committee Chair is recognised as a key role. The present Chair is well respected. She should be supported in this key and unique role with access to independent training and mentoring, as in PAS's opinion all planning committee chairs should be.

4.3 Community and Partnership Engagement: how the authority works with partners to balance priorities and resources, understands its community leadership role and community aspirations, and uses planning to help deliver agreed priorities.

The Council area encompasses many diverse and different planning area designations and opportunities. This makes planning across the whole the area very interesting and challenging. The planners have a role to demonstrate their understanding of this diverse geography and its different communities to local people.

There are some very well-informed community groups and individuals within the borough, with a very good understanding of the planning process and the Council's resourcing challenges, as well as great knowledge of their communities and areas.

Town and Parish Councils are an important part of ensuring that communities can effectively interact with the Planning system. In speaking with Town and Parish Council's there is a clear need for better communication and a more structured approach to engagement to help overcome the current view that communities are not properly listened to. The planning service should look to embrace them; building on the good work of the Council's Community Connectors team.

The planning service should also consider ways that it can establish a pro-active and structured approach to engaging with Town and Parish Councils collectively on Planning matters. This could be achieved by regular attendance at their meetings or setting up a Town and Parish Council Forum to enable issues of general interest and service delivery matters to be debated and discussed. Another option is to work with the Town and Parish Councils on creating an annual training programme or inviting them to attend sessions delivered for committee members and ward councillors.

This engagement and recognition of the different and varied communities of the area is a challenge that the service needs to recognise. We have heard repeatedly from the service during the review that the planners do recognise the diversity and complexity of the area but that they do not have enough time to engage with all the external groups and parishes. However, this needs to be built into the service's work; informing, supporting, advising and bringing the communities with the service on its journey is key and needs to be undertaken.

There is lots of good information on the Council's planning website. The team found lots of good elements and planning detail whilst searching through it, however discussion with members of the public has highlighted that they struggle to know how and where to find things on the website. There is lots of material available and we can appreciate that it can be confusing whilst entering the site. The service could take the opportunity to reflect who the different audiences are for the website material and work with

some applicants, the parishes or public groups to see how they use the site. Taking the time and effort to think how the service can present and share information will reduce resources and time required to field later enquiries.

The Council by the nature of the area has a high number of planning enforcement cases. The Enforcement service is working very hard to appease complainants and respond to the increase level of activity in this area. Enforcement cases cause frustration and there is a narrative out in the community that enforcement is not working, although this is not unusual or specific to Lancaster. There is an understanding amongst members and the some of the public that the planning service, and the enforcement team particularly, is understaffed.

Following the recruitment process that is underway, it needs to prioritise the planned review of the Enforcement service. This should give experienced officers more time to undertake the vital work of stepping back from the case work and reviewing the present enforcement process, to modernise and digitise the process, update the enforcement charter and communicate a new and improved engagement processes to the public, key community groups and councillors and re-allocate tasks accordingly when posts are filled and communicating any new contact arrangements to the public.

There are lots of interested local developers, inward investors, or partners in the area that the service should look to harness their interest, capacity, and the pride for the area. The service should be pro-active and reach out to them. We were informed that the Council had not run a regular agents' forum since before the pandemic. If this could be reintroduced it would be welcomed by agents, helping improve future applications, understanding of future developments, aiding policy production and helping to build relationships and look to set up a partners' board or forum to help deliver the local regeneration and growth agenda.

There is a feeling of frustration that information on progress around planning applications are not being communicated. Greater communication on delays to planning application would reduce the feelings of frustration of not knowing who things are progressing but also reduce contact with Council across all those engaging with the service causing more work to respond to them. There is a recognition that resourcing the service is challenging at the present times.

Despite the tensions between the County and District around the South Lancaster growth area, good relations appear to be in place with County colleagues and the planning service around the day-to-day work of the at 'coal-face' of planning.

The service is considered to have a strong sense of environmental protection and understanding amongst officers with policies to support the Council's position which is supported by statutory stakeholders.

The service has been very successful at producing local planning policy, something that many other local authorities have struggled to do. There is a lot of policy and its very wordy and very dense and it has been reflected to the review team that it can be perceived as impenetrable by members and the public. As policy planners we do struggle to make our policy documents concise and accessible to the public. There is obviously a really good policy team at the authority, challenge yourself as to how can we make your great work around policy accessible, can we produce more easily understood executive summaries, are there videos and pictures that would help the public, can we reduce our planning jargon.

It was not apparent what the role and impact of the non-decision-making member Local Plan Review Group had. The material shared with the group was considered very long, very detailed, described as "impenetrable" by some and at the too late stages of the local plan production to give meaningful feedback. Members are keen to have this group develop into more of a steering and decisions making group. Reviewing and update the terms and the purpose of this group with members would be a useful exercise, recognising and being clear with the members about [hether](#) limitations of change when commenting in the later stages of the plan making process, before embarking on any further policy production.

The council should ensure it communicates the Council's growth and Regeneration strategy to wider partners. Be clear what the vision is going forward, what is going to happen and what are your timelines. Harness the wider partners' very obvious interest in the area.

4.4 Achieving Outcomes: how well the service leverages national and local planning policy to deliver the sustainable development and planning outcomes its community requires.

The planning team is well respected and valued within the Council and across other services. The planning service is recognised as successfully supporting and delivering corporate priorities, with particular mention made of the work the policy teams delivered on its Climate Emergency Local Plan Review, the Low Carbon Hub team supporting the ambition for District Heat Networks in Mainway estate, and on more day to day projects like working alongside the Public Realm Team on local parks' amenities. The planning service is clearly engaged in projects across the council.

Housing has been highlighted as important focus for the council and there is some good work being undertaken on the housing strategy, with a practical approach such as embedding the Housing Strategy officer within the Housing Service team to help deliver Mainway Estate renewal and new social housing associated with it. These relationships and work are vital and really positive. It is notable however, that the delivery of affordable housing through the planning system does not seem strong nor was it raised as a greater issue when delivery isn't happening.

The Development Management team is also seen as open and approachable within Council. Now the backlog of cases has been cleared, the feeling is that the team has more scope to offer support, with advice given to other teams on issues such as Travellers' site, quality of open spaces in new developments and housing to name a few.

The service is also having early engagements on more strategic matters, such as early thinking on the Economic Development Strategy around skills and employment, as well as on inward investment and the pipeline of employment sites that might be available. But this is only a starting point and there are suggestions that more can be done.

There is good work around leveraging development contributions in some places with planners working pro-actively to capture gain in delivering new green space and public realm to a good standard. But there is a lack of clarity around contributions for education and transport. These are not county matters but Lancaster matters and contributions secured for them are for the good of community.

It was noted through several interviews that there was changing and positive "can do" culture from the service, that "the city council will not be a blocker" around priority developments, with examples highlighted such as Eden North project where there has been a lot of support and work by the council to bring it forward.

The service has also been proactive in recently launching the service's new pre-application advice process to support applicants; aiding and working with applicants to bring forward strong applications into the planning system. It is early days in the take up of the advice but there appears to be all the right elements and support in place for this to be welcomed by applicants and successful for the authority.

The work of the local plan gives the council a really solid base for further delivery, with clear key priorities to deliver against. And building on this, there are some fundamental measures of success for the service that we think do need greater attention around dramatically affecting the worsening 5 Year Housing Land Supply position, which is a real challenge and getting worse, the delivery of affordable housing across the authority that deserves a greater priority and a focus on moving both large and small stalled sites forward.

More fundamentally though, there is a real issue on the South Lancaster growth site where there appears to be lack of clarity around where the leadership and responsibility for moving this key site forward sits. It does need to be recognised that there is a real risk of losing HIF monies connected to the project.

There is potential to see progress with the exciting Canal Quarter development and there is a real opportunity to proactively move this great development opportunity in the city forward that has been waiting for many years. However, we have heard a message that there is an absence of joined up working between the Planning and Regeneration teams within the council, with no clear road map or strategy to delivery in the area.

There is a need for the service to have a clear and consistent message around infrastructure funding. We have heard lots of confusion and frustration with infrastructure costs and funding across the borough and with the County Council as its transport partner. This is not just around the South Lancaster growth area and the connected Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF) bid but has wider implications around the highways and transport network and delivery of the Council's local plan, as well as reputationally for both councils. We have heard varying housing requirements related to the HIF bid of 3,000, 9,000 or 11,000 dwellings both internally and externally. There needs to be some clear understanding and messaging on the project. An example of this is around the competing stories around the gravity model proposed by the County Council, this has been relayed from different people with differing figures and impacts but what we have not heard is 'let's consider another approach'?

This uncertainty is starting to affect wider developments beyond South Lancaster. The issue needs to be giving ownership at the corporate level of the council. Get back to first principles on the delivery around the South Lancaster area, it is fundamental to delivering the local plan and the council priorities. Get some shared ownership and risk with County, try to find common ground and collectively problem solve the issues.

There is no question about the skills, knowledge, and capacity that the council's planning team provide in terms of policy and strategy. We suggest that there is a real opportunity to refocus this wealth of planning knowledge and experience on the priority issues and how the council can move forward to solves them.

Alongside this focus on large sites or regeneration areas, there needs to be greater recognition and commitment to where the priority lies across the issues of the stalled sites; which sites are key and who will lead on unblocking them, with the worsening land supply issue, the delivery of affordable housing, how windfall or exceptions sites are brought forward, how they can support the Council's employment and skills strategy, ensuring sites for expansion and new inward investment are defined, available and promoted with other services.

How these issues are prioritised needs to be clearly understood both within the service and across the council. There needs to be a clear purpose, with clearly understood aims, milestones and outcomes for everything you do against such priority issues. There are obviously the project management skills available in the service. Having a defined project management culture can help in terms of defining the deliverables, the work packages that will lead to these, the responsibilities and dependencies between work through a multi-disciplinary approach with the planning team, regeneration team, economic development team, property team and others.

5.0 Implementation, next steps and further support

It is recognised that the Council and service will want to consider and reflect on these findings.

To support openness and transparency, we recommend that the council shares this report with officers and that they publish it for information for wider stakeholders. There is also an expectation that the council responds to the finding in the report and develops an action plan to be published alongside the report.

Where possible, PAS and the LGA will support councils with the implementation of the recommendations as part of the Council's improvement programme.

A range of support from the [LGA](#) and [PAS](#) is available on their websites. Some specific areas of support that the authority might wish to look at includes:

- [helping with options for planning committee changes](#)
- [pre-app and PPAs](#)
- [training and development for members, town and parish councils and officers](#)
- [advice and support around approach to developer contributions \(S106 and CIL\)](#)

It is recommended that Lancaster City Council discuss ongoing PAS support with Steve Barker, Principal Consultant, stephen.barker@local.gov.uk and any corporate support with Claire Hogan, Principal Adviser, claire.hogan@local.gov.uk

As part of the LGA's peer review peer impact assessment and evaluation, PAS and the LGA will contact the Council in 6-12 months to see how the recommendations are being implemented and the beneficial impact experienced.

The author of this report is Steve Barker (stephen.barker@local.gov.uk), on behalf of the peer review team.

This report was finalised in agreement with the Council on 03/01/2023.

We are grateful for the support of everyone that contributed to this review.



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