



**Planning Peer Challenge
Progress Review**

Lancaster City Council

25 January 2024



Context

1.1 A progress review is an integral part of the Planning Peer Challenge process. The purpose of the review is to support the planning service in implementing their action plan following the Peer Challenge and offer a sounding board for discussion as the work is progressing.

1.2 The main aims of this progress review with Lancaster City Council were to:

- Provide feedback to the Planning Service on the progress they have made against the Planning Peer Challenge recommendations and action plan.
- Identify any early impacts or learning from the Planning Service's progress against their action plan to date.
- Identify any significant changes or challenges that have arisen since the peer team were 'on-site' and consider how best to navigate these in the future.

1.3 The Planning Service in Lancaster City Council (the Council) has demonstrated that it is open to peer feedback, support, and challenge in order to help strengthen its ongoing work on improvement.

Scope of the Progress Review

1.4 The following officers took part in this progress review:

- Garreth Bruff – Planning Advisory Service
- Sarah Lewis – Planning Advisory Service
- Rachel Robinson - Local Government Association
- Steve Barker – Planning Advisory Service, Peer Challenge Manager

1.5 Steve Barker and Garreth Bruff were part of the original peer team that undertook the planning peer challenge in November 2022.

1.6 The team initially completed a desk top review of the latest performance information provided by Lancaster City Council, including their own "RAG rated" progress report on the action plan, that has been reported to their own Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and an updated "position statement" for the planning service. This was also supplemented by relevant publicly available information, such as data on housing delivery, decision making performance and local plan position.

1.7 Following the desk top review, the peer team spent a full day with the Planning Service on 25 January 2024 where they engaged with a range of different planning officers as well as a senior elected Member and the Chief Executive.

1.8 It was great to be invited back to Lancaster to undertake this progress review. The peer team were made to feel very welcome and were well supported throughout the day. The team would like to thank all the officers and members involved for their input. It is very apparent that during the time since the review team were originally at the Council it has responded to the recommendations from the peer challenge along with new challenges for the Council and the service.

Strengthen the corporate role of planning to help deliver the Council Plan

1.9 The new flat management structure of the Council appears to have embedded well and is allowing for regular working and information sharing between the lead officers, improving awareness of work across the Council. It places a large onus on the Head of Planning and other Chief Officer roles to make cross cutting working between directorates happen. These actions will need to be actively supported by the wider management team in the planning service (i.e. the Heads of Development Management, Planning and Housing Strategy and the Corporate Climate Change Team) who need to work across directorates on cross cutting projects as the chief officers will invariably get pulled into other areas of work away from the day-to-day specific directorate work. This work will help the service to be recognised as an enabler and delivery agent across the Council and should be a key focus. Recognising the key role the planning service plays in delivering the new corporate priorities and embedding this throughout the service and more widely across the Council. The review team found there to be an improvement in this understanding within the service from when they undertook the initial review. The new council priorities have helped this but the new local plan and strategic delivery projects in the authority will be an opportunity to specifically link the role of planning, place and delivery with the council priorities.

Delivery focused service

1.10 It was recognised that the service still has a challenge to become a delivery focused service that is about “about getting stuff done” as one individual engaged with put it. There is a commitment to be more delivery focused, but several of the people we met feel that this is not happening at enough of a pace or across all of the planning service teams. Making sure that all elements of the service recognise their role in delivering the best solutions for the area is a priority for individual officers and managers alike. This should include actively involving the political leadership at the earliest relevant stages of projects and plan-making.

1.11 It was highlighted that progress on delivery vehicles had slowed down, largely due to the process of embedding the new corporate restructure, but now this has happened the Council is in a very strong position to look at this with cross directorate working. This should include closer working between the Sustainable Growth service and Planning Service to deliver planning and sustainable place work together more.

Local Plan Delivery and Leadership

1.12 The Council has reviewed and refreshed the Local Plan Review Group (LPRG) as recommended in the peer challenge. This includes a wider cross-party membership, more clarity on the group’s role and information received, all of which the review believes to be an improvement. The service should think how outputs and information from this group can be better disseminated across the wider Council and elected members, with short headline reports. The attendees of this group and the officers attending need to be able to communicate the information and decisions made to their respective colleagues. This wider Local Plan Review Group does not replace Cabinet and political group discussions, so helping the attendees to be able to succinctly disseminate information discussed and decisions made in this key group will aid the local plan progress and on-going support.

1.13 The decision to move to a full review and update of the local plan has been driven by the suspension and re-evaluation of plans for the South Lancaster development. Whilst this has been welcomed by all parties involved, the Council will face a challenging position of land supply and delivery of sites for the new local plan. This might require some tough decisions on the developable sites to be included in the new local plan. The Council should make sure that it takes the

opportunity to capture the invaluable learning from the South Lancaster experience and use this in the next local plan.

1.14 It is recognised that the new local plan timetable is challenging when set against the government's requirement for plans to be submitted by June 2025 under the present local plan system. The service has the experience to be able to deliver this challenging timetable but keeping to schedule will need to be managed.

1.15 As part of the plan making role, the service will want to have planned the scenarios going forward at key milestones in the process, to be able to decide at the earliest opportunity if it will need to transfer to the new local plan process and ensure that none of the previous work is wasted if they do transfer. If a change is required, the timings for delivering a local plan in the proposed new system will not just be in the best interests of the local authority. Any change will require new work to be undertaken. Some of these required new works, such as project planning requirements, could be more formal for new local plan e.g. Project Initiation Documents (PIDs), and so it may be wise to undertake a more formal approach to project management so that this can be transferred to new system if required.

Celebrating success and maximising the opportunities to develop the planning team

1.16 The Development Management team continues to work hard to maintain strong performance and the low levels of backlog of planning applications. As mentioned in the initial review, other local planning authorities are still struggling to reduce and maintain low levels of applications in comparison. The partly reviewed local plan is still progressing through the external examination stage, and there is hope of a resolution soon, and has been pushing new boundaries in its response to climate change. The new Enforcement plan is due to be adopted shortly following the service review. The planning team appear to have a strong ownership of the new plan, redistributing the workloads and helping to manage down workloads, which is expected to continue. The service should make sure that it celebrates these successes, both within the service and more widely across the Council to help raise the positive profile and awareness of the functions of planning corporately.

1.17 The service has done very well to manage the recruitment and filling of positions within the Policy, Development Management, Enforcement and Technical Support teams. It has shown great success in growing staff internally and giving staff the opportunity to move within the varying functions of planning. The review team were again impressed by visible appreciation of the service, the Council, and the area from the selection of staff that were interviewed, as they were during the initial review. It is very apparent that there is a fantastic team spirit and supportive culture within the service and the staff and service should be commended for this.

1.18 Even though the service is doing very well in recruiting and developing staff, the review believes that the service could be missing an opportunity to make a pathway for the technical support team to develop into further planning roles for non-graduates. Recruitment and retention of planners will remain an issue for councils nationally and the best planning services make efforts to develop their own "home grown talent" in order to maximise individual development and provide a source of planning expertise to address the natural churn of staff as well as help manage peaks in their workload.

Prepare for upcoming planning reforms

1.19 There have been a few developments around planning reform nationally since the original review. The Council has recognised the local plan changes as already noted in the report.

1.20 The service's use of Extension of Time, particularly on non-major applications, has reduced and there is an expectation to further reduce their use as resources embed into the service. This is in line with recently proposed government changes. It was noted by both the service leadership and the staff that further reductions would most likely require a cultural shift from the service, with less free advice and support, and giving more refusals, on sub-standard applications as well as pushing more applicants to use the paid for pre application advice.

1.21 It is recognised that the Development Management service needs to do more to prepare for mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) as this goes live later in the year. Discussions are underway to access Ecology skills from an already used supplier and from the county and appointing a specific BNG officer. The Council can access national support available, such as the [PAS BNG Practitioners Network](#), as all councils are being challenged to be ready for the upcoming go live dates in February and April 2024. The review suspects the council will have some challenging BNG conversations with applicants due to the high environmental quality of land in the area but also already have a group of environmentally upskilled planners because of this.

Conclusions and next steps

1.22 It is clear to the peer team that the recommendations of the original Planning Peer Challenge in Lancaster City Council have been taken seriously over the last 13 months. A Comprehensive action plan has been developed by Lancaster and significant progress has been made across all of the recommendations, as highlighted in Annex 1 and the Council's own progress reports to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

1.23 Like any local planning service, there are always areas for ongoing improvement as well new challenges or opportunities to consider. This report sets these out and where the peer team the Planning Service should now focus on its improvement journey. PAS will be happy to continue to work alongside Lancaster City Council to support the ongoing development of the planning service.

1.24 For any questions about the original Planning Peer Challenge or this progress review please contact:

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Annex 1: Progress against the recommendations

From reviewing the Council's own progress report and from our engagement with the officers and member there has been considerable improvements made by the council against many of recommendations made in the initial Planning Peer Challenge.

R.1 The planning service owning the council priorities and is an integral part of the wider council,
- Improving and ongoing

R.2 Delivery focus for planning service.

Working corporately across the City Council to support the establishment of multi-disciplinary project teams for each priority site.

- Ongoing

R.3 County-District relationship - delivery challenges of the key South Lancaster

- Ongoing - South Lancaster development opportunity was removed.

R.4 Review the Council's present approach on developer contributions

- Ongoing

R.5 Recognise that "good planning" is also about delivering the right outcome – freeing up officer time to focus on helping delivery, reducing detailed policy development, reducing internal consultees, establishing standing advice, improved communication rather internal consultee comments, reducing the length of committee reports, conditions and presentations

- Ongoing

R.6 Undertake the planned review of the Council's enforcement service

- Completed

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.

- Reviewed, but changes not taken forward by Cabinet and Planning Regulatory Committee

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

- Completed with a new programme of training for committee and wider councillors.

R.9 Recognise and support the essential two-way relationship, trust and understanding between the chair and the committee's lead planning officer.

- Completed

R.10 Review and update the Local Plan Review Group

- Completed

R.11 The service should improve its communication with both internal and external partners, including the public.

- Ongoing

R.12 Re-establish the agents' forum and set up a partners' board
- **Completed**