



# Planning Service Peer Challenge

## Dorset Council

*12-13<sup>th</sup> November 2019 and  
15-17<sup>th</sup> January 2020*

## Feedback Report September 2020

**Note that the peer challenge took place prior to the coronavirus pandemic which delayed the production of the final report.**

## Contents

1.	Executive summary	3
2.	Key recommendations	5
4.	Scope of the review	7
5.	Planning Advisory Service (PAS)	8
6.	The peer team	8
7.	Theme 1: Vision and leadership	9
8.	Theme 2: Customers and stakeholders	11
9.	Theme 3: Change management and priorities	14
10.	Theme 4: Effective and efficient services	15
11.	Theme 5: Sustainable and financially viable services	18
12.	Implementation, next steps and further support	20

## 1. Executive summary

- 1.1** Dorset Council is a few months into the process of bringing together six councils (five districts and one county), into a single Unitary Authority. Several of those former councils had previously been subject to ongoing change for several years before the new council was established. To have a review at this time is a bold move by Dorset, and allows the Peer Challenge team (the peer team) to take a snapshot of an organisation already on a journey and to review assumptions and priorities before they become ‘the way we do things here’.
- 1.2** The new Council has set itself three challenges in particular:
- ◆ ensuring a focus on customers – delivering better services with constrained resources
  - ◆ service transformation – taking a commercial position while still being good for customers
  - ◆ digital transformation – using technology as a key to implementing efficient systems and processes.
- 1.3** The peer team heard lots about the theory of transformation, and everyone we met was clear that change is required and inevitable. However, much of the discussion about the ‘what’ and ‘how’ remains quite abstract and is taking place above the operational practicalities that people need to understand in order deliver the day-to-day service. Setting a tone and culture is important, and it now needs to be followed up with some more detail on how this should work ‘on the ground’. Operational detail is essential to bring together the teams for a consistent operation.
- 1.4** The development management service is in the spotlight. Application processing is delayed, backlogs are building up, advice and decision making is inconsistent and information available to customers needs improving. This is not helped by the fact that in many instances the service is still operating as three separate entities. Critical to solving these problems is putting the whole service on a single software system and adopting a single approach to performance management. This is urgent and no further delay can be tolerated while a ‘perfect’ system is designed.
- 1.5** The local plan is underway and will need keep to a tight timetable to allow development and growth in the context of environmental protection. We were encouraged that a cross-party Executive Advisory Panel has been established to help ensure political leadership and support are available to keep the plan on course and will be pivotal in ensuring the timetable is achievable.
- 1.6** The newly configured Dorset has an opportunity to work at a broader scale and to have a deeper relationship with the statutory regulators and local groups. The local plan is not yet a ‘hot topic’ compared to planning applications, but arriving at a sustainable and supported development strategy is going to be a huge challenge.
- 1.7** The review took place while the restructure was underway, and it is a credit to the staff that they were able to participate fully in the review during an unsettling time. Big organisational changes are hard and it is critical that the restructure proceeds promptly and humanely.

- 1.8** The planning team at Dorset have already learned how hard it is to maintain a business-critical and visible service like development management during a time of change. The planning team need additional support and a fit-for-purpose IT system to allow them the time and space to manage change, otherwise the task will overwhelm them as day-to-day delivery pressures compete for their attention.

## 2. Key recommendations

This section summarises the key recommendations. More detail on each one can be found in the main body of the report.

R1	<p><b>Bring together the whole development management service onto a single software platform that can provide good functionality for customers and simple workflow and performance management.</b></p> <p>Even if the system is a temporary stop-gap, it is essential to get the work in a single place alongside the gazetteer and other sources of planning data.</p>
R2	<p><b>Establish a ‘who’s who’ directory, setting out who does what in the new structure.</b></p> <p>There are gaps in the organisational memory that are going to worsen as the restructure proceeds. A simple directory reinforced by presentations at team meetings and to members will help practically and also promote new behaviours and details.</p>
R3	<p><b>Create new temporary capacity to address the backlog of applications that need processing and to keep the frontline service operating while senior managers deal with the changes to the organisation.</b></p> <p>This new capacity could be from agency workers or by asking staff to work extra hours.</p>
R4	<p><b>Translate the Council’s vision and new culture into practical actions that guide the way people work and interact to deliver the service. This will improve consistency and fairness..</b></p> <p>This doesn’t need to be a huge and formal procedures manual, but a series of crib sheets or a Q&amp;A about procedures and processes. Where possible this should lever-in the software system to save time and set clear guidelines on productivity.</p>
R5	<p><b>Improve communication between staff and managers or members, and between the Council and customers and other stakeholders, including the towns and parishes.</b></p> <p>Communications are critical especially at times of change and where new norms need to be set. Two-way comms should allow the service to be truly responsive and to take full advantage of the resources, knowledge and skills that are available. The systems should also provide some realistic ways for senior managers to be more visible.</p>
R6	<p><b>Pilot an enhanced Planning Performance Agreement development management service.</b></p> <p>This should be done soon with a reduced or zero fee, to allow testing and adaption of the service alongside pre-application advice in response to users’ comments before a fee-based service is introduced.</p>
R7	<p><b>Improve the receipt and spending of income from S106 and the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) to enable an Infrastructure Funding Statement to be published in December 2020.</b></p> <p>The use of developer contributions is also a natural way to create a ‘good news story’ for planning and councillors.</p>
R8	<p><b>Maintain a programme of training for ward, parish and town councillors to ensure that they are well-informed and can provide appropriate advice to residents.</b></p> <p>The input from parish and town councils is an essential part of the consultation process</p>

	on planning applications. In the future it will form an equally important part of deciding on a development strategy. This consultation needs to be informed by what is relevant, proper and realistic in the context of local and national policy.
R9	<p><b>Update the scheme of delegation and ensure that a version of it is published in an easy-to-understand format, such as a flow chart.</b></p> <p>Challenge the work of committee to ensure that applications are only considered where that process adds significant value. This is to ensure the development management service operates as efficiently and effectively as possible having regard to the resources needed to bring an application to committee.</p>
R10	<p><b>Engage with regular planning agents to make the validation requirements clear and improve the quality of their submissions as well as to explain the way the service is moving forward.</b></p> <p>Agents forums are also ideal for getting feedback about their priorities in relation to both applications and pre-application advice.</p>

## **4. Scope of the review**

- 4.1. Dorset asked for a review to assess their position with regard to the process of bringing five districts and one county council together as a single unitary authority. They asked for the review to consider three particular challenges the Council is facing: (1) a focus on customers – delivering better services with constrained resources; (2) service transformation – taking a commercial position while still being good for customers; and (3) digital transformation – using technology as a key to implementing efficient systems and processes.
- 4.2. The PAS review was carried out by fellow local government planning professionals and senior councillors – not consultants, inspectors or lawyers.
- 4.3. The review focused on five key areas as they relate to the planning service:
- 4.3.1. Theme 1: Vision and leadership**
  - 4.3.2. Theme 2: Customers and stakeholders**
  - 4.3.3. Theme 3: Effective and efficient services**
  - 4.3.4. Theme 4: Change management, priorities and staff reorganisation**
  - 4.3.5. Theme 5: Sustainable and financially viable service**
- 4.4.** It is important to stress that this review is not an inspection: it is improvement-focused and designed to complement and add value to the Council's own performance and improvement plans. The review is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment but for the members of the peer team to draw on their experience and knowledge and reflect on the information presented to them and what they observed on site.
- 4.5. This report is a summary of the peer team's findings. Naturally, the review represents a snapshot in time and will inevitably will touch on things that the Council is already addressing and progressing.
- 4.6. The PAS peer team has presented a verbal summary of this report and recommendations to an audience made up of those who took part in or were interviewed for the review.
- 4.7. We would like to thank the community representatives, councillors, staff, customers and partners for their open, honest and constructive responses during the review process. All information collected is on a non-attributable basis. The team was made to feel very welcome and would especially like to mention the invaluable assistance and excellent onsite support provided by Dorset's planning team.

## 5. Planning Advisory Service (PAS)

- 5.1. PAS is a Local Government Association (LGA) programme which is funded primarily by a grant from the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG).
- 5.2. PAS's principal mission is to ensure that local planning authorities (LPAs) are continuously improving in their execution and delivery of planning services.
- 5.3. To achieve this, the PAS work programme focuses on:
  - a) Helping local government officers and councillors to stay effective and up to date by guiding them on the implementation of the latest reforms to planning.
  - b) Promoting a 'sector-led' improvement programme that encourages and facilitates local authorities to help each other through peer support and the sharing of best practice.
  - c) Providing consultancy and peer support, designing and delivering training and learning events, and publishing a range of resources online.
  - d) Facilitating organisational change, improvement and capacity building programmes – promoting, sharing and helping implement the very latest and best ways of delivering the planning service.
- 5.4. PAS also delivers some of its services on a commercial basis, including change and improvement programmes for individual and groups of planning authorities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

## 6. The peer team

- 6.1. The peer team is made up of a serving council officer, serving councillors and a PAS programme manager and a review manager:
  - **Brian Glasson** – Head of Strategic Planning and Housing, South Gloucestershire Council
  - **Richard Crawley** – Programme Manager, Planning Advisory Service
  - **Rob Waltham MBE** – Elected member, Leader, North Lincs
  - **Adele Morris** – Elected member, London Borough of Southwark
  - **Raymond Crawford** – Associate, Planning Advisory Service, Peer Challenge Manager

## **7. Theme 1: Vision and leadership**

- 7.1. Bringing together five districts and a county council in a short period of time is a big undertaking and has led to a period of uncertainty and change for staff, customers and other stakeholders. This is compounded by the fact that four of the districts had already been experiencing ongoing change over a period of several years – three within the Dorset Councils Partnership group and East Dorset in joining together with, and then separating from, neighbouring Christchurch.
- 7.2. The Council sees the planning service as central to delivering its ambitions and there seemed to be a clear understanding of the nature of the challenges – if not always their scale – among the leadership team.
- 7.3. The portfolio holder is enthusiastic and focused on the essential issues, and the political leadership is strong and ambitious for Dorset. The timetable for reviewing the local plan is challenging, so strong leadership will be needed to ensure that progress is maintained. The formation of an Executive Advisory Panel is encouraging as this is an excellent way to ensure a clear direction and pace is maintained.
- 7.4. The word ‘transformation’ was used a lot in the meetings with the peer team, but it was apparent that there was a lack of clarity about what it means and how it affects the way people work on a day-to-day basis. There is a need for the leadership, both political and within the executive, to be clear about what practical changes are expected.
- 7.5. The transition from a small to a large council where managers are dealing with many more staff members and have to be less ‘hands on’ and more strategic can be quite challenging. Furthermore, at the time of the visit there was an ongoing staff consultation over future staffing arrangements, roles and salaries, so aspects of what the peer team observed were transitional and not the way the Council plans to operate in the long term. However, the peer team were concerned that while the management team were focused on transforming the organisation, staff felt a lack of oversight and support for the delivery of the day-to-day service.
- 7.6. Concern over the visibility of senior managers was raised on a number of occasions. The peer team appreciate the challenges senior managers face and the pressure they are under, and their relationships with staff will inevitably be less direct than in smaller councils. However, this is an area which needs to be looked at critically to identify opportunities for managers to provide visible leadership, support and guidance so that staff concerns are addressed and expectations managed. It is to be expected that this will be less of an issue when the new staffing structures are in place and people’s final roles in the organisation are clearly defined.

- 7.7. With all the changes taking place throughout the service, it is important that the vision and priorities of the Council are clear and that as far as possible everybody in the organisation is fully ‘on board’. This is not currently the case and there is a need to use all appropriate channels to reinforce the message of what the Council is aiming to do, how that is being achieved, and how much progress is being made.
- 7.8. If the Council’s ambitious plans are to be realised, there is a need for clear accountability for actions taken at all levels in the organisation. Without clear responsibility and ownership of tasks and accountability for work done and decisions made, there is a high risk that the Council’s ambitions will not be realised. There is a need to reinforce the vision in practical terms and to provide clear leadership, as distinct from management, to ‘bring everybody along’ – including staff, applicants, agents, local residents, internal and external stakeholders alike.
- 7.9. In some areas the Council is effectively operating as three councils based around the area teams, rather than one. If the desired changes are to be realised, a key driver must be a one-council management approach, with a clear message consistently applied across the whole service, and this needs to be brought forward at pace before existing cultures become embedded.
- 7.10. Performance and quality of service and outcomes varied considerably across the former councils, reflecting the different areas, systems and procedures of the different organisations. The development management service of the new authority is performing poorly and the peer team heard complaints about inconsistencies and delays. If the Council is to be in a position to charge more for services and become more sustainable in the long term, the service will need to be transformed. Leadership will have to be clear what this means in practical terms and provide the leadership and support needed to achieve that.
- 7.11. Improving relationships with partners will be important if the Council is to achieve its aims. Good communication will be key to ensure partners work closely together, share the same agenda and push in the same direction. Partners need to have an understanding of the pressures and constraints that others are working under so that they can work together effectively and efficiently.

## **8. Theme 2: Customers and stakeholders**

*[Customers and stakeholders are the users of the service, including applicants and agents, town and parish councillors, internal and external consultees, both statutory and non-statutory.]*

- 8.1. Customers and stakeholders have no control over the way the planning service operates, but their active participation can help the process run much more smoothly and deliver better outcomes. Throughout the discussions with the peer team, the most common message was one of inconsistency. For every example of good practice, there was one where the users were left frustrated. People were generally sympathetic to the pressure that planning officers were under, but nevertheless were often left dissatisfied.
- 8.2. The team were told of examples of positive engagement and support for neighbourhood planning but also cases in which residents felt discouraged. It is likely this is the a result of variable experiences and attitudes towards neighbourhood planning among the former authorities. This illustrates a need for strong communication on the issue from the leadership of the new Council.
- 8.3. Feedback about a local plan workshop held in the autumn was very positive, but people who had been involved were concerned that they had not received any updates on progress, and they were not clear whether there had been any other workshops to which they had not been invited or whether any more were planned. If stakeholders are to remain fully engaged, and if the planning authority is to take full advantage of their skills and expertise, it is vital that they are kept fully informed.
- 8.4. There was positive feedback about supportive officers who worked to find innovative solutions, but others were seen as unhelpful, including an example where someone was told that it was above the officer's pay grade to provide the advice that was being sought.
- 8.5. If the service is to be improved and potential income streams fully tapped, it is important that procedures are in place to ensure that the right people provide advice, that the level of delegation of decisions is absolutely clear, and that there are mechanisms to ensure consistency in the advice given.
- 8.6. There is also a need to ensure that everyone is clear what the vision and culture of the Council means in terms of how far negotiations on schemes are taken. It is important for officers to understand this, but also for customers to know what to expect. For example, is it the case that wherever possible the authority will work to make an otherwise unacceptable scheme approachable, or will they issue a quick refusal?
- 8.7. We were told that the support team receives over 1,000 calls a week. If this figure is accurate, it represents a significant failure of the overall service. Telephone calls are very disruptive to people's work, are often misdirected, and can be frustrating to customers. A modern back-office planning application system should be capable of providing automated updates on the progress of applications. Automated email replies advising people of the likely timeframe for a response, easily accessible information online, and carefully worded letters are all ways of reducing avoidable contact and improving customer service. Some 'light touch' monitoring of telephone calls received by the support team could establish whether there are any recurring issues that could be addressed. Procedures could then be put in place to address the most frequent issues so that people do not feel the need to call.

- 8.8. Town and parish councillors, agents and other stakeholders all complained about poor communication. In particular, town and parish councillors saw the loss of planning surgeries as a significant reduction in the quality of the service. A surgery is an expensive service to operate, but there may be more innovative and efficient ways to achieve similar goals, or there may even be scope for surgeries to be offered as a chargeable service. Understanding what the town and parish councillors actually want from the service would be key to identifying how to meet their needs.
- 8.9. There were complaints about inconsistencies in advice given and decisions made. In one case, pre-application advice was given by one officer, but another officer gave contradictory advice later in the process. This delayed the scheme and the applicants incurred additional costs. There needs to be a procedure in place to ensure that advice that is given is supported by the service as a whole. This could be achieved, for example, with a regular casework surgery where officers could seek a second opinion on certain cases, or where a consensus view could be sought between specialists and planning officers before the application was reported to committee.
- 8.10. The review team heard positive feedback about many councillors, but in some areas there would be a benefit in further training. As with other parts of the service, this variance is partly a legacy of the different approaches of the former authorities. If the new Dorset Council is to be seen as good to do business with, it is important that all members are well trained and feel confident in making sometimes difficult decisions. There was some concern that some town and parish councillors did not fully understand the status of their comments on applications and were frustrated when they were not fully endorsed at the next stage.
- 8.11. The ICT system was singled out by many users as a particular issue. An immediate problem for users is the fact that the online planning application system is still divided along the old council borders, and these do not reflect the boundaries of the new area teams. To be able to view a planning application you need to know which former authority it was within and search within the corresponding of the website. Though a temporary issue, it is a significant obstacle to proper public engagement and it is important that this is resolved urgently.
- 8.12. Finding information on the website was another area of concern. Bringing the six councils together is an opportunity to create a single source of easily accessible planning information for the whole area which would improve the service to customers and, at the same time, create efficiencies for staff who will not have to deal with so many information requests.
- 8.13. There was widespread concern about environmental issues from all the groups that the team met, and an enthusiasm to address these issues. However, there was also a lack of clarity as to where environmental sustainability sits within planning matters, in terms of both formulating planning policy and assessing planning applications. This lack of clarity is partly a legacy of differences in how the old authorities were organised, but also a broader training or communication issue.
- 8.14. The Council is well aware of the poor performance of parts of the development management service in terms of making timely planning decisions, and this has dominated a lot of their discussions with customers. This was a key concern for all users of the service in their discussions with the peer team. It is in everybody's interest to make planning

decisions as quickly as possible. At the time of the review visit there was an unacceptable delay in the time taken to register planning applications and concern about the quality and consistency of the process. This poor customer service creates further inefficiency as staff have to deal with more enquiries from users.

- 8.15. A considerable backlog has been allowed to build up at the validation stage. If extra temporary resources were used to clear the backlog, a level of service in which applications took only two or three days to be validated could be established. If the validation backlog is cleared quickly it will be necessary to have robust measures in place to manage the surge of applications that will be passed on to planning officers.
- 8.16. Poor communication was a thread that ran through our discussions with all the stakeholders. If the service is to improve and reach its full potential, this communication needs to be two-way. It cannot be a matter of the Council simply telling users how things are going to be: meaningful and ongoing dialogue is needed. If the Council is open about the challenges facing the service, it will make it easier for users to understand what they can expect.
- 8.17. There is a need to ensure that there is a simple and effective way of keeping track of correspondence and linking it to applications and addresses to make sure that all items are dealt with in an appropriate way. This would enable officers to manage their workflow and would ensure a consistent approach. There is also a role for a regular simple update for users to keep them informed of any changes to planning law or the way the service operates.
- 8.18. In many cases a lack of knowledge of how the planning system works – in general, and in Dorset in particular – is a cause of confusion. Sometimes the challenge is to manage people's expectations about what can be achieved; in other cases it is a matter of demonstrating the opportunities afforded by the system to shape the future of the area.
- 8.19. Training for ward, town and parish councillors is an effective way to get the message out. Along with planning agents, they need to be part of the collective vision for the area. Well-informed councillors can give members of the public sound advice about planning procedures, such as how to comment on an application and what can or cannot be taken into account, along with the principles of how S106 and CIL money can be spent. The presumption in favour of sustainable development is something that needs to be continually reinforced. Well-intentioned but misinformed advice from town, parish or ward councillors is not helpful to local residents. For the public, simple factsheets or a searchable FAQ database on the website would be a useful resource that improves understanding and reduces unnecessary contact with officers.
- 8.20. There is a need to clear the backlog of applications. However, dealing with a large number of applications in a short period of time, where many might be outside the time period for determination, could have a very significant negative impact on the performance statistics submitted to government in a particular quarter, and this will need to be carefully managed. Agreeing time extensions is one approach, but it also may be that the first applications to be determined should be the simplest and not necessarily be the oldest. Streaming applications may also be a way forward: ensuring that all new applications are registered and validated within new time and quality targets, while assigning a team of technical and planning staff to work through the backlog cases as a separate workstream.

## **9. Theme 3: Change management and priorities**

- 9.1. Council services in Dorset have been through a prolonged period of upheaval. This type of change can be stressful and have an adverse impact on the delivery of services while systems are in a state of flux. The consultation on new staffing arrangements that had just started at the time of our visit is only the latest cause of uncertainty.
- 9.2. It was therefore encouraging to see that during our visit people did seem engaged with the process, and generally positive about what the final outcome might be. There was evidence of good line management and examples of staff being supported with their learning and development. The Portfolio Holder is extremely enthusiastic about the service and he is very supportive and engaged with bringing forward constructive improvements.
- 9.3. The Council made clear to the peer team their wish to transform the whole service. However, so far that transformation has been less about changing the way things actually happen and more of a human resources process cascading from the top. The logic of this approach is understandable, but there is a need to change what people actually do and this is far more complicated than just slotting people into a new organisational structure. The practical arrangements of work (sometimes known as ‘hygiene factors’) really matter to people and there remained some important, basic and unknown facts at the time of the team’s visit.
- 9.4. For those people at the front line, processing planning applications, the changes they have seen so far are the establishment of new area teams with the added difficulty of operating five different computer systems where the boundaries are different to the new areas. It is largely through the goodwill and dedication of the staff that it has been possible to maintain business as usual for customers, and there is a risk that that goodwill will run out if there is no evidence that things are improving. For those concerned with the day-to-day practicalities of providing the service, the ‘vision’ can seem rather remote.
- 9.5. There is a need to continue to invest in the routine hygiene issues and to translate the vision into something tangible in the way people work and the decisions they make: where people will sit, what their responsibilities will be, what teams will they be in, what processes will they follow, and what systems will they use. These are all part of a real-life manifestation of the vision: they give people certainty and confidence in knowing what they should be doing and how they should be behaving.
- 9.6. Among staff and other stakeholders, there was a concern that people did not know who to deal with in the new organisation. People talked about having established good working relationships with individual officers, but now that they had moved, they did not know who to contact. This makes meaningful cooperation more difficult and can be a drain on time while people try to get in touch with the right person.
- 9.7. There is a need for a ‘who’s who’, setting out who people are, what they do, who they support and who they need help from. This could help with team-building and time could be set aside for a ‘marketplace’ where people could meet and put faces to names and job titles. The aim should be to establish a contact database that is searchable by name, job title and function.

## **10. Theme 4: Effective and efficient services**

- 10.1. The potential benefits of being a larger authority are greater resilience and economies of scale, but none of this necessarily follows unless the right arrangements are put in place. In fact, there can sometimes be pressure to add a layer of management to coordinate separate teams.
- 10.2. It is encouraging to see that a few months into the change process some efficiencies are already apparent, and there is a large pool of specialists within the organisation who can be called on for advice. This pool is a valuable asset; having those resources in-house offers the potential to provide timely and cost-effective expertise to both the local plan and development management services.
- 10.3. There is already evidence of individual specialists working together to coordinate their work. This is an informal arrangement but should be encouraged.
- 10.4. We were told that Development Management Officers take pride in delivering successful development, with Brewery Square being cited as an example. It is good to hear that the importance of outcomes on the ground has not been lost during this period of change, when it is easy for an authority to become very inward-looking and process-driven.
- 10.5. Delays in the validation process are making it difficult or impossible for planning officers to determine applications within performance targets. The problem is exacerbated by inconsistencies in the quality of the validation, where, on occasion, after a long delay further information has to be requested. This has been a major contributory factor to the Council's unacceptable reliance on time extensions when dealing with even simple applications.
- 10.6. If the backlog is cleared, existing staff resources should be sufficient to maintain a timely throughput of applications. Up-to-date validation checklists and detailed training for staff can improve consistency, and this could be backed up with advice and training for local agents (who submit a high proportion of applications) so that they appreciate why certain things are required. Improving the validation service has the potential to significantly raise performance against national targets.
- 10.7. The current ICT infrastructure, both in terms of hardware and software, is a considerable constraint on performance and restricts effectiveness and efficiency. The development management service currently uses a range of different back-office systems across three area teams, and in an arrangement where the boundaries between the systems are not the same as the new area teams. Switching between systems takes time and is likely to lead to errors in the application process. It also makes it very difficult to keep track of the flow of applications to ensure a timely decision.
- 10.8. Because operating systems do not reflect the area teams it is virtually impossible to undertake any meaningful monitoring of officers' workload and performance across most of the service. Performance management is important if the full potential of the development team is to be realised. It is important to recognise good performance and to address poor performance if that is not to bring down the performance of the whole team. Poor performance is likely to be due to a complex mix of factors, and the right support, training and encouragement can have a strongly positive impact. Without data, however, it is not

possible to have a reasoned and measured discussion.

- 10.9. Development Management Officers said that they feel overworked and many have a large backlog of current applications. There was considerable sympathy for this position from stakeholders. However, the current and proposed staffing levels in relation to the number of applications being determined are comparable with other similar authorities, so there would appear to be scope for reviewing processes to ensure that they are operating as efficiently as possible.
- 10.10. Most applications that might be referred to as 'current' are not being actively worked on. It is a matter of *workflow* rather than *workload*. If the current backlog was cleared, it should be possible to markedly improve performance times through better management of workflow, without the need for more permanent staff. For example, simply making sure that simple applications are not delayed by complicated ones can have a big impact on performance figures.
- 10.11. Throughout all our discussions there was an awareness of ecology and other green issues and a keenness to address the problem of the climate emergency. However, there seemed to be a lack of clarity as to exactly how responsibility for the various aspects of sit within the organisation and how the different threads come together. We were told of a situation where the Council issued guidance on trees and greening the district through an Executive Advisory Panel, but the tree officers within the development management service were not involved. The Executive Advisory Panels are a good vehicle for driving and coordinating the work of the authority, but it is important that they work hand in hand with the various experts in different parts of the council.
- 10.12. Senior officers and members are seeking to fund ICT improvements. There is an immediate need to bring together all the data onto one system so that officers can work more efficiently and effectively, and so that local residents can easily view current applications. However, it is important to be open to the idea that the short-term solution might not necessarily be the best solution in the long term, so improving ICT really needs to be a two-stage process. Any long-term solution needs to be capable of automating as much of the process as possible to minimise avoidable contact with officers.
- 10.13. As part of the process to decide on a new back-office system, it would be advisable to visit other authorities to see what products are currently available and to look at the processes they use, particularly in development management. Alongside this, learning from best practice from the legacy authorities would also be beneficial, as would listening to ideas from officers about experiences at other authorities they may have worked at before. Previous data gathering by PAS has shown that an application dealt with at committee involves approximately 10 times the resources of one determined by officers. Ensuring that only the most significant or controversial applications are dealt with by committee, where member involvement adds value to the process, reduces officer workload and processing times and improves efficiency.
- 10.14. The local plan timetable is challenging, but it provides an opportunity to bring together the climate change and other ecological issues at a relatively early point in the Council's existence. The process of developing the plan is an opportunity to establish working relationships between the relevant experts which could continue in the long term.

10.15. Concerns were raised that specialists are sometimes pulled between the demands of commenting on planning applications and advising on policy matters for the local plan. This needs careful management. Is it clear that all the interventions on planning applications add value? Could more use be made of ‘standing advice’ and up-skilling Development Management Officers to make more straightforward assessments, and thereby help manage the workload of specialist officers?

10.16. The planning service is much bigger than people were used to before the reorganisation. Maintaining meaningful two-way communication between managers and staff, and between different groups of staff, will be vital if the Council is to operate effectively. There is no shortcut to this, but it is important that processes are in place to facilitate that communication, and that those processes are not onerous or a cause of inefficiency.

## **11. Theme 5: Sustainable and financially viable services**

- 11.1. The Council's goal is to establish a sustainable and financially viable service in the long term. This means working as efficiently as possible and maximising income, particularly where an enhanced service can be offered. Increasing income from additional fees from enhanced services is the best way forward, but it has to be acknowledged that the service offered at present is not of an appropriate standard.
- 11.2. There is a widespread view amongst the staff that the DM teams are under-resourced and have been for many years. However in November 2019 some members of the team undertook a technical and resource review of the service. The results of this review showed that productivity figures are in line with other similar authorities when looking at the number of applications against the number of staff. This means that the emphasis should now be on implementing the new structure and streamlining procedures. The service needs to be adapted and perhaps reconfigured to the resources available.
- 11.3. With current fee income at around £3m, aiming to draw in an additional £1m from new income sources is likely to be attainable. The peer team is of the opinion that a long-term position where fee income covers 73% or operating costs of the service is challenging but achievable. It is encouraging that a four-year plan has been put in place, and this plan seems to be realistic and pragmatic. The plan provides a degree of certainty and enables progress to be monitored to ensure that timescales don't slip.
- 11.4. The Council has been lacking a robust procedure for keeping track of capital receipts from developers through CIL and S106 agreements, and how that income is spent. The situation is exacerbated by the bringing together of five districts and the County Council, which had different ways of working. Progress is being made but this will be difficult until ICT systems are improved. The issue will become more pressing later this year as there will be a requirement to issue a clear Infrastructure Funding Statement. There is also a lost opportunity for showcasing the way these contributions can provide new infrastructure and community facilities.
- 11.5. It is important that the new staffing structure is in place as soon as possible so that new working relationships can become properly established. Staffing issues are important but they distract from delivering day-to-day services. Change processes will continue and so it healthy to establishing a culture of continual improvement, where staff at all levels challenge the way they work and question whether there are better ways of doing things.
- 11.6. The development management service is relying heavily on agreeing extensions of time for even the simplest applications to improve the performance figures. Time extensions are reasonable to allow negotiations to the place, but not where they are used to cover up poor procedures. We heard a suggestion that some agents might be considering refusing to agree extensions and instead seek a refund of their fees under the 26-week guarantee. If this were to happen in a significant number of cases, it would have a serious impact on the reputation, performance figures and fee income.
- 11.7. While the current level of service is not good enough to warrant an additional fee, we would encourage the Council to get the arrangements for a charged service set up as soon as possible and run it as a pilot, either free or at a discounted rate. This would provide an opportunity for agents to sample the service before they have to pay for it fully and

would provide the chance to get user feedback so that the service can be adapted accordingly.

11.8. For the service to be sustainable in the long term, in addition to maximising income, there will be a need to work as efficiently as possible. There is scope for improvement in this area. Simplifying the processes around the most straightforward parts of the service can free up time for planners to use their skills where they can really add value to the application by negotiating improvements to schemes and delivering quick, robust decisions.

## 12. Implementation, next steps and further support

12.1. In September 2020 the council provided the following table as an update on the actions taken in response to the recommendations of the peer team:

- Completed a review of entire Planning Service (new structure, additional posts in under-resourced areas)
- Appointed all existing staff to posts in the new structure
- Recruitment of staff to vacant posts: July – September 2020
- Covid-19:
  - Interim measures in place to continue planning service including document management, post, consultation arrangements and site visits
  - Issued guidance to town and parish councils as to how we are proceeding during lockdown
  - Prepared Covid 19 guidance on how planning will support economic and social recovery (covering high streets, construction and enforcement)
  - Set up and successfully held virtual planning committees to ensure that all non-delegated decisions can continue to be determined
- Made use of Google Earth and Street View, and invited applicants/agents to assist with site notices

No.	PAS Recommendation	Actions/comments	Indicative Milestone
R1	Bring together the whole development management service onto a single software platform that can provide good functionality for customers and simple workflow and performance management.	Work is now underway to consolidate onto a single software platform. There will be phases of implementation for the different legacy systems, with the first phase completed in September 2020, and the entire area completed by March 2021.  All core planning, land charges and building control will use the same system, database and mapping data	Consolidation complete by March 2021
R2	Establish a 'who's who' directory, setting out who does what in the new structure.	Appointment of existing employees into new structure completed in June 2020. Recruitment into new and vacant positions to begin in July 2020. Appointments to take place between July and September.	New recruits in post by September-December 2020  Directory to be made available

No.	PAS Recommendation	Actions/comments	Indicative Milestone
		Directory of staff in preparation – complete with structure, roles, names, and contact details.	by Autumn 2020 and updated as necessary
R3	Create new temporary capacity to address the backlog of applications that need processing and to keep the frontline service operating while senior managers deal with the changes to the organisation.	External support commissioned to assist with backlogs. This is targeted at both validation of applications and householder applications. To date this approach has been effective in clearing the validation backlog in the most affected team areas, recent difficulties during Covid-19 have created some additional validation backlogs.	Utilise interim support to clear backlog (February 2020 – Spring 2021)
R4	Translate the Council's vision and new culture into practical actions that guide the way people work and interact to deliver the service. This will improve consistency and fairness.	Phased approach being rolled out. This consists of: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Creation of longer term vision with 4-year plan for Planning in Dorset (to inform service planning) which aims to move forward in the following overlapping steps:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Standardise, stabilise and recover</li> <li>• Capacity Building</li> <li>• Developing our Strengths</li> <li>• Provide an exemplar Service</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. Prepare, agree and publicise service standards</li> <li>3. Form task and finish groups on key work strands, including procedural guidance</li> </ol>	1: Autumn 2020 2: End 2020 3: April 2021 onwards
R5	Improve communication between staff and managers or members, and between the Council and customers and other stakeholders, including the towns and parishes.	The following measures are taking place or are planned: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Bi-monthly staff briefings</li> <li>2. Management meetings – leadership of service, consistency of decisions, issues and priorities</li> <li>3. Bi-monthly meetings with planning portfolio holder and planning committee chairs/vice-chairs</li> <li>4. All-member briefings on planning matters as and when needed</li> <li>5. 6-monthly webinars for town and parish councils</li> <li>6. 6-monthly agents meetings</li> </ol>	1-3 in place; 4-6: programme in place by Autumn 2020
R6	Pilot an enhanced Planning Performance Agreement development management service.	Benchmarking to be undertaken and PPA template and guidance to be drafted	Pilot / trial PPA by end 2020

No.	PAS Recommendation	Actions/comments	Indicative Milestone
R7	Improve the receipt and spending of income from S106 and the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) to enable an Infrastructure Funding Statement to be published in December 2020.	<p>Progress is well underway. An audit of CIL/s106 receipts (including from legacy authorities) has been completed, and existing spend commitments are logged. A review of governance arrangements is at an advanced stage and should be completed in Summer 2020.</p> <p>Work is taking place as part of emerging Dorset Local Plan to identify future infrastructure aspirations and priorities as part of emerging Local Plan</p>	Infrastructure Funding Statement: publication in December 2020
R8	Maintain a programme of training for ward, parish and town councillors to ensure that they are well-informed and can provide appropriate advice to residents.	Review of existing training material and scoping of future requirements to be undertaken. A programme of training needs will be kept under review in consultation with members, town and parish councils.	Autumn 2020 – Spring 2021
R9	Update the scheme of delegation and ensure that a version of it is published in an easy-to-understand format, such as a flow chart.	Review of officer delegations to begin following restructure of Planning Service. This will be shared (with suitable guidance and training as necessary) with staff, councillors and town and parish councils. Easy-to-understand guidance/flowchart will be made available on Council Website.	Autumn 2020
R10	Engage with regular planning agents to make the validation requirements clear and improve the quality of their submissions as well as to explain the way the service is moving forward.	<p>During Covid-19 uses has been made of social media and business web pages to provide updates to agents/business community about planning in Dorset.</p> <p>Validation process will be the subject of further review with clear guidelines provided. This will be communicated to agents and followed up with 6-monthly agent meetings/webinars</p> <p>Planning Service will initiate further discussions with agents about quality of submissions, improved pre-app service and potential for accredited agents who attain consistently high validation standards</p>	Autumn 2020 onwards
NEW	Consider and review service in light of	1. DM practices (site visits/notices etc.)	July 2020-Autumn 2021 (kept)

No.	PAS Recommendation	Actions/comments	Indicative Milestone
	COVID-19	<p>2. Adapting the approach to planning advice and customer service</p> <p>3. Review of sustainable recovery and implications for planning: e.g. growth sectors; role of town centres; housing delivery; climate emergency</p>	under review)

The author of this report is

Raymond Crawford, on behalf of the peer review team.

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



**Local Government Association  
18 Smith Square  
Westminster  
London  
SW1P 3HZ**

Contact us by:

Email: [PAS@local.gov.uk](mailto:PAS@local.gov.uk)

Telephone: 020 7664 3000

Fax: 020 7664 3030