

Cabinet

8 December 2020

Transformation of Planning Services: PAS Peer Review Findings and Actions

For Decision

Portfolio Holder: Cllr D Walsh, Planning

Local Councillor(s): All

Executive Director: J Sellgren, Executive Director of Place

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Report Status: Public

Recommendation:

That Cabinet:

1. notes the Planning Advisory Service Peer Review of Dorset Council's Planning Service and agrees the recommendations and action plan as set out in the report;
2. agrees that Place and Resources Scrutiny Committee receives biannual (or more frequent as necessary) progress reports on implementation of the action plan.

Reason for Recommendation:

The visit of the PAS peer review team took place at a formative time in the unitary council's development and the work it carried out has informed the Local Planning Authority in shaping its transformation programme. The final report contains practical and constructive recommendations and an action plan which are intended to assist Dorset Council in progressing the work needed to deliver a high-quality and customer-focused planning service.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Planning Advisory Service (PAS) is a Local Government Group programme and is directly funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government. It helps local authorities to deliver:
- strong and strategic planning for neighbourhoods and local areas
 - effective development management and good decision making
 - accountable and value for money planning services.
- 1.2 PAS was invited to carry out a peer review of Dorset Council's planning service prior to the restructure of the service. A review team of fellow local government planning professionals and senior councillors visited Dorset in January this year and conducted a series of interviews and workshops with elected members, officers and customers of the service.
- 1.3 By PAS's admission the timing was unusual as normally such reviews take place in situations where departments are already established rather than in the midst of transition and transformation. This was intentional on the part of Dorset Council, as it was seen as an opportunity to get independent peer advice at a formative period in our evolution soon after Local Government Reorganisation, and PAS considered the council's instigation of the review at this time to be a positive step.

Summary of the findings

- 1.4 The review focused on five key areas:
- Theme 1: Vision and leadership
 - Theme 2: Customers and stakeholders
 - Theme 3: Effective and efficient services
 - Theme 4: Change management, priorities and staff reorganisation
 - Theme 5: Sustainable and financially viable service
- 1.5 The review report sets out 10 key recommendations which are intended to provide a constructive framework for creating a resilient, customer-focused and effective planning service. A key part of this is a recognition of the importance of having fit-for-purpose systems and processes in place to deliver a high quality service and to create the time and space for value-added services. The paragraphs which follow summarise some of the findings and progress made in addressing these.
- 1.6 The report recognises the importance of translating the council's vision and new culture into practical actions (but it also fairly recognises the scale of the challenge). This has been a key driving aim of the restructure process, with teams and services now aligned to closely reflect the

geography of the council and to respond more effectively to resource demands placed upon them.

- 1.7 A key message of the report is the need for consolidating legacy software systems onto a single platform as this will be essential in achieving a consistent, efficient and effective development management service. Work is now well underway on the new development management software system, which also includes building control and land charges on the same platform. The former North Dorset planning records have already migrated onto the new system, and West Dorset is planned for December this year, with Weymouth and Portland following shortly afterwards. Other remaining legacy council systems will then migrate in 2021. Once this phase of work is complete (in spring 2021) work can then progress on transforming the user experience of our planning portal.
- 1.8 The report also highlights the need to tackle planning validation/application backlogs in the interim to provide the breathing space needed for transformation of the service. This has been a challenge due to the service carrying a number of vacant posts during the restructuring process, and it is being addressed through the use of external support (TerraQuest) for a temporary period to assist with the checking and technical assessment of applications.
- 1.9 The report recommends improved communication between staff, members, town and parish councils and customers of the planning service. Of relevance to this is the importance of maintaining a programme of training for elected members and parish and town councillors. Some steps have already been taken to promote this, including the use of webinars, and further initiatives are being planned.
- 1.10 Another key recommendation relates to the role of pre-application advice and the potential this offers for improved income generation, including the use of planning performance agreements (PPAs). The report suggests this should be rolled out initially as a pilot until the system becomes established and tested. In principle this is a sensible suggestion, although the ability to do so will depend upon implications for staff resources. The LPA is currently trialling PPAs in selective cases.
- 1.11 Table 1 sets out the key recommendations.

Table 1: Peer Review Recommendations

R1	<p>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.</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>Establish a ‘who’s who’ directory, setting out who does what in the new structure.</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>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.</p> <p>This new capacity could be from agency workers or by asking staff to work extra hours.</p>
R4	<p>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. .</p> <p>This doesn’t need to be a huge and formal procedures manual, but a series of crib sheets or a Q&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>Improve communication between staff and managers or members, and between the Council and customers and other stakeholders, including the towns and parishes.</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>Pilot an enhanced Planning Performance Agreement development management service.</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>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> <p>The use of developer contributions is also a natural way to create a ‘good news story’ for planning and councillors.</p>

R8	<p>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.</p> <p>The input from parish and town councils is an essential part of the consultation process 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.</p>
R9	<p>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.</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>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> <p>Agents forums are also ideal for getting feedback about their priorities in relation to both applications and pre-application advice.</p>

Action Plan

- 1.12 In response to the initial draft report from PAS, officers were invited by the review team to prepare an action plan to set out steps that were being taken or programmed to address all the recommendations in the peer review. The Planning Leadership Team also proposed an additional recommendation to that contained in the PAS report to consider and review the service in the light of COVID-19, and proposed some actions to deal with this. The action plan was sent to the review team for inclusion in the final report (see Section 12 of Appendix A).
- 1.13 Members will note from the action plan that good progress is being made on a number of initiatives that relate directly to the peer review's recommendations, some of which have been mentioned in paragraphs 1.6-1.10 above. It is clear that the scope of work involved is significant and so indicative milestones have been set out which will need to be kept under review as the transformation programme proceeds. It is therefore recommended that progress on implementing the action plan be reported to Place and Resources Scrutiny Committee during its implementation, provisionally on a biannual basis.

2. Financial Implications

- 2.1 The peer review contains recommendations that involve consolidation of software systems onto a single platform. Whilst this has significant set-up costs, the resulting single platform will ultimately save money and time and reduce ICT support pressures as currently exist for the myriad of legacy platforms. Dorset Council has made a commitment to this as a key transformation project and the PAS report does not add any additional costs to those already anticipated.
- 2.2 A further financial implication arises from recommendation R6 to introduce Planning Performance Agreements. This, along with an improved pre-application advice service, has the potential to increase discretionary income as a means of improving financial resilience in order to offer value-added services.

3. Well-being and Health Implications

- 3.1 Staff in Planning Services will benefit greatly from more efficient software systems, improved processes, a fit-for-purpose customer planning portal, and a new structure that is aligned to the geography and demands of Dorset Council. Notable improvements to well-being are expected to arise from reduced inefficiencies in performing day-to-day tasks, alleviating pressures from application backlogs, and improved customer feedback arising from better service standards.

4. Climate implications

- 4.1 The action plan includes a recommendation to review the service in the light of COVID-19 which includes reference to sustainable recovery and the role of planning in tackling the climate emergency. These are matters that will be relevant to the emerging local plan, but are also reflected in the interim measures taken to support local businesses in their necessary adaptations to the pandemic.

5. Other Implications

- 5.1 None to report.

6. Risk Assessment

- 6.1 Having considered the risks associated with this decision, the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: Low

Residual Risk: Low

7. Equalities Impact Assessment

- 7.1 The peer review is not the subject of Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA). Note, however, that its recommendations are closely linked to the planning service restructure which involved consultation with the unions and staff, and was the subject of an EqIA, as was the software systems transformation. The implementation of the action plan will take place having full regard to the EqIA findings.

8. Appendices

A: PAS Planning Service Peer Challenge – Dorset Council

9. Background Papers

- 9.1 None

Footnote:

Issues relating to financial, legal, environmental, economic and equalities implications have been considered and any information relevant to the decision is included within the report.