



# Development Service

# Visioning Programme

November 2024

# Introduction

In May 2022 the Council brought together the following services to establish a new Development Department. It was the first time in some 15 years that the various planning responsibilities reported to a single Head of Service.

- Building Control
- CIL and S106 Administration
- Conservation
- Economic Development and Tourism
- Housing Policy and Development
- Land Charges
- Landscape and Trees
- Planning and Building Control Administration
- Planning Applications
- Planning Enforcement
- Planning Policy

Doing so created an opportunity to explore how the various development functions of the Council could work better and more effectively together to deliver improved outcomes. This exists of course in a changing context, including a desire to better align with wider corporate objectives and capitalise on the benefits and opportunities of the emerging digital agenda.

The Department Visioning programme brings all of these opportunities together to set out a plan for change. Importantly, the visioning programme is not a one-off event, it is an ongoing journey. The journey began with the commissioning of a Planning Peer Challenge and has then incorporated transformational performance techniques, undertaken with [KBA Solutions](#), resulting in a series of key actions that are being implemented to achieve our Departmental goals and vision.

The Vision Programme will be reviewed regularly, and this document and accompanying action plan will be updated accordingly.



# Transformational Change

Transformational change within an organisation typically takes around 18 months. The diagram below shows the various steps within the change journey.

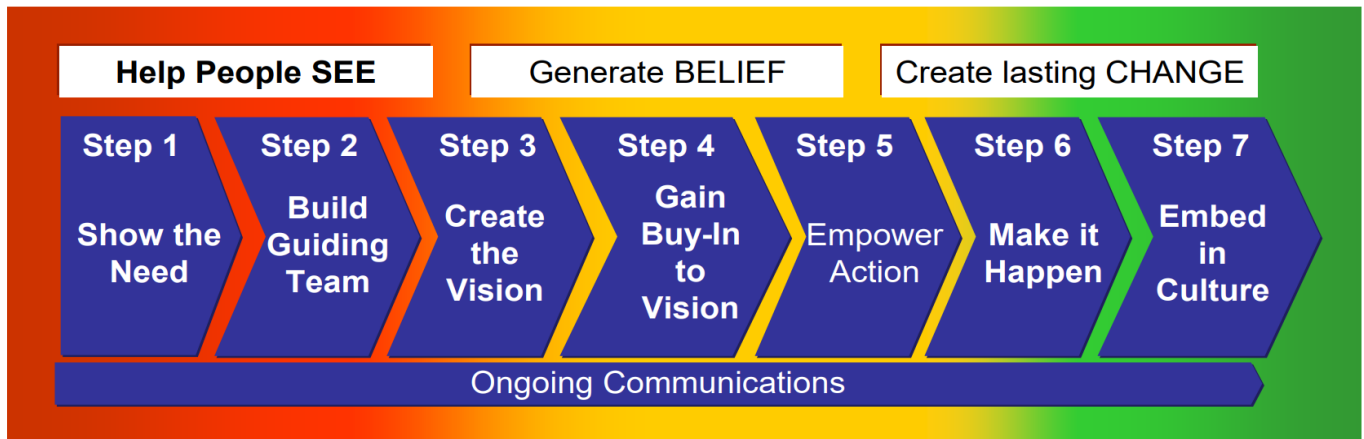
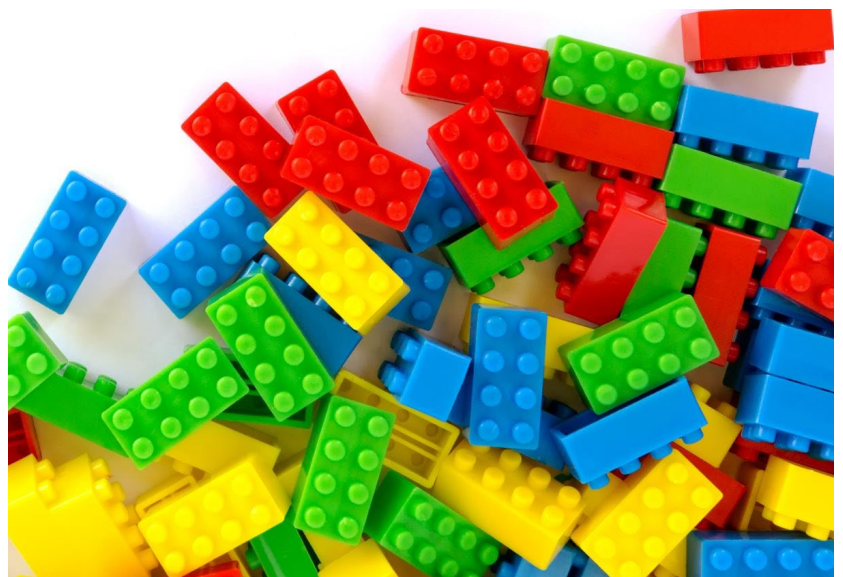


Image Credit: KBA Solutions Ltd

There are various building blocks to embedding change into a culture.

<b>Purpose</b>	The reason why the department exists
<b>Vision</b>	The guiding principles for everything we do
<b>Themes</b>	A distinct component of the vision
<b>Goals</b>	Specific measurable aims to help us achieve the vision
<b>Success Measures</b>	Indicators that allow us to monitor the goals
<b>Key Projects</b>	Series of manageable tasks to deliver each goal



## **Our Purpose**

The following statement sets out our purpose as a department; the reason why the department exists:

Our purpose is to enable the growth of sustainable, attractive, and safe places for both existing and future communities, whilst preserving and enhancing the natural environment and valuable heritage of our District.

## **Our Vision**

The following statement sets out our vision as a department. These are our guiding principles for everything we do. We will live by this vision.

Our vision is to be a service that delivers the development that the district needs; prepares for and responds to climate change and other environmental challenges; and balances competing demands from the plan-making stage through to decision making and implementation. We will facilitate effective participation with all our stakeholders.

We will provide an outstanding and innovative service and act with integrity, care and consistency with a commitment to continuous improvement.

We will be a service where staff feel valued, trusted and empowered to make decisions and manage change in the best public interest.

## **Our Goals**

We have identified four distinct but interrelated components or themes to the vision. To help us achieve our vision, we have established a goal for each theme.

### **Thriving Culture & Leadership**

By 2026 the Development Service will be renowned for being a positive, supportive, and professional team to be part of.

### **Continuous Improvement**

By 2026 through engagement with staff and key stakeholders, the Development Service will have embedded a culture of continuous improvement, utilising Information Technology that is fit for purpose.

### **Positive Engagement**

By 2026, together with our partners we will have identified and improved our engagement techniques to enable active and effective participation by all our stakeholders.

### **Excellence in Decision Making**

By 2026 we will have consistently made transparent and high-quality decisions

# Success Measures

The Department has a good track record in the performance of its various functions:

- Strong 5-year housing land supply
- Improved performance in land charges searches
- Very high customer satisfaction in building control
- Record levels of affordable housing
- Successful grant awards for UK Shared Prosperity Funding
- Strong planning appeal performance

The Visioning programme is about building on these successes, maintaining this excellent performance whilst at the same time improving the delivery of outcomes for all of our customers, be they businesses, residents or applicants.

As such, the visioning programme is a journey of continuous improvement. Different aspects of the programme will come on stream at different times. By regularly reviewing progress against our Key Projects and monitoring our Goals, we will demonstrate change through our actions.

For each goal we have devised series of *success measures* to enable us to monitor our performance. These are set out below:

## Thriving Culture & Leadership

By 2026 the Development Service will be renowned for being a positive, supportive, and professional team to be part of.

1. *Management and leadership teams will achieve positive results in staff surveys and 360 feedback.*
2. *To maintain our excellent record of staff retention, and where appropriate, attracting back staff who have left. This will be achieved through recording and benchmarking staffing retention against other LPAs.*
3. *Reduced number of applications going to committee. This will demonstrate support for the professional judgements of staff.*

## Continuous Improvement

By 2026 through engagement with staff and key stakeholders, the Development Service will have embedded a culture of continuous improvement, utilising Information Technology that is fit for purpose.

1. *To demonstrate our continuous improvement, we will have delivered our key projects and implemented our quick wins in line with the work programme.*

## Positive Engagement

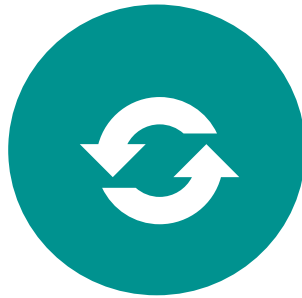
By 2026, together with our partners we will have identified and improved our engagement techniques to enable active and effective participation by all our stakeholders.

1. *Increased awareness of consultations and increased number of responses to consultations. This will be measured using social media data and measured against previous relevant consultations.*
2. *Consultation feedback surveys to show positive results in respect of effectiveness of consultation.*

## Excellence in Decision Making

By 2026 we will have consistently made transparent and high-quality decisions.

1. For planning, the quality of our decisions will be measured through outcomes for residents and appeals benchmarking.
2. For building control, this will be measured by the increased size of our market share.



## Key Projects @ November 2024

To further help us achieve the vision, each goal into more manageable key projects to establish a work programme or action plan for the Department. The key projects are listed below by theme and the detailed Work Programme is included at **Appendix 1**.

The key projects are envisaged to be 'live' and the work programme will be updated regularly, including adding new key projects as they emerge.

To ensure delivery and buy-in across the Department, a departmental manager has been appointed as the project lead for each project, and each group includes staff from across the department. All staff are involved in at least one project group. Strategic oversight and ownership of each theme is provided by a senior departmental managers.

### Stakeholders

A key part of the programme will be improving the relationship with our stakeholders. We already have a strong relationship with SDC members through the officer-led member training and briefing sessions, and this approach can be rolled-out to developers and parishes.

It is proposed to establish a **Developer Forum** to engender regular two-way engagement including plan-making updates, briefings and discussions on new Government initiatives and how they will operate, and feedback from the industry regarding improvements. We will also utilise the newly established **Parish Forum** to achieve similar outcomes with our community representatives.



## Thriving Culture & Leadership

TC.1	Review Scheme of Delegation to Planning Committee
TC.2	Review Scheme of Delegation to Regulatory Committee
TC.3	Departmental Meetings – in person and every 4 months
TC.4	Introduce de-briefs for council committees
TC.5	Remove physical barriers in the office
TC.6	4 monthly department-wide manager & team leaders meeting
TC.7	Team building opportunities
TC.8	Greater oversight of infrastructure

## Continuous Improvement

CI.1	Review Training Needs
CI.2	Review and scope internal and external surveys
CI.3	Support applications for professional Membership
CI.4	Benchmark against other local authorities
CI.5	Publish a correspondence / communications charter / standards
CI.6	Provide structure and clarity in respect of complaints

## Positive Engagement

PE.1	Application notification consistency
PE.2	Improve communications on decisions / outcomes
PE.3	Encourage applicants to undertake community consultation
PE.4	Engagement resources, tools and techniques
PE.5	Closer partnership working with Warwickshire County Council

## Excellence in Decision Making

ED.1	Monitoring and publicising success
ED.2	Bench marking the quality of decisions and the IT systems used to support them
ED.3	Review the pre-application process
ED.4	Review the application amendments procedure



## Planning Peer Challenge

In early summer 2023 the [Local Government Association's Planning Advisory Service](#) (PAS) was invited to undertake a [Peer Challenge](#). A Peer Challenge is an in-depth look at a local planning service by a group of fellow planners and elected members. It provides a critical friend's view and advice, identifying strengths or good practice as well as opportunities for improvement, including how well different elements of the planning service work together and with the rest of the council to deliver the council's strategic, spatial, and place-based objectives.

The PAS Challenge Team visited the council for 3 days between 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> October 2024 and the final report was received in January 2024.

The key outcome of the Peer Challenge is a report containing a conclusion and series of recommendations as to where the Council may want to look at further improvements. The findings are based on conversations with staff, Members, partner organisations and users of the SDC planning service. A 12month review has been scheduled for December 2024.

In summary, the Peer Challenge Team noted:

*“The Planning Service, as a whole, is regarded as a well-performing one; attributed to its excellent performance on meeting national measures on decision-making and a strong track record in plan-making.”*

*“We did not find any critical systemic issues and the recommendations for improvement are refinements and should be viewed in this context.”*

*“These recommendations are designed to assist the Council in further improving its service delivery.”*

The Peer Challenge provides a snapshot view of the planning service at a point in time. The recommendations are set out in **Appendix 2** along with the Council’s initial response to each recommendation and a progress/status update.

The following matrix shows how the PAS recommendations are covered by the key projects. Although not covered by a key project, recommendation 18 is already complete.

		PAS Recommendations																				
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Visioning Programme Key Projects	VP	✓	✓			✓	✓															
	TC.1												✓									
	TC.2		✓										✓				✓					
	TC.3																					
	TC.4															✓						
	TC.5																					
	TC.6		✓																			
	TC.7		✓		✓																	
	TC.8																				✓	
	CI.1				✓				✓						✓							
	CI.2																					
	CI.3				✓																	
	CI.4													✓			✓					
	CI.5		✓								✓											
	CI.6																					
	PE.1									✓												
	PE.2		✓	✓				✓	✓						✓	✓		✓				
	PE.3									✓												
	PE.4		✓					✓	✓						✓							
	PE.5											✓										
	ED.1														✓	✓						
ED.2																				✓		
ED.3							✓														✓	
ED.4							✓														✓	

The PAS report itself is attached at **Appendix 3**. It provides a useful snapshot and critical friend assessment of the planning service which has informed and been superseded the wider visioning programme and key projects.

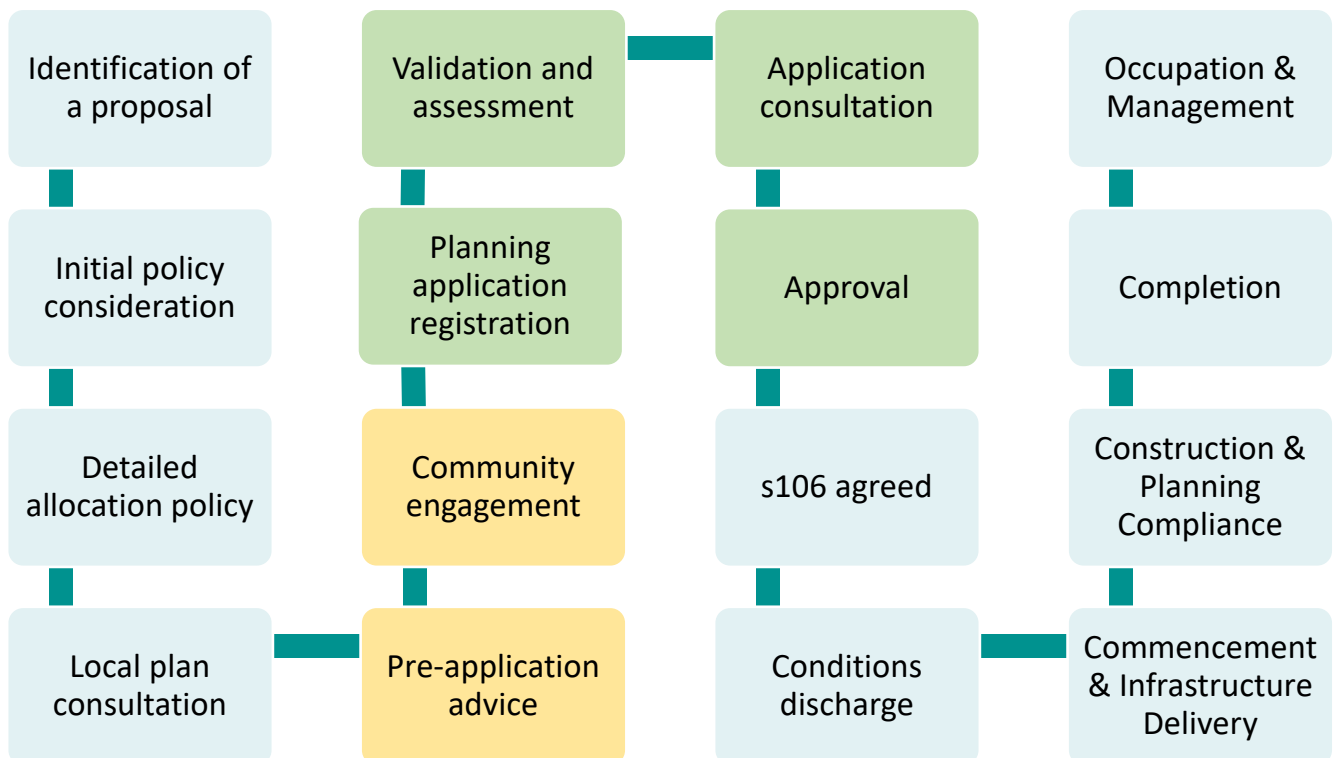
## Implementation

The Department is continuing to implement the Key Projects and progress on the Visioning Programme will reported to SDC Members on a regular basis. As the work proceeds and evolves, additional key projects may be added to the Work Programme.

Bringing the various components of the Department together highlights the various points at which the Department interacts with the different phases of the development process, as shown below, including for example, Building Control during the construction phase and Land Charges at the Completion and Occupation phases.

START

FINISH



It is fair to say that arguably, the focus of the development process is on the formal planning application stages (highlighted green above). This is not untypical. However, this neglects the proactive role of the Department in place-shaping as well as the monitoring role that the Council has in ensuring that development and infrastructure is properly delivered.

As such, two key areas of focus for the Visioning Programme are firstly to embed earlier department involvement and community engagement into proposals, including through encouraging applicants to undertake pre-application advice (highlighted yellow), and secondly, to provide dedicated resources to proactively ensure compliance with planning consents and monitor the delivery of associated infrastructure during the post application stages.

Therefore, to deliver this more holistic and stakeholder driven approach to place-shaping, the Council is looking to re-enforce the management and organisation of the Department with additional resources. This Visioning Programme Document will be reviewed and updated regularly to set out how the improvements are being made and to monitor progress on achievement of the vision.

Implementation of the Work Programme is being undertaken alongside the continued day-to-day operation of the Department and the Head of Service would like to thank all staff for their ongoing and continued participation and support for the Visioning Programme; KBA Solutions and the Peer Challenge Team for their input; and all stakeholders who participated in the Peer Challenge workshops.

# Appendix 1: Work Programme

## Key to Complexity / Risk Columns

	High
	Medium-High
	Low-Medium
	Low

## Key to Status Column

	Complete
	Ongoing / Good progress
	On track
	Little or no progress to date
	Not progressed

Key Projects		Outcome (The Why?)	External Dependencies	Dept. Dependencies	Timescale	High-Level Benefit v Feasibility Assessment	PAS	Key Project Inter-relationships	Complexity (H/M/L)	Risks	Status (@ Nov 24)	Commentary
TC.1	Review Scheme of Delegation to Planning Committee (with a view to implement change)	Empowerment and build officer self- confidence.	Parish Councils Ward Members Committee Services.	DM, HoS	Feb 25	Improved use of resource and self- confidence of officers Vs increased pressure for managers dealing with repercussions of changes and reliant upon gaining member buy in	12, 16, 7, 8	Positive engagement	H	Lack of support from Members and parish councils	Ongoing*	Exploring amendments to constitution to exclude reports where parish councils do not attend and TPOs.  *Relationship to proposed national scheme of delegation
TC.2	Review Scheme of Delegation to Regulatory Committee (with a view to implement change)	Empowerment and build officer self- confidence.	Parish Councils Ward Members Committee Services.	DM, Enf, HoS	Feb 25	Improved use of resource and self- confidence of officers Vs Increased pressure for managers dealing with repercussions of changes and reliant upon gaining member buy in	12, 16, 7, 8	Positive engagement	H	Lack of support from Members.	On Track	Discussions ongoing with Head of Paid Service, Head of Law & Governance and Chair of Regulatory Committee. Proposal to standardise scheme of delegation and update reports to go to OSC. Focus on Regulatory Committee should be decisions on direct action.
TC.3	Departmental Meetings – in person and every 4 months	One team togetherness approach	n/a	HoS, PA, Staff	Nov 24	Benefit for officers vs Need to set a clear agenda so that it is seen as a beneficial use of time. Also requires sufficient desk availability	1, 2, 3, 15		L	Agenda items, venue costs given size of dept	Complete	Sessions an opportunity for whole dept to come together – more than just a corporate / dept debrief. Invite guest speakers. Next session early Dec.
TC.4	Introduce de-briefs for council committees	Build Officer knowledge, confidence, self- awareness, reflective and create a “one team” mentality	n/a	Policy, DM and the relevant Planning Committee Manager	Oct 24	Benefits similar to outcome, few feasibility concerns due to being an “informal meeting”	4, 15		L	None identified	Complete	Sessions being diarised and open to all staff. Opportunity to reflect on questions asked, the members debate and any procedural points and learning outcomes.
TC.5	Remove physical barriers in the office	Creates a “one team” togetherness approach and mentality	Premises Officers, Transformation PM		Nov 24	Benefit similar to outcome Vs Logistical issues with relocating tamber units and relevant documents contained within	2		L	Relationship to wider corporate WoW project	On Track	Relationship to wider corporate WOW project and refurbishment of Elizabeth House.
TC.6	4 monthly department-wide manager & team leaders meeting	Creates a “one team” togetherness approach and mentality	n/a	DMT, HoS, PA	Sept 24	Creates a “one team” togetherness approach and mentality	1,2, 3, 15		L	Diary availability and non-attendance owing to competing priorities.	Complete	DMT currently meeting more regularly as part of Vision Programme
TC.7	Team building opportunities	Creates a “one team” togetherness approach and mentality	n/a	DMT, staff	Feb 25	Creates a “one team” togetherness approach and mentality		ED.1, PE.2	L	Poor turnout.	Ongoing	TBAG committee formed! Suggestions being followed up including office-based Christmas party and departmental newsletter.
TC.8	Greater oversight of infrastructure	To better manage infrastructure delivery to support new development	WCC, Infrastructure Providers, RSLs, Developers, MT	DM, CIL & S106 Admin, Policy	Feb 25	More proactive, co-ordinated, joined-up approach with better outcomes and less reliance on reactive enforcement.	19		MH	Expectation and limited ability to influence outcomes.	On Track	Separate PAS CIL&S106 Review completed (CIL enforcement regime cited as excellent). Need for oversight of infrastructure issue and bringing disparate officers together.
CI.1	Review Training Needs	To maximise staff development and therefore retention which in turn leads to a better service	HR Professional organisations, training bodies	DMT	Feb 25	Maximising the potential of staff to maximise the quality of service and staff retention. Budget issue as to whether SDC can support additional training needs.	4, 5, 6, 20		L	Budgets	Ongoing	Anonymised feedback from appraisals, although hard to find common themes. Expertise already in the dept – will get most learning from each other. Renewed focus on new starters. Mentoring underway. Relationship to corporate staff strategy.
CI.2	Review and scope internal and external surveys	Invite service improvement suggestions	ICT, Insight & Consultation, customers & stakeholders	All dept services	Nov 24	Data driven approach to inform continuous improvement. Need to manage process to ensure collected data is utilised.	3, 5, 20	PE.6	L	Unable to implement suggestions.	On Track	NB: may not be progressed as standalone project as need for surveys related to other individual projects.
CI.3	Support applications for professional Membership	To increase the No. of staff per department with professional membership and encourage apprenticeships schemes and sponsorship of staff.	HR, Finance, professional organisations, training bodies	HoS	Feb 25	Maximising the potential of staff to maximise the quality of service and staff retention. Budget issue.	4, 6	CI.1	L	Budgets	On Track	Dependent on budgets: • Multiple memberships? • Time to prepare applications? • Fund application itself? Relationship to corporate Staff Strategy.
CI.4	Benchmark against other local authorities	To contextualise our operation and performance and inform improvements	Other Authorities	All dept services	Nov 24	Data driven approach to inform continuous improvement. Need to manage process to ensure collected data is utilised.	7, 20	PE.6 ED.2	LM	Unable to obtain data or data not comparable	On Track	Significant overlap with number of other projects. Focus on qualitative benchmarking and digital functionality of other councils. Review AMR. Link to corporate Digital Strategy.

Key Projects		Outcome (The Why?)	External Dependencies	Dept. Dependencies	Timescale	High-Level Benefit v Feasibility Assessment	PAS	Key Project Inter-relationships	Complexity (H/M/L)	Risks	Status (@ Nov 24)	Commentary
CI.5	<b>Publish a correspondence / communications charter / standards</b>	To provide certainty and consistency to both officers and customers	MT Customers ICT	HoS, DSM, DMT	Oct 24	Certainty for customers as to the level of service they can expect. Need to ensure standards are achievable and can be maintained.	2, 7, 16, 17,	ED.2	L	Unintended consequences of setting unachievable standards	Ongoing	Examples sourced and vary greatly both in detail and length. Proposal for short and punchy but need to ensure propose approach is achievable.
CI.6	<b>Provide structure and clarity in respect of complaints</b>	To provide certainty and consistency to both officers and customers	MT Customers	HoS, DSM, DMT	Sept 24	Certainty for customers as to the level of service they can expect. Need to ensure standards are achievable and can be maintained	2, 3, 7,	ED.2	L	None identified	Complete	Amended text on website. Will be kept under review.
PE.1	<b>Application notification consistency</b>	To provide certainty and consistency to both officers and customers	Customers	DM, Dev Support, Case Officers	Dec 24	To ensure clarity and consistency To ensure no upheld complaints in relation to publicity / consultations	7		L	None identified	Ongoing	Systems Admin Team producing report to assist with comparison.
PE.2	<b>Improve communications on decisions / outcomes</b>	Better awareness and understanding of planning decisions/ownership	local press, ICT, Comms	DMT	Dec 24	Better public understanding of the planning process from beginning to end Clarity and transparency in the planning process	7, 10	ED.1	LM	Resources	On Track	Focus on social media and website – single dept latest news page, how to videos, reduce jargon on website, quarterly dept infographics to be published. Link to corporate Communications Strategy.
PE.3	<b>Encourage applicants to undertake community consultation</b>	To improve quality of proposals, speed of decision making and community engagement in the process	Key external consultees/com munity	DM	Dec 24	Better quality and timely decisions to meet national targets	7, 8	ED.3	LM	Lack of take up by developers	Ongoing	Benchmarking completed and wording for website to promote community engagement drafted alongside form for applicants to submit to demonstrate what community engagement has been undertaken. Feeds into review of pre-app and potential need for review to local list and SCI.
PE.4	<b>Engagement resources, tools and techniques</b>	To improve how we engage, benefitting both officers and customers	Other Local Authorities ICT Finance	DMT	Nov 24	To gain an understanding of stakeholder requirements, create a better engaged Development Service / more efficient working and better-quality decisions	7, 8, 10, 20	PE.3	MH	Skills and resources	On Track	Scoping work has identified significant breadth to project. Focus on parish councils and front loading of whole planning process. Also identified wider corporate issues with planning being to touch point. Need to manage expectations. Engagement not helped by changes and communication at parish councils.
PE.5	<b>Closer partnership working with Warwickshire County Council</b>	To improve place-based outcomes	WCC Officers WCC Members SDC Members	HoS DMT	Feb 25	Better understanding of roles of both councils and how better and better aligned place-based outcomes can be achieved. Requires buy-in from WCC.	11		MH	Buy-in from Members and WCC	On Track	Mapping of WCC structures underway and types of interactions. Arranging meeting with WCC to share SDC structures and vision programme and understand WCC perspectives and what WCC want from SDC. Potential concern with WCC use of standing advice.
ED.1	<b>Monitoring and publicising success</b>	More positive view of Dev Services Better relationships with stakeholders Better education and understanding of all parties	Local newspapers, social media, business Support agencies, LABC, Internal comms, Members	DMT	Nov 24	Smoother planning process and engaged communities who better understand why decisions are made. Given number of parishes and changes to PC composition, could be resource intensive.	2, 3, 6, 8, 20, 21	Thriving Culture & Leadership, Positive Engagement Esp PE2 + PE.4	MH	Resources, need Members to act as advocate of department	On Track	Need to define success. Should focus be on internal success sharing? Need to consider how we manage misinformation. Each team to have comms lead? Relationship to corporate Communications Strategy.
ED.2	<b>Bench marking the quality of decisions and the IT systems used to support them</b>	To ensure we're giving value to all our stakeholders and achieve continuous improvement	Other Councils Govt data ICT Performance and Insight Team	Uniform Policy (through the AMR)	Feb 25	Efficiency and effectiveness improvements allowing staff to focus on more important aspects of work inc relationships with members, customers and parishes VS costs and disruption of acquiring systems.	3, 7, 20	Continuous improvement	MH	Resources for new ICT systems	On Track	Proving challenging to obtain qualitative data. New focus on GIS and EDMS and the quality of these processes. Relationship with corporate Digital Strategy.
ED.3	<b>Review the pre-application process</b>	To encourage take-up of the service, leading to better outcomes.	WCC, Developers, other SDC teams	DM	Dec 24	Better outcomes and performance. Opportunity for commercialisation.	21	Continuous improvement	MH	Resourcing the new approach, buy-in from developers, customer up-take	On Track	Service not particularly user friendly with complex fees. Exploring tiered approach and inclusion of householder pre-app and same day appraisal.
ED.4	<b>Review the application amendments procedure</b>	To provide certainty, further improve performance and encourage pre-application advice.	Developers	DM	Dec 24	Better outcomes and performance. Opportunity for commercialisation. Impact on customer satisfaction.	21	Continuous improvement	MH	Increased complaints	On Track	Reverted back to published amendment procedure. Benchmarking underway.





## Appendix 2: Peer Challenge Recommendations Status

Complete
Ongoing / Good progress
On track
Little or no progress to date
Not progressed

		PAS Recommendation	Initial Response	Status Update
Vision & Leadership	1	Establish a clear and compelling vision via the Council Plan and the development of an action plan for the Planning Service to provide the direction of travel for the Planning Service. Strengthen the 'golden thread' describing how the outcomes achieved through development management and the local plan take forward priorities in the Council Plan	Accepted.  Will need clarity from Members to ensure alignment of the departmental vision with the Council Plan. Important link to SWLP.	Complete.  Visioning programme established including purpose, vision, goals and key projects.
	2	Develop a shared understanding among officers regarding the enabling function of Planning in delivering the Council's strategic priorities and improve communication around expectations and priorities for service delivery	Accepted.  There are two aspects to this recommendation,  The first relating to the Department's enabling function and the second in respect of communication in respect of expectations around service delivery. In respect of the former, this is directly related to Recommendation 1 and the need to have finalised the new Council Plan.	Visioning programme established including purpose, vision, goals and key projects.
			It is acknowledged that communication needs to flow from the Head of Service downwards. Will need to carefully manage expectations of Members especially regarding the limitations of the Planning System itself. Complete	Ongoing

	PAS Recommendation	Initial Response	Status Update	
Performance	3	<p>Include further indicators measuring planning and development management outcomes in the corporate performance reporting and monitoring arrangements, to help link planning outcomes to corporate priorities and build greater ownership of corporate priorities within the Planning service and of planning priorities across the wider council.</p>	<p>Noted.</p> <p>In principle, the indicators should relate to corporate priorities, but they need to be meaningful, informative, useful and easy to collate. May be a case that SDC needs to promote its achievements more widely.</p>	<p>Review AMR to identify what indicators are already monitored and how these now relate to the Council Plan. Review how the AMR is shared with Members and publicised more widely.</p>
	4	<p>Provide consistent career development and training opportunities for officers.</p>	<p>Noted although query this recommendation.</p> <p>There are two aspects to this recommendation.</p> <p>We have a very strong track record of both “growing our own” and retaining staff and that is a testament to the nurturing culture in the Department. There have been 30 promotions in the last 6 years. However, it is acknowledged that officers are not routinely exposed to a broader experience.</p> <p>Training opportunities are available and each member of staff can discuss their individual training needs at their appraisals with their manager. Clearly, there is a need to ensure that training opportunities are taken, including on the job training.</p>	<p>Explore means of routinely giving officers broader experience.</p> <p>Line managers have been reminded of the need to encourage staff to identify training and development needs through the annual appraisal process. Email sent to all staff 9th May (RG). Need to review outcome and collate once appraisals are complete to see extent of any shared training needs.</p>
	5	<p>Prioritise resources and align resources with priorities for the Planning Service including</p>	<p>Accepted.</p>	<p>Urban Design Officer appointed recently pre-empting this recommendation to some degree. Primary focus is conservation,</p>

PAS Recommendation		Initial Response	Status Update
	specialist skills resource and capitalise on the expertise within the teams.	This is directly related to Recommendation 1 and the need to have finalised the new Council Plan. Also dependent upon the outcome of the Process Review (Recommendation 7). The need for greater sharing of specialist skills between DM, Enforcement and Policy is acknowledged and was one of the rationales for establishing a single Development Department. Ultimately a funding issue with current resources focused on statutory responsibilities. However, the resources can only be determined once the priorities and processes are finalised.	landscaping and tree officers. Skills Audit also required to see what specialisms staff have and how these can better be deployed. Funding earmarked with Change Programme Budget confirmed at Cabinet 3rd June.
6	Reflect on the structure, resources and skills needed to enhance career development and build resilience.	Noted	To follow once vision established and resources needed to deliver vision identified
7	Enhance the consistency of service delivery and undertake a DM process review. Improve decision-making processes and create a Development Management manual. Implement an annual review of decisions and appeal outcomes.	Noted. There are three aspects to this recommendation.  It is accepted that process reviews should be carried out periodically to ensure that the service operates as effectively as possible.	Need to identify resources and capacity to undertake a process review. Work underway looking at Extensions of Time and Amendments Procedure.
		We already have DM guidance for officers to ensure consistency in our decision-making. PAS did not find any evidence of inconsistency in our decisions, and this is testament to the hard work of managers to ensure robust decisions particularly in a District with such a high number of applications. It is acknowledged, however, that there is inconsistency in the customer experience related to amendments.	Complete.  DM manual already exists.
		Reviews happen on a regular basis at the fortnightly Managers meetings. Agree that it would be beneficial to more formally ensure that learning is captured (see Recommendation 15).	Appeal briefings already run for Members. Appeals database/spreadsheet to be prepared to facilitate analysis.

	PAS Recommendation		Initial Response	Status Update
Engagement	8	Foster regular engagement with town and parish councils, potentially linked to the Warwickshire Association of Local Councils (WALC).	Accepted.  Area based parish forums were established for the SWLP but have not been run recently. It is acknowledged that these need to be held regularly and could cover SWLP, appeal outcomes, national changes, procedural advice and training. There are some practical complexities given the very high number of parishes spread over a dispersed rural geography.	Regarding training, suggested that external trainers are used to ensure degree of independence. Process should be managed through WALC with possible corporate alignment. Inception meeting with WALC to understand how to best achieve outcome.
	9	Reintroduce the developer/agent forum.	Accepted.  A forum was established for the SWLP but has not been run recently. It needs to be held regularly and could cover SWLP, appeal outcomes, national changes, and procedural advice. Such a forum would also be a good opportunity to set out our expectations from applicants in respect of the quality of applications.	ToR to be drafted and a mix of DM and Policy topics on set agendas.
	10	Review the engagement strategy for the South Warwickshire Local Plan (SWLP) to ensure meaningful stakeholder involvement.	Noted.  There hasn't been any recent engagement because of the stage the SWLP is at but we have good examples of previous engagement.	Workplan has been prepared and engagement will restart as progress towards Preferred Options is underway.
	11	Seek a stronger working relationship with the County Council to help ensure the delivery of place-making priorities.	Noted.  However, this is a two-way activity and required at both the corporate and political levels of both organisations. SDC can only seek to influence WCC in respect of how it aligns its objectives with SDC's place-shaping agenda and responsibilities.	First meeting with LLFA held 22nd May. Meeting with Highways held 6th June. Both to be diarised regularly. Actions to be followed up.
Committee	12	Review the scheme of delegation and reduce the number of items going to committee	Accepted.  This will need Member support.	Requires Member input. New chair of Regulatory Committee. Wider review of Constitution by Head of Law & Governance.

	PAS Recommendation		Initial Response	Status Update
	13	Find ways to better manage speaking time	Accepted.  This will need Member support.	Engagement with PH & Committee Chairs to be undertaken.
	14	Deliver recap training sessions or other development initiatives for new members and expand this to parish and town councils.	Noted.  Decision was taken previously by Members to exclude parishes. Parish forums (see Recommendation 8) could be more appropriate forum for parish training.	Separate sessions for SDC Members and Parishes. Latter to be co-ordinated through WALC. Inception meeting with WALC to understand how to best achieve outcome.
	15	Arrange informal meetings to review decisions, appeal outcomes, and progress against the Local Plan.	Noted.  Decision was taken previously by Members to exclude parishes. Parish forums (see Recommendation 8) could be more appropriate forum for parish training.	Suggested focus on planning committee members. Tied into SWLP updates.
Outcomes	16	Review the Enforcement policy, procedures, prioritisation, and delegation	Accepted.  A review of the LEP was already scheduled for 2024. Amending delegation in particular will need Member support.	Already scheduled for 2024/25. Liaison with Portfolio Holder and new Chair of Regulatory Committee, now been confirmed.
	17	Communicate the potential of the Enforcement service and involve councillors to increase understanding of the art of the possible.	Accepted.  Related to Recommendation 16 and Parish Forum could be a useful medium for communication (Recommendation 16).	See 16 above. Email to all Members re Enforcement Service sent 24 May 24 (JC)
	18	Conduct independent scrutiny on Custom & Self Build and be proactive in communicating the Council's approach.	Partly accepted and underway internally. Query extent to which further external assistance needs to be sought.	Complete.  Internal review of current process underway with new briefing note and approach finalised. Member briefing held 19th June.
	19	Take a corporate approach to infrastructure issues, focusing on delivery.	Accepted.	Separate PAS review of S106 and CIL procedures completed. Internal process mapping underway. Revised Open Space SPD adopted 8th June 24. S106 & CIL

PAS Recommendation		Initial Response	Status Update
		The need for reviewing infrastructure processes was already recognised by Mgmt and initial work is already underway. Political priority.	Compliance Officer post created and officer recruited. Green Spaces Officer post being recruited for.
<b>20</b>	Initiate digital transformation in the service	Accepted.  The need for digital transformation was already recognised by Mgmt and initial work is already underway	SDC Digital Strategy being finalised and corporate approach to systems review being initiated.
<b>21</b>	Promote commercialisation, particularly regarding the pre-application and Planning Performance Agreements (PPA) offer.	Accepted.  Also being driven by proposed Government changes to use of planning application extensions of time agreements.	Dept mgmt team exploring new approaches to pre-application advice.



# Planning Service Peer Challenge

## Stratford on Avon District Council

*10<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> October 2023*

Feedback Report  
Final Version  
29.01.2024

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## Executive Summary

1. This report presents the key findings of a Planning Service peer review for Stratford on Avon District Council, organised by the Local Government Association (LGA) with the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) and carried out by its trained peers. The peer review was conducted from the 10th to the 13th of October 2023. The objective was to evaluate the department's performance in various areas, provide recommendations, and identify opportunities for improvement. The review encompassed vision and leadership, performance management, community and partnership engagement, achieving outcomes, and the potential for implementation of suggested changes.
2. An over-arching objective of the peer challenge at Stratford-on-Avon District Council is to support the Council's goal of maintaining an effective and agile planning service that is fit for purpose now and for the future. The peer team recognised the Council's aspirations for delivering an enabling, efficient, and vibrant service that is consistent in its approach and supported by modern technology. We also recognised the recent change in political administration and the importance of working collaboratively between officers and members, aligning corporate ambitions, including new ambitions on the climate change & environmental agenda, with the planning service. The purpose of the peer challenge was to challenge the service in a constructive and enabling way to help the Council identify where improvements might be made to support achieving these ambitions.
3. The District of Stratford-on-Avon comprises around half of the area of the County of Warwickshire. It is generally affluent and rural. The District has a dispersed settlement pattern that includes the world-famous destination of Stratford-upon-Avon and a further eight main centres. The northern third of the District is part of the West Midlands Green Belt whilst the southern fringes of the District are part of the Cotswolds National Landscape. The District has a rich history and heritage with significant heritage assets and conservation areas.
4. As a result of the local elections held in May 2023 the Council has changed political administration with the election of the first Liberal Democrat majority administration in the Council's history, having previously been a Conservative-led Council. Approximately 50% of the councillors being new or having had no previous council experience. A new Council Plan is being prepared to set the corporate agenda for the next four years.
5. The Planning Service has undergone relatively recent changes in its structure. Prior to the previous year, the Development Management, Policy (encompassing economic development and housing strategy functions), and Development Support services (involving planning administration, S106, and CIL administration) had separate Heads of Service overseeing them. Starting in 2022, a unified planning department was established with a single Head of Service, which now also encompasses Building Control and Land Charges.

6. The Policy team incorporates strategic housing, housing enabling and economic development functions. The Local Plans Team is responsible for the preparation of both the joint South Warwickshire Local Plan and Stratford-on-Avon planning policy documents.
7. The Planning Service, as a whole, is regarded as a well-performing one; attributed to its excellent performance on meeting national measures on decision-making and a strong track record in plan-making. We found a thriving council with an overall well-resourced Planning service filled with dedicated and skilled officers. We regard the Planning Service as a well-performing function and found many areas of best practice in operation, including policy making, evidence base production, the operation of the Planning Committee and Development Support processes. We did not find any critical systemic issues and the recommendations for improvement are refinements and should be viewed in this context.
8. The service appears to be experiencing some residual effects from the recent unification changes and reporting lines are not fully settled. There is evidence of a conflict between the policy functions (which represent the corporate ambitions and objectives) and the impartial execution of the Council's development management responsibilities. We found this level of tension to be atypical for the operation of local government Planning services and this report contains recommendations to resolve this.
9. Senior officers and members are committed to utilising the planning service to enable and deliver the Council's corporate priorities and a clear plan is required to enable this to happen.
10. Like many councils, Stratford-on-Avon's Planning service is hampered by the technology. A comprehensive service transformation plan including IT and with a resourced programme to deliver it, is required to create an agile, flexible planning service.
11. We found strong and respectful relationships between members and officers, across all elements of the Planning Service, including the Planning Committee and the South Warwickshire Local Plan development.
12. We found committed, hardworking, planning staff and that this is recognised by some councillors and stakeholders. However, we found a mismatch between the view of external & internal stakeholders of the Development Management service and the view the service held of itself. We recognise that performance against national indicators is good and over 80% of applications determined within the set thresholds. However, we found the customer experience to be mixed. This is related to the customer experience during the determination of applications and the actual processing. We heard customer expectations are not being met and that processes during determination are not conducive to good customer service. We heard about some excellent customer relationships but we also heard reports of an inability to provide a consistently good customer service. There are opportunities to overhaul and

standardise the way that customers experience the planning service, including the website.

13. Relationships with town and parish councils are also mixed although this is not atypical. Over 30 neighbourhood plans are in place or under development. Many town and parish councils reported good relationships with the planning service in developing their neighbourhood plans but raised concerns that policies are not always taken into account in decision making.
14. There is widespread dissatisfaction about a perceived lack of planning enforcement. There needs to be a better match between the resources available, the outcomes being delivered and the perception of that part of the Planning Service.
15. Whilst this report focuses on areas for improvement; it should be read in the context that we regard Stratford-on-Avon District Council's Planning Service to be a well-performing one; attributed to its excellent performance in meeting national measures on decision-making and a strong track record in plan-making. These recommendations are designed to assist the Council in further improving its service delivery.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are made based on the findings of the peer review:

<b>Vision and Leadership:</b>	
R1	Establish a clear and compelling vision via the Council Plan and the development of an action plan for the Planning Service to provide the direction of travel for the Planning Service. Strengthen the 'golden thread' describing how the outcomes achieved through development management and the local plan take forward priorities in the Council Plan.
R2	Develop a shared understanding among officers regarding the enabling function of Planning in delivering the Council's strategic priorities and improve communication around expectations and priorities for service delivery
R3	Include further indicators measuring planning and development management outcomes in the corporate performance reporting and monitoring arrangements, to help link planning outcomes to corporate priorities and build greater ownership of corporate priorities within the Planning service and of planning priorities across the wider council.
R4	Provide consistent career development and training opportunities for officers.
<b>Performance Management:</b>	
R5	Prioritise resources and align resources with priorities for the Planning Service including specialist skills resource and capitalise on the expertise within the teams.
R6	Reflect on the structure, resources and skills needed to enhance career development and build resilience.
R7	Enhance the consistency of service delivery and undertake a DM process review. Improve decision-making processes and create a Development Management manual. Implement an annual review of decisions and appeal outcomes.
<b>Community and Partnership Engagement:</b>	
R8	Foster regular engagement with town and parish councils, potentially linked to the Warwickshire Association of Local Councils (WALC).
R9	Reintroduce the developer/agent forum.
R10	Review the engagement strategy for the South Warwickshire Local Plan (SWLP) to ensure meaningful stakeholder involvement.
R11	Seek a stronger working relationship with the County Council to help ensure the delivery of place-making priorities.
<b>Planning Committee:</b>	
R12	Review the scheme of delegation and reduce the number of items going to committee.

R13	Find ways to better manage speaking time.
R14	Deliver recap training sessions or other development initiatives for new members and expand this to parish and town councils.
R15	Arrange informal meetings to review decisions, appeal outcomes, and progress against the Local Plan.
<b>Achieving Outcomes:</b>	
R16	Review the Enforcement policy, procedures, prioritisation, and delegation.
R17	Communicate the potential of the Enforcement service and involve councillors to increase understanding of the art of the possible.
R18	Conduct independent scrutiny on Custom & Self Build and be proactive in communicating the Council's approach.
R19	Take a corporate approach to infrastructure issues, focusing on delivery.
R20	Initiate digital transformation in the service.
R21	Promote commercialisation, particularly regarding the pre-application and Planning Performance Agreements (PPA) offer.

## Background and Scope of the Peer Review

16. Peer reviews are managed and delivered by the sector for the sector. They are tailored to meet the individual Council's needs and designed to complement and add value to a Council's own performance and improvement focus. They help planning services review what they are trying to achieve; how they are going about it; what they are achieving; and what they need to improve. This peer review was initiated by Stratford-on-Avon District Council in light of a desire to explore how it can further improve on top of its existing strong performance.
17. The peer review was conducted by a team of experts in planning and local government. It included a comprehensive analysis of the Planning Department's operations, documentation review, interviews, workshops, and background reading. The aim was to provide constructive feedback and recommendations to help the service improve its performance.
18. The Stratford-on-Avon District covers approximately half of Warwickshire County's total area. It is primarily characterised by affluence and a rural landscape, featuring a dispersed settlement pattern that includes the renowned destination of Stratford-upon-Avon and eight additional main rural centres. The northern segment of the District is part of the West Midlands Green Belt, while the southern edges fall within the Cotswolds National Landscape. The area boasts a rich historical and cultural heritage, encompassing significant heritage assets and conservation areas.
19. Stratford on Avon District Council in May 2022, agreed to formally withdraw the request to the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities for a proposed merger with Warwick District Council which would have seen the creation of a South Warwickshire Council. The Councils both agreed to continue joint-working on a number of key areas; namely the South Warwickshire Local Plan (SWLP), the South Warwickshire Economic Development Strategy, and a shared Legal service.
20. Within the Policy service, there are functions related to planning policy, local plans, strategic housing, housing enabling, and economic development. The Local Plans Team bears the responsibility for crafting both the joint South Warwickshire Local Plan and planning policy documents specific to Stratford-on-Avon.
21. The Development Management service deals with typically in excess of 4,000 applications of various types per annum. Nearly 80% of applications were approved in 2022-23, with less than 10% refused. The service deals with a high number of householder and other types of application which disproportionately impact on costs because of the low planning fee that can be charged for such applications.
22. The Planning Service recently underwent structural changes. Until the previous year, the Development Management, Policy (incorporating economic development and housing strategy functions), and Development Support services (comprising planning administration, S106, and CIL administration) were supervised by separate Heads of Service. As of 2022, a unified planning department was established, led by a single Head of Service, and it now also includes Building Control and Land Charges. An over-arching objective of the

peer review was to support the council in its goal of embedding a unified planning service that is fit for purpose. The service is currently dealing with lingering repercussions from these recent changes, and the reporting lines still need to be wholly respected. Notably, there is evidence of a clash between the policy functions, which reflect the corporate ambitions and objectives, and the impartial execution of the Council's development management responsibilities. In our experience, this level of tension between the two is somewhat uncommon in local government Planning services.

23. We understand the Council's aspirations for delivering an enabling, efficient, and vibrant service that is consistent in its approach and supported by modern technology whilst meeting the financial challenges experienced across the sector. The purpose of the peer review was to challenge the service in a constructive and enabling way to help identify where improvements might be made to support achieving these ambitions.
24. The peer review involved an assessment of the Council's planning function against a framework which explores five main themes. These are:
  - **Vision and leadership:** the Council's leadership and corporate engagement of the planning service in this.
  - **Performance management:** effective use of skills and resources to achieve value for money and continuous improvement of the planning service, including in decision making on proposals, and whether the service is adequately resourced.
  - **Community engagement:** how the authority understands its community leadership role, especially in terms of the accessibility, customer focus and transparency of the planning process
  - **Partnership engagement:** how the service works in partnership with other stakeholders to balance priorities and resources, address differing views and deliver shared ambitions.
  - **Achieving outcomes:** the achievements of the planning service within the available resources and the planning services role as a facilitator to change in the area.
25. Peer reviews are delivered by experienced elected councillor and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the peer review and peers were selected based on their relevant expertise. The peers were:
  - **Peer Challenge Manager** - Shelly Rouse MRTPI, Planning Advisory Service
  - **Lead Officer Peer** - Karen Syrett, Joint Head of Planning, Colchester City Council
  - **Officer Peer** - Karen Britton, Head of Spatial Planning and Economic Development, Maidstone Borough Council
  - **Member Peer (Liberal Democrat)** - Dr Tumi Hawkins, Lead Cabinet Member for Planning Policy & Development Management, South Cambridgeshire
  - **Member Peer (Liberal Democrat)** - Caroline Leaver – Councillor at North

## Devon and Devon County Council

26. The framework of the peer review was to look at the following areas of focus
- How the service works towards the delivery of the corporate objectives
  - Effective use of skills and resources of both members and officers in the service
  - How the service understands it's communities and uses planning to deliver their aspirations
  - How the service works with partners to deliver it's agreed priorities
  - How well the service works to deliver outcomes and development
27. The review took the form of an analysis of data and information relating to the operation of the Planning Service. The review team watched over 10 of the Council's Planning Committee meetings (between 2020-2023) via the YouTube channel as well as an in-person meeting on the 11<sup>th</sup> October 2023. It reviewed key documents and supporting material produced by the Council and undertook interviews from 10<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> October 2023 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.

## Context and Overarching Messages

28. The review was conducted in the context of significant change within the local government and planning sector. In a more specific context, the shift in the political administration to Liberal Democrats, involved a significant influx of new members and an ongoing period of adaptation.
29. We found a real passion for the place from many people, both officers and members, as well as internal and external partners. The Council are also faced with navigating the intricacies of joint plan-making and maintaining two-tier relationships presents an ongoing challenge. The Planning Service is comprised of exceptional individuals who take immense pride in their community. We can state that this is a well-performing service and the improvements needed should be seen in the context of refinements. This report primarily focuses on areas for improvement, reflecting the Council's commitment to excellence.
30. The overarching message is the need for the department to align with the Council's priorities, develop a culture of togetherness, and improve communication and consistency across all aspects of its operations.
31. Planning needs to see itself as part of the wider Council. Officers across the service need to better understand the strategic priorities of the Council as well as those of its new administration. In respect of the latter, it is acknowledged that the new administration is still 'bedding in' and a new Council Plan is still to be finalised. Linked to the above, there appears to be a lack of understanding of the department's essential role in supporting the delivery of



the broader organisation's goals and helping to develop new ambitions. In order to reach its full potential, the Planning Service should integrate more closely with the broader Council. While officers may not yet fully grasp the strategic priorities of the Council and its new administration, this represents an opportunity for growth. As they come to understand their integral role in advancing the organisation's goals and fostering new ambitions, a more cohesive approach will emerge.

32. The Planning Service structure is complex, is not working effectively and we heard examples of 'siloed' working and inconsistent approaches to service delivery. It needs to be fixed. There is a need to develop a 'culture of togetherness' within the service. The Planning service's structure is intricate, however, it could provide the opportunity for greater effectiveness if reviewed. Currently, there are isolated teams with inconsistent service delivery methods. There is a clear need to cultivate a 'culture of togetherness' within the service, allowing for a more harmonious and collaborative environment which, in turn, will result in greater effectiveness.
33. A review of the enforcement policy, procedures, prioritisation, and delegation is warranted. Developing a shared understanding of what Enforcement can accomplish and aligning priorities across the service will lead to increased efficiency and effectiveness.
34. Neither in-application negotiation nor the pre-app offer are working effectively. Both in-application negotiation and pre-application processes require refinement for enhanced effectiveness. Achieving consistency in approach and a focus on commercialisation will lead to improved outcomes.
35. The service needs to improve communications across the board. Enhancing communication across all levels of the service is a vital objective. Effective communication will promote collaboration and ensure that the entire service functions seamlessly.
36. 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 Stratford on Avon District Council and everybody they met during the process for their time and positive contributions.

## Vision and Leadership

37. Throughout the review the team has 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 Head of Service in bringing the unified service together.
38. The Council has recognised the importance of the Planning function in moving the teams to a unified planning department comprising Development Management (incorporating enforcement), Policy (incorporating economic development and housing strategy functions), and Development Support

services (comprising planning administration, S106, and CIL administration).

39. Following the initial onboarding after the local elections in May 2023, the new council administration is finding its way and has begun a review of the Council Plan. The Council has an administration that wants to establish strategic direction and priorities using, amongst other avenues, the Council Plan. The Council Plan requires full endorsement by Members as the direction of travel for the Planning service.
40. The Council Plan is relatively high-level and we found not all members who interact with the Planning Service understand the importance of using the Council Plan in articulating what the Council wishes the service to achieve. There would be a benefit in producing an action plan for the Planning Service to articulate the crucial enabling function the Planning Service has for the strategic priorities of the Council, and its new administration. The action plan should be a collaborative project between members and officers, with clear governance in place, and potentially spearheaded by the Head of Service.
41. The production of an action plan immediately following the adoption of the Council Plan would be well-timed. We found that it is not yet understood by officers across the service that they are a crucial enabling function for the strategic and corporate priorities of the Council. Apart from senior leadership, the Planning service does not understand that there is a 'golden thread' stemming from the Council Plan and council priorities. We found that officers within development management see their role as processing caseloads rigidly in a regulatory nature without understanding the 'golden thread' from the council objectives down to their workloads. We also found policy officers did not understand the importance of the development plan being the spatial interpretation of the council objectives either. From the peer team's experience of how local government functions nationally, we can say this is highly unusual for a Planning service. There is a danger that this lack of awareness of the 'golden thread' is generating an 'us and them' mentality towards senior management and leadership. Work to address this should begin immediately and develop into the production of an action plan for the Council Plan.
42. Other services suggested that the Planning 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 to achieve the aims of the Council, moving to making more pragmatic decisions, delivering outcomes rather than a focus on planning process, and brokering discussions between departments to get to the right decision.
43. No planning service is ever an island, it is an integral 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. We believe the service has an opportunity to be more focused on being a delivery agent through the planning process to achieve the aims of the Council, moving to making more pragmatic decisions, delivering outcomes rather than a focus on planning process. The planning service is often a public shopwindow for the Council and its therefore critical that the recommendations that are made are outcome-focused. We recommend senior leadership is more communicative

around the expectations and priorities for the service delivery including producing a more strategic service plan. The new administration 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. We recommend that a more strategic service plan is prepared to set out expectations and priorities.

44. There is limited evidence of a strong golden thread from the Councils' corporate plans to the priorities of the planning service or awareness of how planning outcomes deliver corporate priorities. Planners are properly guided by the Local Plans in their reports and advice to Members but could make more use of the councils' agreed priorities and the Corporate Plan as a material consideration in planning decisions. This would also strengthen the links between planning and the rest of the councils and address perceptions that it is a service apart from wider corporate concerns.
45. We highly commend the Council for the member training programme that has been delivered since the elections in May 2023. We found it to be thorough and comprehensively covering Planning matters. That said, we heard that members felt at times overwhelmed by the level of information, this is not a surprise given the number of new members elected. Now, six months after being elected members, new members in particular, would benefit from some refreshers on key information related to defensible decisions and emerging planning reform. This need not be a re-run of the comprehensive training sessions but could be via bite-sized sessions, more informal drop-ins, or establishment of a buddying system between councillors and officers of different levels.
46. It was universally triangulated that the Head of Service has a complex workload and that matters are frequently escalated to them for problem solving. The Head of Service and senior leadership need to balance when to delegate matters brought to them versus when it is crucial to step in to resolve problems. The current level of matters escalated and the Head of Service workload is currently unsustainable. As noted above, a wider understanding of the enabling function of planning and a clear service plan would assist in addressing this issue. We recommend setting up clear and frequent communication to the service, fronted by the Head of Service and the development of a service plan.
47. A very small number of planning staff feel unsupported and would welcome more cohesive leadership. They recognise the need for change and some are keen to be involved and help shape the changes needed. They are doing their best to deliver services and we found some strong teams supporting each other, but there was a level of despondency and we think there is an opportunity to use an inclusive and collegiate approach to developing transformation plans and workstreams that might help with this. This is not surprising and is evident in any programme of change, especially when ways of working appear to be long established.

## Performance and Management

48. The service is excelling in meeting national targets for both Development Management and Policy. It owes its success to a team of dedicated and diligent officers who share a strong bond with one another and most members. Positivity pervades the service, and officers genuinely care about the district they serve. The individual officers within the team are highly esteemed by colleagues.
49. Additionally, it benefits from a wealth of technical support from the Development Support team. Internal and external stakeholders regard the Development Support team as delivering an excellent service. The make-up of the various teams and expertise that form Development Support is working effectively. The proposed merger with Warwick Council has left some legacy issues around the permanence of staff roles within Development Support, we recommend these are resolved as quickly as possible.
50. All elements of the service, apart from Policy, are well-resourced and have a wealth of highly skilled and specialist expertise. Benchmarking against other Planning services shows that, in particular, Development Management and Enforcement are well-resourced for a council of the size, complexity and caseload scale of Stratford on Avon District Council. Caseloads within Development Management and Enforcement, when apportioned against the number of staff, are below what is found in councils nationally. Development Management caseloads of up to 40 cases are below what is seen when benchmarked nationally, where caseloads of 70-90 are regularly reported. Whilst it is accepted that some officers' caseloads are akin to those in other councils, we found that the routine level is significantly and regularly lower. We therefore recommend the council consider undertaking a Development Management process review, about which, more details can be found on the PAS webpages. There has also been a recent increase in appeals being upheld and we recommend that this is monitored closely to understand why this is the case.
51. The service has earned internal and external recognition for its outstanding work on the South Warwickshire Local Plan and we highly commend the Council for this. The range and complexity of workload for the policy service is vast and the progress made on proactively working on a new joint Local Plan with neighbouring Warwick District during a time of fluctuating national policy and limited team resources is to be commended. The Policy service is small in size for the level of work, particularly with the importance of delivering the corporate ambitions.
52. We recognise that some individual officers across the service, including within Development Management, are held in high regard by stakeholders and customers. However, there is a mismatch between internal and external stakeholders' perceptions of the performance of Development Management and how that part of the service views itself. We heard from internal and external stakeholders that the service is viewed as performing poorly and is not effective. It should be recognised that in the context of the Council approving 80% of applications, this disconnect appears to reflect the processing of applications and how decisions are being reached as opposed to necessarily the decision itself. There is a view that teams are unapproachable and overly defensive. We consider the root of the inefficiency

and negative perception stems from the complex structure of the service.

53. The Planning service structure is overly complex and highly unusual for a council of this scale and nature. The structure of the teams, particularly in Development Management, is not working as effectively as it should; teams are siloed with inconsistent approaches to service delivery, particularly around the implementation of the 'amendment policy' approach to in-application negotiation. The Council could look at improving the consistency of service delivery, decision-making and the processes of application through a DM process review.
54. Development Management and Policy teams need more cross-pollination and opportunities for sharing resources and expertise. We heard of limited joint-working on Supplementary Planning Documents and masterplans. The Council should consider furthering opportunities for cross-pollination and embed joint-working, or secondments, between Development Management and Policy. This would assist rather than solve the resourcing issues within the Policy service and the Council needs to consider providing additional resources. There is no conflict with DM officers creating policy (such as masterplans) and then having the responsibility for determining applications on the same site. This is common practice within local government Planning departments nationally. Indeed, it would bring efficiencies and a consistency of the officer understanding the detail and corporate objectives that are looking to be achieved.
55. The Planning service contains highly skilled and specialist expertise and should be used for more than application work. We heard that the expertise in-house is not being maximised and officer time is directed towards commenting on applications rather than assisting with more strategic or policy development.
56. The structure is also inhibiting a consistent approach to career development. Officers need consistent access to a diversity of work or opportunities for career development. We acknowledge that staff retention is good and many officers have been able to progress their careers within the department at Stratford-on-Avon. However, as with most councils, recruitment is challenging and likely to remain so. The good track record of internal promotion is acknowledged and can be attributed to the attitude and dedication of internal staff to support more junior staff. Promotion and career development opportunities are different things. Due to its complexity and splitting up of development application types, the structure does not foster an organic learning environment and relies on individual officers requesting exposure to different or more advanced projects. A more commonly found structure contains teams with a spread of officer levels and exposure to a wide range of application types and complexities; this enables learning by osmosis and exposure to more challenging planning work for all officers. This naturally lets officers gain experience and expertise which is the cornerstone of career and personal development.
57. We recommend that the Council think carefully about the resources, the service structure and the skills the Council will need in the future to facilitate better performance and outcomes. There is a need to prioritise the work to

use the resources wisely and capitalise on the skills and expertise within the teams. Whilst we believe that the DM and enforcement functions are adequately resourced, the resourcing of policy and specialist staff to enable cross-departmental working should be seriously considered.

58. The age and unproductive use of information technology (I.T.) within the Planning service operations has inadvertently resulted in inefficiencies and the emergence of time-consuming manual processes, underscoring the pressing need for a comprehensive digital transformation in the service and lost opportunities for commercialisation. To address this challenge effectively, a collaborative effort involving Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Geographic Information Systems (GIS), and all components of the Planning service is imperative, requiring the establishment of a dedicated project equipped with the necessary resources to drive this transformative initiative forward. This has recently been achieved at Enfield Council which could be used as a learning for best practice. We understand that our findings confirm the view of the departmental leadership and that early work has commenced in this regard.
59. As previously discussed, planning application caseload levels are well within, and even below, what we would expect to find. That said, the volume of discharge of conditions applications is high with nearly 1,000 applications annually, a third of the total applications processed by the Council. We were unable to ascertain whether the high levels is due to each condition being discharged separately, or as a result of the number of major applications in the pipeline, or whether too many details are needing to be discharged rather than setting out the requirement in the condition. We are also aware of the expectation of parishes and members in this regard and whilst commendable, we found that this is raising expectations amongst residents which cannot then be reasonably fulfilled.
60. We recommend the Council identify the root causes of the application levels and decide if a review to the approach is needed. Part of the inefficiency is that lots of officer time is spent on managing/chasing internal and external consultations on planning applications, drafting committee reports and conditions discharges. We recommend undertaking the PAS DM Toolkit to examine how officer time is being used effectively and to improve processes. The Council should consider reviewing its existing standard conditions and introducing an updated suite of standard conditions with wording that requires works to be undertaken rather than requiring the submission of details for approval.
61. Neither the 'amendment approach' nor pre-app/PPA offer from the Council –is meeting customer needs. The Council's approach to in-application negotiation is set out in 'Negotiating amendments to pending application' referred to by officers as the 'amendment approach'. The document is light touch and is not particularly clear to applicants how rigidly, or not, it is applied. We found inconsistency across teams in the implementation of the policy; some applying the one-change approach and others permitting a greater degree of flexibility. Nor does the approach guide applicants towards a pre-application approach robustly. There is dissatisfaction amongst customers, internal and

external stakeholders and members with the ineffective and inconsistent approach to the 'amendment approach'. The pre-application and PPA webpages are not user-friendly and the fee schedule is hard to find amongst other council charges. The Council should review the 'amendment approach' and reach a view on the rigidity of its implementation, communicating this to officers and customers clearly. We recommend a complete review and reboot of the pre-application offer, involving customers & stakeholders in the process. This should look at the development types and the fee schedule. This reboot will require senior leadership buy-in and a corporate understanding of the importance of pre-application as both an income stream for the Council and assisting toward a more commercially minded service delivery.

62. To address the perceptions of the service and to improve engagement with stakeholders we recommend introducing a developers' forum which can meet regularly to discuss matters affecting service delivery.
63. As mentioned above, the Policy team is the element of the service where resources are below what we expect to see for the complexity and volume of planning policy work being undertaken. In order to steer the Policy team in a more productive direction and effectively manage the various competing priorities they face, it is essential to establish a robust project plan bringing together the multiple workstreams. While we acknowledge that there has been improvement in terms of consistent career development and training opportunities, the Council should commit to enhancing this aspect for the dedicated staff within Policy.

## Planning Committee

64. Committee meetings are exceptionally well-organised, facilitated by the strong chairperson and assisted by camaraderie among members and towards officers. The planning officers stand out, not only for their expertise but also for the respect and assistance they consistently offer to the committee. The reports and presentations they provide are commendably succinct and balanced, ensuring efficient discussions. Furthermore, members have benefited from a structured training program that further enhances their abilities. While the cross-questioning by speakers can occasionally extend the committee sessions, it undeniably contributes to a more thorough and comprehensive examination of the matters at hand.
65. The planning committee follows a process acceptable to objectors and supporters, including stakeholders and ward councillors. The case officer presentation of the item is followed by applicant and objectors, each of which can speak for a maximum of 3 minutes, followed by ward councillors being allocated 5 minutes with committee members having an opportunity to ask questions to all speakers before a motion is proposed and seconded by committee members and then voted on.
66. The limit of three minutes per speaker is considered a reasonable length of time to present and it is questioned whether ward members need 5 minutes given the involvement of parish councils. The Council's approach to the public speaking and the '30 seconds left warning' are considered helpful. However, the team observed, both on-line and in-person committee meetings, where

members of the public appeared unaware of the speaking protocol or the need to share the speaker slot if both parties were objecting. There is a clear explanation available on the Council website about the process for participants. Still, 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 provide clarity to the attending public, for whom this will most likely be the first time they have attended a planning committee. 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. Given that planning committee is the shop window of the council, it is also imperative that ward members in particular use their speaking time to focus on addressing the relevant planning issues. Not doing so, risks perpetuating a lack of understanding of the planning process by residents and a failure to understand how and why a particular decision has been reached.

67. We have not looked at the complexity of the cases but 9% of all applications going to the committee would be considered a high amount, and an average of six applications being seen in one session would be considered more than most other local authorities. The committee is sitting on average of 2.5 hours. Having 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.
68. Statistics provided by the Council show around 30% of committee items are decided contrary to the officer's recommendation. When benchmarked nationally this is high, especially if it does not include adding or amending conditions rather than overturns. We consider 10% overturns healthy for a committee of this nature. We recommend that a Development Management process review would help analyse the overturns and monitor performance on appeals more closely.
69. The Council's requirement for applications to be called to committee is that any parish or town council, of which there are over 80 in the district, 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 the current arrangements allow parish & town councils to push things to committee that do not warrant committee time. Four of the committees we viewed included cases that did not warrant having a committee decision on and they could in fact be delegated decisions. 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.
70. 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, including the preparation, as well as the public and applicant time. The fortnightly cycle of committee is particularly onerous. This time should be used on the applications that will have the most significant impact on the District. The scheme of delegation should be reviewed now and on a regular ongoing basis. Likewise, Parish and Town



Councils would benefit from sharing good practices on their schemes of delegation to improve the efficiency of call in of applications to committee.

## Community and partnership engagement

71. The planning service offers an opportunity for greater partnership working across the Council and with external partners. A lack of communication with wider partners and joint working results in missed opportunities. External stakeholders don't always know how or who to contact to resolve problems. This results in matters being escalated to senior leadership.
72. Joint Plan production is currently working well; Warwick District Council officers and members hold the Policy team and SDC members involved in high regard. The change in administrations in both Councils means there is need for clear and consistent communication around the plan production and discussion of key matters. We recommend reviewing the engagement strategy for the SWLP to ensure all stakeholders can take a meaningful role in the preparation.
73. There are some very well-informed community groups and individuals within the District, 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.
74. Town and Parish Councils are an important part of ensuring that communities can effectively interact with the Planning system. Parish and Town councils have welcomed the briefings they have received thus far and acknowledged that there are individuals with expertise within the teams. In speaking with Town and Parish Councils 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 adequately listened to. This lack of engagement and recognition of the different and varied communities of the area is a challenge that the service needs to recognise. 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 potentially linked to WALC<sup>1</sup> or inviting them to attend sessions delivered for committee members and ward councillors.
75. Planners recognise the diversity and complexity of the district. The Council area encompasses many diverse and different planning area designations and opportunities. This makes planning across the whole 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, particularly around communicating the South Warwickshire Local Plan and Neighbourhood Plans. We recommend creating opportunities to better engage with partners, parishes and communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Warwickshire and West Midlands Association of Local Councils

76. The Council, by the nature of the area, has a high number of planning enforcement cases. Enforcement cases cause frustration and there is a narrative within the community that enforcement is not working and the enforcement team is understaffed. The Enforcement team staffing has recently undergone a notable expansion, resulting in a bolstered and well-resourced team. However, there exists a discrepancy between the current good resource level and the high level of expectations from councillors and the public. We recommend that now is the time to examine the effective allocation and utilisation of resources to match the overarching priorities of the Council. Prioritise the work to use the resources wisely and capitalise on the skills and expertise within the teams. Now is the time to reflect on the resources and skills within the service.

77. The Enforcement service needs to prioritise the planned review of itself. Officers need to be given time to undertake the vital work of stepping back from the casework and reviewing the present enforcement process, to modernise and digitise the process, update the enforcement charter and communicate a new and improved engagement process to the public, key community groups and councillors. An improved approach to communications and managing expectations needs to be built into the service's work; informing, supporting, advising and bringing the communities with the Enforcement service on its journey is key and needs to be undertaken. We recommend the following:

- Review of enforcement policy, procedures, prioritisation and delegation
- Undertake communication on the art of the possible and practicable for the enforcement service.

78. Developers and agents perceive the service as performing poorly. They want consistency in communication, negotiation and outcomes. There is a feeling of frustration that information on progress around planning applications are not being communicated. Enhanced communication regarding delays in planning applications would alleviate the frustration stemming from the lack of progress updates but also mitigate the influx of inquiries to the Council from all stakeholders engaged with the service, thereby optimising efficiency in responding to these inquiries. Improved communication regarding planning application delays would serve to streamline interactions with the Council among all service stakeholders. Reintroducing a regular developer/agent forum would also improve lines of communication.

79. Despite the pressures between the County and District around transport matters (consistent with other two-tier parts of the country), 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 strategic and operational relationship with Warwickshire County Council (WCC) - particularly with the Highway Authority and Lead Local Flood Authority - may benefit from strengthening, and senior officers and leading members at both authorities may need to invest time in this. While the officer-to-officer engagement was described as 'positive', it is clear that some frustrations occur within both organisations and there is scope to improve the timeliness of responses by WCC.

80. This relationship may greatly improve if opportunities to be taken to building a

closer alignment in respect of place-shaping priorities. The impact of the timeliness (or otherwise) of delivery of highways infrastructure projects for major applications and the development pipeline needs to be more widely recognised, as do the resource pressures all partners are experiencing. The county and district need to work together in order to facilitate appropriate growth and development. We would advocate seeking a stronger working relationship with the County Council.

## Achieving Outcomes

81. The Council has a strong performance on delivery with a healthy and robust land supply and performance against the Housing Delivery Test.

82. We heard a perception from a number of sources, stakeholders as well as officers, that the council is not getting the most out of developer contributions. We also heard that there is a lack of transparency and visibility about what is being achieved. We understand that work is underway to respond to this. The officers overseeing the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and Section 106 (S106) obligations have garnered significant respect within the Council and externally. As at March 2023, the Council had £4m of CIL funds available for spend. However, it is imperative to align these achievements with the aspirations of members in order to strategically deliver local infrastructure that aligns with the overarching objectives of the Council.

83. In light of this, we recommend a multifaceted approach:

- Embrace infrastructure challenges as a collective corporate responsibility, recognising their pivotal role in fulfilling the planning policy and Council priorities.
- Undertake a comprehensive and in-depth review of the processes and governance associated with developer contributions. This entails a thorough examination of existing procedures to optimise resource allocation and enhance efficiency.
- Revisit the core principles underpinning infrastructure delivery, with a clear focus on its intrinsic importance in aligning with the local plan and Council priorities. By re-evaluating the approach, the Council can better position itself to meet the demands of its evolving community and the broader strategic objectives of the Council.

84. The Council is experiencing a number of complications around Self and Custom Build applications and policy interpretation. This has led the Council into a reactionary mode and the approach to decision-making on Self and Custom build proposals lacks consistency. This reactionary and inconsistent position is being exploited. We recommend the Council undertake independent scrutiny on its approach to Self and Custom build. This should cover:

- a. A review of recent decision-making and how the Council is interpreting current legislation and the administration of the Self Build Register, and

- b. Recommendations for shifting to a proactive approach with clear communications on the Council's approach, expectations and identification of suitable sites.
85. Pre-app is seen by customers as ineffective and levels of take-up of pre-app and PPAs are low proportionate to the number of applications received, with only 149 applications received in 2022/23. Neither in-application negotiation nor the pre-app offer are working effectively. Pre-app could be an effective income generator for the service. Both in-application negotiation and pre-application processes require refinement for enhanced effectiveness. Achieving consistency in approach and a focus on commercialization will lead to improved outcomes. We recommend the Council reinvigorates its pre-app and PPA offer. The Council may wish to research the approach recently taken by Northumberland County Council in this respect.
86. Digital transformation in the service is needed. In particular, Policy monitoring practices are inconsistent and inefficient, heavily relying on manual and resource-intensive processes. We recommend joint working with ICT, GIS, and all elements of the Council. The Planning service needs a dedicated digital transformation project with relevant time and dedicated resources. We found an appetite among officers to be involved in transformation work and there is an opportunity to harness this as the Council works up its transformation plan through some task and finish groups. This work would benefit from a clear definition of what good looks like and some clarity around the service levels and standards that the Council wants in the future.

### **Implementation, Next Steps, and Further Support**

87. To implement the recommendations, the council should consider a clear plan that assigns responsibilities and establishes timelines. Communication and training will be essential to ensure that all members and staff understand the changes and their roles in achieving them. Follow-up support from the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) can help facilitate the implementation of these recommendations.
88. This peer review provides an opportunity for the Local Government Planning Department to enhance its operations and better serve the community. The challenges and opportunities identified in this report are essential for achieving the Council's goals and providing effective planning services.
89. Importantly, this peer review should be read in the context that the Planning Service, as a whole, is regarded as a well-performing one; attributed to its excellent performance on meeting national measures on decision-making and a strong track record in plan-making. This report primarily focuses on areas for improvement, reflecting the Council's commitment to excellence. The recommendations set out in this report are about where the Council could further improve its service delivery.
90. It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider and reflect on these findings.
91. To support openness and transparency, we recommend that the council share this report with officers and that they publish it for information for wider

stakeholders. There is also an expectation that the Council will develop an action plan to be published alongside the report.

92. Both the peer team, PAS and the LGA are keen to build on the relationships and the peer review process includes a six-month check-in meeting to take place in April 2024. This will be a facilitated session which creates space for the Council's senior leadership to update peers on its progress against the action plan and discuss next steps and any further support required.
93. A range of support from the LGA and PAS is available on their websites. This includes:
- development management support
  - local plan project management
  - helping with options for planning committee changes
  - pre-app and PPAs
  - training and development for members, town and parish councils and officers
  - more detailed work around enforcement
  - advice and support around approach to developer contributions (S106 and CIL)
94. For more information about planning advice and support, please contact [pas@local.gov.uk](mailto:pas@local.gov.uk)
95. The LGA has a range of practical support available. The range of tools and support available have been shaped by what councils have told LGA that they need and would be most helpful to them. This includes support of a corporate nature such as political leadership programmes, peer review, LG Inform (our benchmarking service) and more tailored bespoke programmes.
96. Helen Murray, Principal Adviser is the LGA's focal point for discussion about your wider improvement needs and ongoing support and can be contacted at [helen.murray@local.gov.uk](mailto:helen.murray@local.gov.uk)
- This report was finalised in agreement with the Council on 29.01.2024.
97. We are grateful for the support of everyone who contributed to this review.