

Annual Report of the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Place 2022-23

1.Lancaster Planning ‘Peer Challenge’

In Autumn 2022 the Council’s local planning authority welcomed a peer review of their planning functions by representatives from the Local Government Association (LGA) alongside the Planning Advisory Service (PAS). The review included interviews and workshops with internal and external stakeholders, including regular users of the service.

The LGA/PAS final report contained some pleasing outcomes. The local planning authority was considered to be “*performing very well in many areas*”. The Peer Reviewers noted that the Council is recognised nationally as a good example of producing local plan policy; that it maintains good planning decision-making; and that staff are highly regarded inside and outside the Council.

The review set out a series of recommendations which have shaped an Implementation Plan for 2023/24. This plan identifies workstreams necessary to deliver continued improvement and to help us respond to existing and future challenges. I commend the whole planning team for their willingness to embrace and respond positively to this exercise.

2.Development Management

The last 12 months has seen a continued increase in the number of planning applications being determined within national statutory timescales. The quality of decision-making is reflected by a good planning appeal record. The team is still partially reliant on some external consultancy support due to vacancies at senior officer level, and recruitment in the local government development management sector in the north west remains challenging.

Despite the cost-of-living crisis, planning application numbers remain constant. The relaunched Planning Pre-Application Advice Service is proving popular, with service users now guaranteed a face-to-face site visit for all enquiries. There is notable increased pre-application developer interest in sites in Morecambe following the recent Levelling Up Funding decision for Eden Morecambe.

The Planning Enforcement Team experienced another very busy year with a number of high-profile enforcement investigations. Recruitment to vacant posts will enable the team to take forward revised working practices in response to the recommendations of the Peer Review.

The Building Control service, provided by Capita, continues to develop partnerships with public and private developers/agents. This has resulted in an improved fee income performance for 2022-23. The Council will evaluate all options for future building control delivery during the next 12 months as it seeks to build upon the good work of the last year. The volume of dangerous building callouts rose slightly during 2022, when compared to the calendar year of 2021.

3.Planning and Housing Strategy

The Climate Emergency Local Plan Review (CELPR) process is coming to a conclusion. The Government’s Planning Inspector held public examination sessions during 2022 and her letters to the local planning authority are published in the Examination Library on the Council’s website. It is disappointing that the Inspector does not accept the ambitions of the Council regarding localised setting of energy efficiency standards. The team is currently considering how to respond to this issue.

The CELPR has been lauded by a number of independent observers, including the Royal Town Planning Institute, Friends of the Earth, and the Town and Country Planning Association. This recognition demonstrates that Lancaster is at the forefront of new policy approaches to the climate emergency.

The team consulted on a series of Supplementary Planning Documents (SPD) during the last 12 months. Other SPDs were advanced to adoption in 2022, including the Meeting Housing Needs SPD and the Viability Protocol SPD.

Development of the Lancaster South Area Action Plan (AAP) continues and evidence gathering has included informal consultation on a series of Topic Papers. The results help inform the approach to a number of thematic areas, including the Overall Development Strategy; Travel, Transport and Connectivity; Addressing Climate Change and Community Resilience; the Natural Environment and Securing Biodiversity Net Gain; the Management of Water; and the Creation of Sustainable Places and Communities.

The South Lancaster Growth Catalyst and related strategic transport project, like other major infrastructure projects, is challenging, not least given the impact of inflationary increases. Discussions between the Growth Catalyst partner organisations Lancashire County Council, Lancaster City Council and Homes England on how challenges can be overcome are on-going. Following a recent public consultation, Lancashire County Council are working towards submitting a planning application for the South Lancaster to M6 Road later this year.

Neighbourhood planning continues with local communities supported in their aspirations to adopt a Neighbourhood Plan. During the last 12 months, Neighbourhood Plans have been adopted at Aldcliffe with Stodday (September 2022) and Carnforth (March 2023). A referendum for the Caton with Littledale Neighbourhood Plan is due to take place on 4 May 2023. Other Neighbourhood Plans are in various stages of progression.

The Council also declared a new Lancaster Moor Conservation Area in 2022.

4. Sustainable Transport

The service continues to influence transport policy at national and regional levels. After the successful lobbying effort during 2021-22, to ensure continuation of direct London to Lancaster rail services, it has been a quieter year regarding High Speed 2 (HS2), predominantly because of continued uncertainty regarding the completion of the full project.

Improvements to public transport in Morecambe are a necessity, not least because of the forthcoming arrival of Eden Morecambe. The local planning authority continues to have good relations with Lancashire County Council regarding the rail sector.

The Council also continues to work closely with Lancashire County Council on major transport proposals. However, the County Council have not yet made further progress on developing their programme for the Lancaster City Centre Movement and Public Realm Strategy. The next 12 months will be critical to ensure that the County Council comply with the requirements of the Bay Gateway Development Consent Order, which obliges them to implement transport/network improvement in the city centre.

The County Council are however continuing to work on preparing sustainable transport improvements as part of the South Lancaster Growth Catalyst. These proposals include a South Lancaster Cycleway and improved bus service infrastructure.

5. Heritage Action Zone

Extensive repairs and improvement to the Grand Theatre underway since summer 2020 are now complete. Public realm improvements to Damside Street are complete but subject to final carriageway remediations. Some further grant assisted property repairs have been completed

or are underway at Stonewell, Damside Street and St Leonard's Gate with other schemes in development.

Endeavours to raise the understanding and appreciation of the area's heritage continue through new heritage plaques, production of digital and paper trail maps and the complementary cultural programme activities, as well as preparation of the draft part two of the Conservation Management Plan for the area. A traditional heritage skills training programme was recently delivered involving members of the public and students at Lancaster and Morecambe College.

6.Canal Quarter Programme

There has been significant activity on the Canal Quarter Programme during 2022/23, including the completion of a masterplan for the area following extensive consultation. Proposals to bring sites forward have been helped by securing Brown Field Land Regeneration funds, for St Leonardsgate and Nelson Street Housing proposals. Officers continue to work with the other land-owners in the area to bring their elements forward in this very exciting project.

Cllr Gina Dowding
Portfolio Holder for Planning and Place

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