

Implementation Plan – 2023/24

Response to the LGA Planning Service Peer Challenge

Background

During 2022, Lancaster City Council requested a planning service peer challenge as part of its desire to deliver continuous improvement. This challenge, in the form of a review of the Council's planning-related functions, was independently organised by the Local Government Association (LGA) with the Planning Advisory Service (PAS).

The peer challenge was not an inspection. The challenge was delivered in a constructive and enabling way that helps the local authority identify strengths and areas where improvements might be made to support their wider planning objectives.

As part of the challenge, the LGA/PAS Team familiarised themselves with a wealth of planning-related literature prior to their visit to the district. They also toured the district, looking at key development sites and settlement patterns. Between 7 and 10 November 2022, they carried out a series of interviews and workshop events. Some of these interviews involved Elected Members, managers and officers from across the City Council. Other events involved representatives from Parish and Town Councils, architects, agents and developers, statutory consultees and local stakeholders and partners.

The LGA/PAS Team also observed two meetings of the Planning Regulatory Committee (October and November 2022).

Following the completion of the interviews and workshops, the LGA/PAS Team have produced a Final Report (3 January 2023). This report provides an Executive Summary, including a series of recommendations. It also provides far greater detail regarding the composition of the challenge team, the scope of the challenge, and feedback from the interactive sessions.

This **Implementation Plan** is produced in response to the recommendations contained in the Final Report. The City Council can confirm that both documents will be published and will be publicly available.

Lancaster City Council would like to take this opportunity to thank the Peer Review Team for their guidance, time and expertise during the challenge process.

The Scope of the Challenge

The aim of the challenge was to assess the operation of the Council's planning service and advise how it can respond to the present and future challenges. In doing so, it focused on:

- The recognition of the role of the Council's planning service to deliver and support the Council's strategic priorities and deliver the growth ambitions for the area;
- The perception of the service from within the service, the Council, communities and partners;
- How the service – including the Planning Committee – is performing, engaging with councillors, communities and wider stakeholders; and,
- How the service is delivering outcomes for the area.

The LGA Final Report is structured around four headings:

- Vision and leadership;
- Performance and management;
- Community and partnership engagement; and,
- Achieving outcomes.

Report Findings

The City Council is pleased to find that the Final Report considers that the Council's planning service is *"performing very well in many areas"*.

There are several positives to take from the report's findings. These include, but are not limited to:

- The current good performance provides a strong base for an increased focus on the delivery of key developments in the district;
- The Council is recognised nationally as a good example of producing local plan policy;
- The service is maintaining good planning decision-making;
- It continues to deliver an enforcement service despite an increase in cases and resourcing difficulties;
- There are exciting development opportunities within the district;
- There is genuine passion for the 'place' and a desire to deliver the best for the area;
- Staff within the service are highly regarded, both from inside and outside the council;
- The Council's complex political positions provides healthy challenge to the planning service, with local members and officers working very well together;
- The Planning Committee is working very well with a respectful and professional relationship between committee members and officers;
- There are many interested local developers, inward investors and partners in the area whose energy and interest could be harnessed further; and,
- The service has been very successful in recruiting and supporting junior planning officers through to more senior roles. This 'grow your own talent' is seen as a key strength during the national shortage of experienced planners.

There are also areas that are identified for improvement. There are 12 recommendations in total, and they are:

R.1 Throughout the planning service there needs to be an improved recognition that it is an integral part of the wider council, that the Council priorities are the priorities of the planning service, and the important role that the planning service has in delivering them.

R.2 Delivery must be the challenge in the planning service. Both the planning & regeneration services need to work together to focus on delivery and to unpick some of the issues that are causing sites to stall in delivery. Working corporately across the City Council to support the establishment of multi-disciplinary project teams for each priority site, developing a roadmap to delivery and clear milestones that are supported by a re-focused planning service using the knowledge and capacity, problem solving & pragmatism skills.

R.3 Work with Lancashire County Council to undertake an immediate deep dive into the delivery challenges of the key South Lancaster site and the related highways and infrastructure funding issues. The County-District relationship is a delivery issue, so to build a shared sense of ownership and risk between Lancaster City and the County Council, find common ground and move this key site forward

R.4 Review the Council's present approach on developer contributions and establish if the current approach will maximise the opportunities now and in the future.

R.5 Recognise that "good planning" is also about delivering the right outcome. The service needs to think more pragmatically rather than aspire to a "perfect planning" approach or solution. This means taking a step back to recognise "is this the right answer for getting things delivered?". It also includes prioritising work to use resources wisely; the service and the planners can take some risks in how limited resources are utilised, recognising what can be reduced in order to allow things to progress. This should include moving from detailed policy development, reducing the number of internal consultees, establishing standing advice, having more communication rather than detailed internal consultee comments, reducing the length of committee reports, conditions and presentations – freeing up officer time to focus on helping delivery.

R.6 Undertake the planned review of the Council's enforcement service to strengthen the present enforcement process, modernise and digitise the process and update the enforcement charter. Clearly and widely communicate a new and improved engagement processes to public.

R.7 Introduce some practical changes to the planning committee:

- consider live streaming the committee meetings to increase public accessibility,
- re-draft the chair's introduction to better clarify the processes and procedures that will be followed at the meeting and include an introduction of who is present
- discuss with members ways to better manage speaking time instead of the present unlimited number of speakers able to present at committee, and
- consider reviewing the scheme of delegation to reduce number of items going to committee so only those that require the committee input into are decided at committee.

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

- an increase in the number and variety of training sessions for committee members around key topic areas,

- having informal “catch up” meetings with officers and committee members to review decisions, appeal outcomes and progress of delivery against Local Plan,
- a requirement that all committee members, including substitutes, attend an annual training session.

R.9 Recognise and support the essential two-way relationship, trust and understanding between the chair and the committee’s lead planning officer. Develop a clear forward plan for items coming to the committee with a regular chair’s briefing and discussion with the committee’s lead planning officer.

R.10 Review and update the terms and the purpose of the Local Plan Review Group with members before embarking on any further policy production.

R.11 The service should improve its communication with both internal and external partners, including the public. Building on the work of the Community Connectors role, help and support the Parish and Town councils and community groups to better engage with planning through access to training with local councillors, regular briefings and updates along with other partners, delivered in language that is accessible and not planning jargon heavy, helping them to recognise the knowledge of the diversity of the place held by planners.

R.12 Be pro-active and reach out to developers, inward investors, or partners. Re-establish the agents’ forum and look to set up a partners’ board or forum to help deliver the local regeneration and growth agenda.

Responding to the Recommendations

The local planning authority accepts the recommendations, some of which are inter-linked. It has identified a work programme that will positively respond to the recommendations and try to achieve the best outcomes from the Peer Challenge.

As part of the monitoring of the Implementation Plan, it is proposed to report progress to the Council’s Overview and Scrutiny Committee at appropriate points during the work programme.

Some of the workstreams will be influenced by the outcomes of the City Council’s service restructuring. The implementation date of some workstreams (particularly those that involve councillors) will be influenced by the impending local elections.

The LGA and PAS has advised that they will contact the Council in 6-12 months to assess progress being made in implementing the recommendations, and we look forward to continuing to work with them.

Work Programme

The Work Programme identifies a series of operational workstreams and then illustrates which of the recommendations are relevant to that particular workstream. It recommends measures for exploration, and then assigns them to a project team consisting of existing officers and members in each case.

The ordering of the workstreams in this document does not indicate priority. Each workstream includes an estimated timescale for delivery. These will be dependent upon project team availability and any other emerging competing priorities and may require adjustment as the workstreams progress. If this is the case, then this will be reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee during regular reporting.

Key: Officers and Members

CEX	Chief Executive
CHR	Chair of Planning Regulatory Committee
PHDR	Portfolio Holder – Planning and Place
HPP	Head of Planning and Place
SMDM	Service Manager – Development Management
SMPHS	Service Manager – Planning and Housing Strategy
PAM	Planning Applications Manager
SPEO	Senior Planning Enforcement Officer
PSM	Planning Systems Manager
STEC	Senior Planning and Building Technicians
-	Other stakeholders (named where identified)

Workstream A

Review the operation of Planning Regulatory Committee.

Recommendations

R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6
R7	R8	R9	R10	R11	R12

Measures	Who	When
Develop a forward planning mechanism for briefing the Chair and Planning Group Leaders regarding upcoming Committee items.	CHR, HPP, SMDM, PAM	April 2023
Produce new, consistent scripts for Committee meetings	CHR, HPP, SMDM, PAM	April 2023
Review length of committee reports and accompanying presentations	CHR, HPP, SMDM, PAM	June 2023
Develop the existing member training and support arrangements for Planning Committee, including the introduction of review meetings	CHR, HPP, SMDM, PAM	May-June 2023
Review current Planning Committee speaking arrangements to better manage speaking time (instead of unlimited number of speakers)	CHR, HPP, SMDM, PAM and all Planning Regulatory Committee Members	July-September 2023
Consider a review of the Scheme of Delegation to reduce the number of items being determined at Committee	CHR, HPP, SMDM, PAM	September 2023
Fix an agreed procedure for defending Committee overturns at any subsequent planning appeal (noting the Institute's professional Code of Conduct)	CHR, HPP, SMDM, PAM	May-September 2023

Workstream B

Review the operation of Local Plan Review Group prior to any further (new) policy production.

Recommendations

R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6
R7	R8	R9	R10	R11	R12

Measures	Who	When
Revisit the terms and reference of LPRG to determine the purpose of the Group going forward	PHDR, HPP, SMPHS, Democratic Service colleagues	May 2023
Consider the membership arrangements of LPRG	PHDR, HPP, SMPHS, Democratic Service colleagues	May 2023
Agree the forward plan for LPRG meetings for 2023/34 including a review of report length and content	PHDR, HPP, SMPHS and LPRG Members	May 2023

Workstream C

Align corporate priorities with the priorities of the Planning and Place Service

Recommendations

R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6
R7	R8	R9	R10	R11	R12

Measures	Who	When
Determine methods for ensuring aligned priority delivery <i>(Taking into account remodelled service delivery post-senior leadership team restructure)</i>	CEX, HPP, SMPHS, SMDM	September 2023
Embed shared priorities within Service teams via training	HPP, SMPHS, SMDM, External where necessary (e.g. PAS)	October 2023

Workstream D

Undertake the (already scoped) review of the planning enforcement service

Recommendations

R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6
R7	R8	R9	R10	R11	R12

Measures	Who	When
<p>Implement the next phases of the Planning Enforcement Recovery Plan (2022), including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) Review Enforcement Charter, including expediency flowchart and timescales and match with existing resources; (b) Produce new standard letters with flexibility for all circumstances; (c) Consider whether other forms of digital communication might be deployed; (d) Empower PEOs to be taking expediency decisions rather than Planning Officers (includes greater awareness of Development Plan); (e) Review length of electronic file records and methods of recording meetings/dialogue on cases. (f) Consider approaches to educating agents and architects re: enforcement responsibilities, especially condition compliance. Restructure of decision notices may assist; (g) Handover of casework from SPEO to PEOs with the exception of major strategic cases. 	HPP, SMDM, SPEO, PSM	By September 2023
Recruit to vacant existing Planning Enforcement Graduate role to bolster capacity	SMDM, SPEO	When freeze on recruitment ends or case made for filling by exception
Review longstanding enforcement cases to clear historic work as much as possible	SMDM, SPEO	By July 2023

Workstream E

Seek greater liaison with developers, inward investors and/or partners

Recommendations

R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6
R7	R8	R9	R10	R11	R12

Measures	Who	When
Ongoing monitoring of new pre-application planning service via feedback forms and other methods	SMDM, PAM, Other (External users of the Service)	Ongoing, immediate
Re-establish the Agents' Forum	HPP, SMDM, PAM, Other (External users of the Service)	September 2023
Consider the establishment of a Partners' Board or Forum to help deliver the local regeneration and growth agenda (and attract inward investment)	CEX, HPP, Internal Others (Cabinet and other Heads of Service/Chief Officers), Other (Strategic local stakeholders)	From September 2023

Workstream F

Make the planning system more accessible to external users and improve communication

Recommendations

R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6
R7	R8	R9	R10	R11	R12

Measures	Who	When
Review and consider various methods for improved communication with communities, Parish and Town Councils	HPP, SMPHS, SMDM, PAM, SPEO, STEC, Others (External – Parish and Town Councils, Community Groups/Representatives)	September 2023
Review all outgoing literature (reports, policy documents, etc) and ensure that planning jargon is, as far as is possible, minimised.	HPP, SMPHS, SMDM, PAM, SPEO, STEC, Others (inc. Communications Team)	September 2023
Assess what further improvements can be made to website and other digital forms of communication	SMPHS, SMDM, PSM, STEC, Others (ICT, GIS Officers and other supporting internal staff)	October 2023

Workstream G**Review processes and priorities to ensure best use of officer time commensurate with agreed Service priorities****Recommendations**

R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6
R7	R8	R9	R10	R11	R12

Measures	Who	When
Review length of delegated reports and templates	SMDM, PAM, PSM	September 2023
Review existing consultee list	SMDM, PAM, Other (internal teams/ services)	September 2023
Reconsider role of internal consultees (especially with Service) and devise strategy for communication, rather than formal consultation	SMDM, SMPHS, PAM	December 2023
Review what standing advice can be agreed with consultees and within our own Service documents	SMDM, SMPHS, PAM, SPEO, PSM	December 2023
Review other examples of local authority policy production, to compile good practice with an aim to move away from detailed policy development where practicable	HPP, SMPHS, SMDM	By April 2024
Review end-to-end planning application (and other similar consenting regimes) process	SMDM, PAM, PSM, STEC	By April 2024
Review existing planning conditions and seek to reduce quantum (whilst ensuring fit-for-purpose from an enforcement perspective)	SMDM, PAM, SPEO	April 2024
Review structure and appearance of Decision Notices	SMDM, PAM, PSM	April 2024
Review length of committee reports and accompanying presentations	See Workstream A for details	

Workstream H

Explore corporate opportunities to create improved delivery vehicle for strategic and other major sites

Recommendations

R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6
R7	R8	R9	R10	R11	R12

Measures	Who	When
Assess the current range of projects and strategic sites and agree priorities commensurate with resources	CEX, HPP, SMPHS, SMDM, Other (Cabinet, Heads of Service/Chief Officers)	June 2023 (and informed by outcome of service restructuring)
Agree roadmap to delivery with clear milestones	HPP, SMPHS, SMDM, Other (Heads of Service/Chief Officers)	June 2023 (as above)
Establish multi-disciplinary projects teams to assist with delivery (<i>informed by outcome of Senior Leadership Team restructure</i>)	CEX, HPP, SMDM, SMPHS, PAM, Other (Heads of Service/Chief Officers), Other (external partners)	December 2023 (and subject to service restructuring)

Workstream I

Work alongside Lancashire County Council and other strategic partners to explore delivery challenges in South Lancaster

Recommendations

R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6
R7	R8	R9	R10	R11	R12

Measures	Who	When
Increase the work with strategic partners to agree a preferred way forward on developer contributions in South Lancaster	CEX, HPP, SMPHS, SMDM, Other (Cabinet, Heads of Service/Chief Officers), Other Externals (including LCC, Homes England, National Highways)	Ongoing – end date TBC
Agree preferred options and roadmap to delivery with partners, establishing clear milestones	HPP, SMPHS, SMDM, Other (Cabinet, Heads of Service/Chief Officers)	As above
Establish a new multi-disciplinary project team for South Lancaster (which includes external partners) to assist with strategic delivery	CEX, HPP, SMDM, SMPHS, PAM, Other (Heads of Service/Chief Officers), Other (external partners)	As above (and subject to outcome of service restructuring)

Workstream J

Review wider developer contribution position across the district as part of the plan-making process

Recommendations

R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6
R7	R8	R9	R10	R11	R12

Measures	Who	When
Create an officer group to review mechanisms for securing financial and non-financial developer contributions and prepare options for consideration	CEX, HPP, SMPHS, SMDM, Other (Heads of Service/Chief Officers) Other external partners (Planning Advisory Service)	October 2023 (timescale informed by evolving national planning policy consultations, and the developer contribution work programme that is emerging with PAS)
Review governance of section 106 contributions	HPP, SMPHS, SMDM, Other (Heads of Service/Chief Officer Legal) Other external partners (Planning Advisory Service)	December 2023 (informed by developer contribution work programme that is emerging with PAS)