

PLANNING PEER REVIEW

Executive Summary

This report provides an overview of the recent Peer Review of the Council's Planning Service undertaken by the Local Government Association. A peer review was requested from the Local Government Associations (LGA) in response to a motion agreed at Council.

Appendix 1 – Planning Peer Review report

Appendix 2 – Peer Review Action Plan.

Recommendations

That Planning Committee is asked to:

RECOMMEND TO COUNCIL That

- (i) The action plan be approved, and;
- (ii) That a quarterly update on the action plan be presented to the Planning Committee.

Reasons for Decision

Reason: To record the actions arising from the Peer review and ensure an appropriate monitoring regime is in place.

Background Papers:	None.
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Date Published:	14 March 2022

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Planning Service is key to the Council's ability to guide and manage the future development of the Borough, impacting on the quality of place experienced by residents, businesses, workers and visitors for generations to come. Within the service, the Strategic Planning function has secured a suite of plans as part of its adopted Local Plan that provides the spatial context and polices to ensure future growth meets the Council's priorities (for example spatial responses to the declared climate emergency). The Development Management function seeks to ensure that development proposals are taken through a process of public consultation and are consistent with the adopted plans of the Council, and the Enforcement function which seeks to address breaches of planning control and therefore maintain public trust in the planning system.
- 1.2 An external review of the service was undertaken in December 2021 by the Local Government Associations. Their Planning Peer Review Report was published on the 8 March 2022. The purpose of this report is to, via Planning Committee, recommend an agreed Action Plan to Council. It is also recommended that the monitoring of the Action Plan is overseen by the Planning Committee.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 At Council in July 2021, Councillor Aziz submitted a motion 'Review of the operation of Woking Borough Council's Planning Department'.
- 2.2 The minute of the Council meeting records the following:

'The Council considered the recommendations of the Executive in respect of Councillor Aziz's motion seeking a review of the operation of the Borough Council's planning department. The Executive had not been supportive of Councillor Aziz's motion and had proposed an amended motion as follows:

"In recent times, Woking Borough Council's Planning Department has recommended a number of planning applications subsequently voted down by the Planning Committee.

In addition, applications have been called in by Members and subsequently agreed by Councillors against officer advice even when previous refusals on identical schemes had already been issued – or enforced.

This Council calls for an LGA-appointed review of the operation of the planning function of Woking Borough Council, including the steps taken by officers and Members to come to decisions in performing their professional and statutory duties."

In consideration of the recommendation before the Council, Councillor Barker moved and Councillor Howard seconded an amendment to delete the first two paragraphs of the recommendation, reducing the recommendation to the following:

"This Council calls for an LGA-appointed review of the operation of the planning function of Woking Borough Council, including the steps taken by officers and Members to come to decisions in performing their professional and statutory duties."

- 2.3 Councillor Aziz advised that he was content with the amendment as moved by Councillor Barker. The Motion as amended was supported.
- 2.4 Consequently a peer review was completed in December 2021 and a full report received in March 2022.

3.0 The Peer Review Findings

- 3.1 A copy of the Planning Peer Review report is attached as Appendix 1. The Executive summary sets out the key findings under a number of themes as set out below. Members will want to note the review found that the Council is delivering a good quality planning service within a challenging agenda, performs well against the national planning performance regime for speed and quality of planning decision making and has a comparably low numbers of complaints and appeals compared to other local authorities.

The council's place making work

- 3.2 The Peers recognised that town centre regeneration was driving vitality, footfall and private investment in the town and welcomed the development of a town centre master plan. The Peers have identified there needs to be a clear narrative of how local plan policies, HIF project, the approach to tall buildings and the town centre master plan sit together. With the Council's key objective of town centre focused development and the wider regeneration agenda there should be greater clarity on who the individual officer and lead councillor are on this agenda. They considered that there is a need for clarity in relation to i) early engagement with key members and officers on regeneration and new investment; ii) the planning role as separate from the Council's regeneration responsibilities and iii) ownership of the HIF project and the wider aims and positive outputs of the project. They also felt that there was a need for additional specialist skills in relation to urban design and heritage. There is also a need to form a strong and coherent policy narrative in relation to key town centre projects, cross party support for the emerging town centre master plan and the growth agenda.

The perception and integrity of the planning service

- 3.3 The Peers concluded that there was lots of recognition for the planning service from members, agents and residents but there was a perception that the development management service is siding with developers although this was a minority view and not something the review team found evidence of. The Peers noted that the perceived integrity of the planning service and decisions seems to have suffered as a result of a number of major applications. There seems to be a gap between the officers' view of planning policy and Members' acceptance of this policy. They recommended that further member and officer training could support trust and understanding. The establishment of an agents' forum was also recommended as with a bridge building exercise with Thamesway.
- 3.4 The Peers identified there needs to be some improved engagement, recognition and better understanding from both officers and members about how to work together. In addition, it is not clearly understood by many how the Council's role as development partner works in relation to planning decision and there needs to be a clear definition between the two roles of place maker (regeneration) and regulatory function (planning).

The Development Management Service – including the Council's planning committee

- 3.5 The Peers concluded the Council is delivering a good planning service within a challenging agenda which is recognised by many. The service is performing well against national performance regime for speed and quality of decision making with a comparably low number of appeals of complaints and appeals compared to other local authorities. The focus is on working to improve applications and their quality rather than speed of decision making. The peers identified that as the service is performing well, there is an opportunity for it to do more than its primary function and stay "ahead of the game" in present and future opportunities.
- 3.6 There is a need to improve the engagement between the service and the Council's IT improvement programme, identifying what IT improvements are needed. Improvements to the Council's planning website are recommended to make information more easily available with improved opportunities for self-service as well as improvements to the mobile and Council

telephone system. The Peers recommended that the service was sure on how extensions of time when determining planning applications are used so the service is not reliant on them.

- 3.7 It is recommended there is improved engagement between committee members and officers prior to committee enabling more informal opportunities for members to ask questions of case officers in advance of the committee. The Peers recommended there should be an improved training programme for all members and planning officers on each others' roles and responsibilities with independent training and mentoring for the Chair of planning committee recognising the key role this is as well as recognition and support between the chair and lead planning officer. All parties and committee members need to recognise that planning committee decisions must be non-political and they have a responsibility to make individual planning judgements. The Peers recommend clear guidelines on committee procedures for the public with improved production and public access to the streaming of the planning committee. The process to call in an application to the Planning Committee, an issue raised in the motion, should be kept under review.

The Planning policy and other service elements

- 3.8 The planning policy team was spoken about very positively and should share their learning with other authorities. The Peers recommend embracing the principles of making data accessible, making sure the service has access to specific GIS mapping skills and to make the next plan digitally based. The good work already being undertaken on community engagement needs to be built upon and have a consistent and clear offer of community support around neighbourhood planning.
- 3.9 An action plan addressing the recommendations set out in the report is attached as Appendix 2.

4.0 Corporate Strategy

- 4.1 The Council's Corporate Strategy was approved in 2021 and a replacement strategy will be proposed for approval in March 2022. The current and emerging plan emphasises the Council's role in the 'place' – supporting high quality sustainable development, new housing – including affordable housing, a strong economy and proposals to reduce climate change. The Planning Service has a critical role in delivering these ambitions and objectives.

5.0 Implications

Finance and Risk

- 5.1 For the individual actions, some related to procedural or operational matters that have a neutral financial impact and will be dealt with within the existing service budget. Other actions set out in the report may create financial pressure including future proposals to separate out the lead roles related to regeneration and planning, a training programme for officers and members and improvements to the IT offering.

Equalities and Human Resources

- 5.2 There are no immediate equalities or human resources matters arising.

Legal

- 5.3 There are no immediate legal matters raised in this report. The peers identified that the finely balanced political position within the authority creates tensions around decision making at the planning committee and a lack of ownership of the growth agenda. While there was a perception by some that the Council's Development Management approach was siding with developers there was no evidence of this. It should be recognised that the Council's planning

service has a responsibility to engage proactively and work productively with developers towards good outcomes for the area and the present and future communities. This work is steered by the Council's planning policies.

6.0 Engagement and Consultation

6.1 The process to complete the planning review involved a wide cross section of stakeholders which informed the peers' thinking and their final report.

7.0 Recommendation

- (i) The action plan be approved, and;
- (ii) That a quarterly update on the action plan be presented to the Planning Committee.

REPORT ENDS