Planning Peer Challenge – Final Report

Woking Borough Council

Interviews: 8th to 10th December 2021

Final Report: March 2022

1.0 Executive Summary

1.1 This report summarises the findings of a Planning Service Peer Challenge, organised by the Local Government Association (LGA) with the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) and carried out by a team of experienced local government officer and member peers for Woking Borough Council's Planning Service. The aim of the review was to assess the operation of Woking Borough Council's Planning Service (the service); focusing on the Council's place making work, development management, including the Council's planning committee, and policy work, the perception of the service and how it can respond to the present and future challenges.

1.2 Due to the ongoing Covid 19 pandemic, Woking Borough Council (the Council) agreed with the peer team that the review would be undertaken via a series of socially distanced onsite and remotely held interviews. The peer review was undertaken whilst waiting for the Government's response to the Planning Reform White Paper 'Planning for the Future' in 2020, which will give details of any future changes in the national planning process.

1.3 It is the reviews opinion that Woking Borough Council is delivering a good planning service within a challenging agenda. This is recognised by many people that we interviewed. The service is performing well against the national planning performance regime for speed and quality of planning decision making, with a comparably low numbers of complaints and appeals compared to other local authorities. The Council has a suite of Local Development Plan Documents that includes a Core Strategy, Site Allocation and Development Management policy documents and a number of neighbourhood plans being made and produced.

1.4 Officers and councillors at the senior level of the service and within the Policy and Development Management Teams are well respected by many both within and outside of the Council.

1.5 The very finely balanced political position of the Council, with a minority Conservative Council leadership and opposition party committee chairs, as on the Planning Committee, and the almost annual political cycle of council elections by thirds, is widely recognised by officers, members, and others externally as bringing some challenges in planning decision making, which can be contentious anyway. This is very understandable with issues around ownership of the planning policies with committee members when making decisions in public at the committee.

1.6 The Council and the service has recently gone through a period of change with several new senior officers and councillors. This has brought a new more collaborative approach for the senior management and leadership team which has been welcomed by many and is helping to bridge this challenge. This good work, along with the recent work to strengthen public engagement, should continue to be built upon.

1.7 The Council is facing the challenge of managing and delivering a high level of population and economic growth within the borough over the coming 5, 10, 15 years and beyond. There are some very apparent tensions both politically and with some members of the community and wider stakeholders around the Council's policies of focusing delivery within the town centre, the Council's approach to tall buildings and an awarded Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF) project within the borough. It was widely recognised and supported that the Town Centre Master Plan that the Council is presently producing, is key in bringing the community, wider stakeholders and the Council together on this agenda.

1.8 It is the review's opinion that the Council needs to produce a clear policy narrative for how the local plan policies, Town Centre Master Plan and HIF funded project sit and deliver together. This

should be clearly communicated to the community and developers and understood by councillors and officers. Some work will be needed to bring the community and the wider Council on board with the Town Centre Master Plan to make this "our" master plan rather than "the" master plan as it is referred to by everyone presently. There should be an aim to get cross party support for the growth agenda, or at least a clear and understood policy position for decision making by officers and committee members.

1.9 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. It is the review team's opinion that the key officer with the responsibility to lead this work around promotion and delivery should have a clear separation from the Head of Planning role. The political and officer positions need to be separated from the planning decision-making role but with a clear understanding of the Council's aims, objectives and policies across planning, regeneration and the wider council, with access to the necessary regeneration and urban design skills to support this key agenda within the Council.

1.10 It does appear, due in part we believe, to the finely balanced political position within the authority, that tensions are being felt around decision making at the planning committee and a lack of ownership of the growth agenda. There were suggestions, from both inside and external to the committee, that decision making at the committee has become more political. This was not reported as consistently the case and it was not viewed directly during the review but it is vital for the reputation of the Council, the committee and the service that any political voting does not happen. All committee members need to be aware of their responsibilities to make individual planning judgements, using the Council's policies and professional advice from their officers on the applications that they make decisions on at committee.

1.11 It was very apparent that there are some very dedicated councillors and officers. They need to work well together, across all political parties within the finely balanced political position of the Council, with an improved understanding of each other's roles, building greater trust and working professionally together. In the review's opinion an improved understanding and training on all sides of the different roles and responsibilities for committee members, non-committee members and professional planning officers would help to reduce some of the tensions. This should also include improved engagement between committee members and planning officers prior to the committee through formal briefings for committee members and more informal opportunities to ask questions in advance of a committee to better enable quality decision making. This would also include further developing the essential two-way relationship, trust and understanding between the chair and the lead planning officer of the committee. The role of the planning committee chair is recognised as a key role. The present chair is well respected and recognised as knowledgeable on specific policy areas but should be further supported with access to independent training and mentoring in this key role.

1.12 There was a perception by some that the Council's Development Management approach was siding with developers over residents, but this was not a majority held view and was not evidenced by the review team. 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.

1.13 There are some very well-informed community groups and individuals within the borough, with very good understanding of the planning process and the Council's challenges, as well as great knowledge of their communities and areas. The Council should look to embrace them;

building on the good work of the recently set up Residents Panel and Community Forum and make sure that there is a consistent and clear offer of community support, information and training around local authority and Neighbourhood Planning to help to bring the community into the Council's planning processes.

1.14 The planning service performs well and has continued to perform well throughout the challenges of the Covid period and should be commended for this. The service is busy but well resourced. The service needs to quickly improve how it supports case officers' access through mobile and council telephone system, which it was reported does not allow calls to be diverted properly, and an external focused service should not be reliant on case officers using their own private phones for applicant and public contacts.

1.15 There is a general positive and engaging approach to the delivery of the service, focused on quality rather than speed, whilst still performing well against the national performance regime. The service should build on its good past and present work and look to use its strong position to be a leader around new planning challenges in areas such as biodiversity net gain, design codes, developer contributions and the single development levy, digital data and skills and supporting and empowering communities as it moves forward with its next iteration of the local plan and service delivery, and embracing the new planning reform agenda when the details are known.

2.0 Key Recommendations

R1 The Local Plan Policies, Town Centre Master Plan and HIF project should be brought into a coherent policy narrative that is understood by officer, members and can be communicated to the public and developers. The council should aim to secure community and cross-party ownership of the key Town Centre Master Plan, or as a minimum have clarity on the position and policy to support decision making.

R2 Have one widely recognised senior officer and member as the leaders of the Council's regeneration agenda. This officer role should be separate from the Head of Planning role with access to required specialist regeneration and urban design skills to support the Council's regeneration agenda.

R3 Deliver an improved training programme for all members and planning officers on each other's roles and responsibilities, giving a collective clarity on policy, decision making, call-in requirements for applications to go to committee and political awareness. This should be open to all councillors but required for all committee members and planning case officers. Support the recognised key role of the planning committee chair with access to specific independent training and mentoring in the role.

R4 Improve the engagement between committee members and planning officers prior to the committee. This should be done through both formal briefings for committee members and more informal opportunities for committee members to ask questions of case officers in advance of a committee to better enable quality decision making.

R5 Recognise and support the essential two-way relationship, trust and understanding between the chair and the lead planning officer of the committee. Develop a clear forward plan for items coming to the committee with a regular chair's briefing and discussion with the lead planning officer of the committee. This needs to occur at time in advance of a committee sitting for any required actions to be undertaken.

R6 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, using the policies and professional advice from their officers.

R7 Continue and build on the recognised good work led by the new Chief Executive and Director of Planning around improved community engagement and accessibility through the Residents Panel and Community Forum and the Council Leaderships cross-party engagement.

R8 Have a consistent and clear offer of community support, information and training around local authority and Neighbourhood Planning.

R9 The service needs to quickly improve how it supports case officers' access through the mobile and council telephone system.

R10 The service should build on its good past and present work to be a leader around new planning challenges in areas such as biodiversity net gain, design codes, the single development levy, digital data and skills and supporting and empowering communities. Embed GIS mapping skills within the service, actively embrace accessible digital data across the service and as it moves forward make the next iteration of the council's local plan a digitally based plan.

3.0 Background and Scope of the Peer Review

3.1 This report sets out the findings of a planning improvement peer challenge, organised by the Local Government Association (LGA) in cooperation with the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) for Woking Borough Council. Peer challenges are managed and delivered by the sector for the sector. They are improvement orientated and are tailored to meet the individual council's needs. Designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement 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.

3.2 The aim of the peer challenge was to assess the operation of Woking Borough Council's Planning service (the service) and how it can respond to the present and future challenges. This was due in part to a motion made at the Council's Executive Committee (17th June 2021) to review the service and the decision-making processes of officers and members due to concerns that a number of planning application decisions made at the Council's Planning Committee were going against officer advice. The review has focused on:

- the Council's place making work,
- the perception and integrity of the service - including the officer-developer relations,
- the Development Management Service - including the Council's Planning Committee, and
- the Planning Policy other service elements

3.3 The review took the form of an analysis of data and information relating to the operation of the Planning Service. The review team watched several of the Council's Planning Committee meetings - streamed live, recorded and in person. It reviewed key documents and supporting material produced by the Council and undertook structured interviews with political leaders, Planning Committee members, ward councillors, senior managers and staff, internal consultees, Neighbourhood Forum and Resident Association representatives, external consultees, developers, agents and neighbouring local authorities.

3.4 Due to the ongoing Covid 19 pandemic, the Council agreed with the peer team that the review would be undertaken via a series of socially distanced onsite and remotely held interviews from 8th to 10th December 2021. This was at a time whilst waiting for the Government's response to the Planning Reform White Paper 'Planning for the Future' in 2020, that will give details of any future changes in the national planning process.

3.5 The peer team was made up of serving council officers, serving councillors from across the country and a PAS review manager. The review team members were:
- **James Arnold** - Strategic Director of Place, North West Leicestershire District Council
- **Sunil Sahadevan,** Head of Planning, Luton Council
- **Cllr Philip Broadhead,** Deputy Leader of the new unitary Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council, Conservative.
- **Cllr Liz Green,** Kingston upon Thames, former leader of the council and leader of the opposition, Liberal Democrat.
- **Steve Barker,** Planning Advisory Service, Peer Challenge Manager

3.6 Where possible, PAS and the LGA will support councils with the implementation of the recommendations as part of the council's improvement programme. A range of support is available from the LGA at http://www.local.gov.uk. It is recommended that Woking Borough Council discuss ongoing PAS support with Steve Barker, Principal Consultant, stephen.barker@local.gov.uk and any corporate support with Mona Sehgal, Principal Adviser, mona.sehgal@local.gov.uk

3.7 As part of the LGA's peer review peer impact assessment and evaluation, PAS and the LGA will contact the council in 6-12 months to see how the recommendations are being implemented and the beneficial impact experienced.

3.8 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 Woking Borough Council and everybody they met during the process for their time and positive contributions and allowing the review to occur within Covid safe practices.

4.0 Detailed Feedback

4.1 The Council's place making work

4.1.1 The Council is facing the challenge of managing and delivering a high level of population and economic growth within the borough over the coming 5, 10, 15 years and beyond. The Council's development strategy has focused large amounts of development within the town centre of Woking, protecting the areas of greenbelt within the borough from development. There has been significant investment in quality public realm where the town centre regeneration seems to be driving vitality, footfall and private investment at a time where other town centres in the country are facing considerable challenges in this area. It was also recognised that this brings financial benefits to the council through increased business rates and local employment opportunities.

4.1.2 There are some very apparent tensions both politically and with some elements of the community and wider stakeholders around the required housing delivery, the Council's policies of focusing delivery within the town centre, particularly around the Council's the tall buildings policy and an awarded Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF) project, which has brought with it extra housing numbers. This is especially true with some councillors feeling unease about the level of development occurring. This, coupled with some residents' concerns over the height and mass of recent development in the town centre, is causing some tension and uneasy about development.

4.1.3 The review team felt that there was a lack of clarity relating to the HIF project around its political leadership, the ongoing ownership of this key project and a clearly expressed narrative of the wider aims and positive outputs of the project. For such a key development project we would expect a political leader, as well as the senior officer, to be recognised by stakeholders both inside and outside of the council, and a commonly expressed understanding and language about the project.

4.1.4 The importance and support for the Town Centre Master Plan that the Council is producing was widely recognised and supported. It is seen as key in bringing the community, wider stakeholders and the Council together on the development agenda of the Council. The Council has a good policy base for the Master Plan to progress from with the good work undertaken on the adopted Design Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) and characterisation work.

4.1.5 The Council needs to produce a clear policy narrative for how the local plan policies, the key town centre master plan and HIF funded project sit and deliver together. This narrative needs to be clearly communicated to the community and developers, and understood by members and officers across the council. Some work will be needed to bring the community and elements of the council onboard with the town centre master plan to make this "our" master plan rather than "the" master plan as it is referred to by everyone presently. There should be an aim to get cross party support for the growth agenda, at least having a clear and understood policy position for decision making.

4.1.6 With the Council's key objective of town centre focus development and the wider regeneration agenda it is the peer team's opinion that the key responsibility to lead on the promotion and delivery of the place agenda should be separated from the Head of Planning role and planning decision-making role. There needs to be greater clarity and recognition who the individual lead officer and lead councillor are on this work. These roles should take initial approaches about potential large-scale development in the area, front the community engagement and promote the vision for the area. The lead officer position needs a clear understanding of the Council's aims, objectives and policies across planning, regeneration and the wider council with access to the necessary regeneration and urban design skills to support this key agenda within the Council.

4.1.7 It was not apparent to the peer team where the specialist skills around the regeneration and urban design to support the place agenda were held within the Council and a recognition of the where the roles and responsibilities sat.

4.1.8 With the volume of major projects occurring in the borough it was felt by the review team that there needs to be an improved and clearly understood process of engagement with councillors earlier in the development process about these potential future developments, to help shape, maximise the outputs, and build understanding and support going forward.

4.1.9 The very finely balanced political position of the Council, with a minority Conservative Council leadership and opposition party committee chairs, as on the Planning Committee, and the almost annual political cycle of council elections by thirds, is widely recognised by officers, members, and others externally as bringing some challenges in planning decision making, which can be contentious anyway. This is very understandable with issues around ownership of the planning policies with committee members when making decisions in public at the committee.

4.1.10 It needs to be recognised that if there is a lack of confidence in decision making by the Council at the planning committee it could influence investor confidence and future regeneration potential.

4.1.11 The Council and the service has recently gone through a period of change with several new senior officers and councillors. This has brought a new more collaborative approach from the senior management and leadership team which has been welcomed by many. This more collaborative, cross-party engagement is helping members and officers to work constructively together in the balanced political position. The new Chief Executive and Director of Planning have been leading on some work to improve community engagement and accessibility through the Residents Panel and Community Forum. This widely recognised good work should be continued and built on.

Recommendations

- The Local Plan Policies, Town Centre Master Plan and HIF project needs to be brought into a coherent policy narrative that is communicated to the public and developers and understood by officer and members.
- The council should develop and get community and cross-party ownership of the recognised key Town Centre Master Plan – to become "our" masterplan.
- Build cross party support for the growth agenda where possible but ensure there is a clear and accepted policy position for decision making.
- There needs to be a recognised senior officer and lead member as the leaders of the Council's regeneration agenda and "line" into the Council for major projects.
- Ensure that the required specialist skills around the regeneration and urban design are in place to support the agenda.
- Continue to build on the recognised good work of the new Chief Executive and Director of Planning in terms of community engagement and accessibility and the Council Leaderships cross-party engagement.

4.2 The perception and integrity of the planning service

4.2.1 As part of the peer challenge the review team were asked to look at the perception and integrity of the service following a motion made at the Council's Executive Committee (17th June 2021) where some members had concerns that planning officers were considered to be to "pro-development" through working closely with developers.

4.2.2 Throughout the review there was lots of recognition that that the planning team across the development management and policy functions are hardworking, diligent and offered a good service. This view came from both inside the Council, some community and residents' groups, applicants and other external stakeholders.

4.2.3 The service works proactively and productively with applicants to improve applications to produce good outcomes for the area and the present and future communities, as it has a responsibility to do as a positive development management process. This work is steered by the Council's planning policies as the framework for decision making of development in the area – this positive planning approach was understood and accepted by most people we engaged with during the review.

4.2.4 There was a perception by some that the Council's development management approach was siding with developers over residents, but this was a minority held view and not something that the review team found evidence of. Most recognised the reality of the present required national planning approach and the challenges faced by the planning service.

4.2.5 The perceived integrity of the planning service and decisions seems to have suffered as a result of decisions taken on a number of the major applications. This appears to be due to a gap between the officers' view of planning policy and some members' acceptance of this policy. We heard that members rarely engage on major applications, even when offered to do so through offered "drop-in" sessions. Officers have stated that they are keen do more to work with members, build a better shared understanding and would welcome feedback and discussions.

4.2.6 The engagement between officers and members that we viewed and heard about appeared professional and respectful. How a planning service functions, and particularly within a planning committee, is strongly reliant on how strong, trusted and understood the relationship is between the councillors and planning officers. Planning committee members are reliant on the professional advice they receive from their planning officers to make good defensible decisions. These are often contentious or have finely balanced planning reasons. They can have impacts on the communities and places they serve presently and for generations to come. This can bring real tensions to both roles.

4.2.7 However there does appear to be a need to have some improved engagement, recognition and better understanding from both officers and members about how to work together. Officers could be more aware of the ongoing political challenges, understanding the different roles of members, with members receiving training on the planning processes, professional judgement and technical briefings and a more open two-way engagement on issues prior to the committee. This will go some way to build the required trust between officers and members to work supportively together and disagree professionally.

4.2.8 As highlighted earlier there is a need for greater ownership and involvement by councillors in the regeneration and placemaking agenda and there should be a much greater collective ownership of the policy aims and direction.

4.2.9 Some residents spoke highly of their engagement with the service, with good access to the officers, as did many of the developers and agents, saying that the planning service was robust, accessible and constructive in their engagements.

4.2.10 As noted previously, it is the peer team's opinion that the Council can do more to bring councillors and the community with them around the Council's development aims and delivery through a clear and owned narrative for the area across the different policy documents.

4.2.11 The Council is already undertaking actions to better engage with the community through the recently implemented Residents Panel and Community Forum, which have been welcomed and this work should be continued and built upon.

4.2.12 We were informed that the Council had not run a regular agents' forum for a number of years. If this could be reintroduced it would be welcomed by agents, helping improve future applications, understanding of future developments, aiding policy production and helping to build relationships.

4.2.13 It appears that it is not clearly understood by many how the Council's role as a development partner works in relation to and different from its planning role. The role of the Local Planning Authority needs to be clearly defined and a clear understanding of the different roles understood fully by members.

4.2.14 There were some tensions highlighted in the present relationship between the planning team and the Council's development body ThamesWey. This is obviously a complex relationship but there needs to be some clear understanding of roles and responsibilities relating to the Council as the decision maker in planning and as a development partner in ThamesWey. Having the clearly communicate and defined roles highlighted earlier in the report should allow for a more positive and productive relationship.

Recommendations

- Reintroduce a regular agents' forum.
- Collective training for both Officers and Members on their respective roles
- Improved access between case officers and committee members.
- Provide clarity between the Council's roles of decision maker and development partner and ensure that there is a positive relationship between ThamesWey and planning service.
- Build cross party support for the growth agenda where possible and ensure there is a clear and accepted policy position for decision making.
- Continue to build on the recognised good work of the new Chief Executive and Director of Planning of improved community engagement and accessibility
- Continue to build on the Council Leaderships cross-party engagement.

4.3 The Development Management Service - including the Council's Planning Committee

4.3.1 It is the peer team's opinion that Woking Borough Council is delivering a good proactive planning service within a challenging agenda and finely balanced political position. This is recognised by many who we interviewed. The service is performing well against the national planning performance regime for speed and quality of planning decision making, with a comparably low number of complaints and appeals compared to other local authorities. There is a general positive and engaging approach to the delivery of the service, with a well-defined culture of working to improve applications and a focus on the quality of the application rather than the speed of handling a decision, whilst still performing well against the national performance regime.

4.3.2 The service has continued to perform well throughout the challenges of the Covid pandemic and should be commended for this.

4.3.3 The service appears well-resourced but busy. Many staff spoke about how much they enjoyed working for the authority, as they felt valued and supported, that the Council and the service had a proactive "open for business" approach and that they felt they were really helping to make a difference to the place. This is reflective of the low levels of staff "churn" within the service.

4.3.4 There are some good quality and respected officers within the service. This was recognised by agents as *"one of the most helpful planning authorities they have ever worked with"* and some of the residents' groups recognised the support given to them by the case officers as very good.

4.3.5 All these elements bring an opportunity for the service to be more ambitious in making improvements beyond just the primary function of determining planning applications and dealing with enforcement complaints.

4.3.6 As the service has moved to remote working practices as a response to the Covid pandemic it has highlighted some serious issues. The Council phone system not being correctly set up and calls not diverted correctly was highlighted as an issue in contacting case officers and for an externally focused service such as the planning service officers should not be reliant on using their own private mobile phones to engage with applicants and the general public.

4.3.7 It was highlighted that case officers were generally accessible and willing to spend time with both applicants and the public. Access to case officers was however rarely taken by committee members as an opportunity to raise questions or receive clarifications prior to committee.

4.3.8 The council should look at how it projects the planning service and shares information with the public through its website. The planning website can be improved to give the public better access to information and encourage great self-use. The time and resources required to do this will save resources in the long term.

4.3.9 How the service receives feedback from its users is important. This can be done through surveys or structured feedback with regular users. The council has not run a regular agents forum for a few years. If this could be reintroduced it would be welcomed by agents, helping to improve future applications, understand future developments, aid policy production and help to build relationships.

4.3.10 It is recommended that the Development Management Service should increase their engagement in the Council's IT improvement programme, which has been quite limited to date. Though the planners are not currently keen on the present IT offer there appears to be a lack of understanding from both sides about what is required by the service. The service should designate a planning IT super user role to liaison with the project and research what IT improvements are needed, what is possible from other LPAs experiences particularly around the use of the preferred Enterprise system that has seemingly been discounted by the service.

4.3.11 The service needs to be clear how it is using Extensions of Time (EoTs) on planning applications. Even though it has been highlighted that many of the applications that the service receives require their use due to high number of Special Protection Area (SPAs) in the borough, it was also noted that there was becoming an increased reliance on them during the Covid pandemic. This has been common across a lot of local authorities during this time as the number of applications, mainly householder applications, has increased and resources and changing work partners have brought delays. However, the authority wants to be clear that they are using them in a proper manner and not becoming reliant on them to protect performance.

4.3.12 The planning committee follows a good process within the committee but it could clarify the process that will take place at the start of the meeting. It could also produce some clear guidelines for the viewing or attending public on planning committee procedures and decision making, in advance of and available at meetings to provide more clarity to those attending the planning committee.

4.3.13 The physical layout of the committee is very good for in person viewing of the committee from the gallery, with good visibility of the presentations, recognition of committee members and good audio. However, the streamed presentation of the committee is difficult to follow, with the presentations not shown, no signage of speakers or case information. The Council should consider improving the production of and public access to the streaming of the planning committee. This would make it a better experience for the public that is on-par with, or close to, the experience of attending in person.

4.3.14 Officer presentations are well delivered with good clear presentation material. The reports could be modernised to be more informative, more interactive, structured to be more tabular with linked plans, illustrations, and fact sheets. Delegated reports should be templated.

4.3.15 Officers are professional and responsive to questions that are raised by the committee members and the interactions between officers and members appear professional and courteous.

4.3.16 It does appear, due in part we believe, to the finely balanced political position within the authority that tensions are being felt around decision making at the planning committee and this could also be related to the lack of ownership of the growth agenda as highlighted previously.

4.3.17 There were suggestions, from both inside and external to the committee, that decision making at the committee has become more political. This could be due to the tight political situation of the Council. While this is of concern, this was not reported as consistently the case and it was not viewed directly during the peer review but it is vital for the reputation of the Council, the service and the committee that political voting does not happen or even that there is a perception of it occurring. All committee members need to be aware of their responsibilities to make individual planning judgements, using the Council's policies and professional advice from their officers on the applications that they make decisions on at committee. This is something that all the political groups will need to be aware of and work on.

4.3.18 It was very apparent that there are some very dedicated councillors and officers in this area. They need to work well together, across all political parties within the finely balanced political position of the Council, with an improved understanding of each other's roles; building greater trust and working professionally together. In the peer team's opinion, an improved understanding and training on all sides of the different roles and responsibilities for committee members, non-committee members and professional planning officers would help to reduce some of the tensions. This should also include improved engagement between committee members and planning officers prior to the committee through formal briefings for committee members and more informal opportunities to ask questions in advance of a committee to better enable quality decision making. This would also include further developing the essential two-way relationship, trust and understanding between the chair and the lead planning officer of the committee.

4.3.19 The role of the planning committee Chair is recognised as a key role. The present Chair is well respected and recognised as knowledge on specific policy areas. She should be supported in this key and unique role with access to independent training and mentoring, as in PAS's opinion all planning committee chairs should be.

4.3.20 The applications that will be on the agenda for each committee are presently communicated to the Chair very late. The Chair does not know what is coming forward in advance of when the formal agenda is produced so cannot help to manage agenda lengths or give advice to the lead officer. The Council should develop a clear forward plan for items coming to the committee with a regular Chair's briefing and discussion between the Chair and the lead planning

officer of the committee. This should occur at time in advance of a committee so that any required actions can be undertaken.

4.3.21 It was reported that case officers were very willing and available to committee members to give clarity or answer questions prior to the committee sitting but very few took up the opportunity. These informal opportunities alongside more formal specific briefings are great opportunities to share information, and to ensure that any required information will be available when the committee sits to enable quality decision making.

4.3.22 There is a mix of experienced and inexperienced planning committee members due to regular changes through the authority's constant election cycle and other changes. This regular change on a committee is not always a bad thing but this lack of experience and understanding of the practicalities of decision making by some committee members means that access to training, as well as support from planning officers, is essential.

4.3.23 It also brings with it an initial lack of understanding of the different roles and responsibilities for committee members, non-committee members and professional officers. The change of role for a ward councillors; from being political, representing and advocating for their wards, to being a planning committee member; being non-political, not pre-determined in their view, weighing up often complex planning arguments, making decisions in line with the Council policies for the wider present and future communities of the area. This is very challenging. The reliance and support received by all committee members from the professional planners is absolutely key. These are different but complementary roles that can allow for open and frank exchanges of different views when the trust and understanding is held by both sides.

4.2.24 The Council receives on average 20 major applications a year and 940 non majors. Of these around 60 are called to committee which on average is 5 or6 applications per committee which is about 6% of all applications. The Council's requirement for applications to be called to committee is that any councillor can call any application into committee if there is a highlighted planning reason to do so. This requirement is lower than most authorities but the number of applications being called to committee is comparable with other authorities' planning committees.
Of the committees that the peer team observed there were a number of applications that appeared to have unresolved previous reasons for refusal or no planning reasons to be at the committee. We would suggest that even if altered, or if planning reasons are enforced better, that this call in requirement should be kept under regular review whilst the overall profile of applications the Council receives changes and any changes to the committee processes reflect what is needed.

4.2.25 The Council's profile of planning applications, like all local planning authorities in the country, has been altered by the Covid pandemic, with a reduction in major applications and a substantial increase in non-major or householder applications. Due to this, now is not the best time to consider if an appropriate volume of the applications are going to committee as there has been a general reduction in the larger, more strategic applications that would be expected to be the main applications going to the committee. It is worth the Council regularly challenging if the correct applications are being seen at committee and reviewing decisions that are made both at the committee and as delegated decisions. Committee time is valuable, and most of this time should be used on the applications that will have the biggest impact on the area.

4.2.26 The committee is going against officer recommendations around 15% of the time. This is higher than most authority planning committees and appears related to the collective acceptance of the need for housing delivery and the accompanying vision to deliver it as highlighted previously

in the report. It was suggested that this has caused Members to feel that they can show their unease through going against officer recommendation for approval on some of the major schemes, despite widespread acceptance that they were largely policy complaint.

4.2.27 It needs to be recognised that if there is a lack of confidence in decision making by the Council at the planning committee it could influence investor confidence and future regeneration potential.

Recommendations

- The good work and performance of the service gives it a great opportunity for the service to do more than the primary function and stay "ahead of the game" in present and future opportunities.
- Improve the engagement of the Development Management Service with the Council's IT improvement programme, designating a planning IT super user role to liaison with the project and research what IT improvements are needed, what is possible from other LPAs experiences particularly around the use of the preferred Enterprise system.
- Make improvements to the Council's planning website to make information more easily available with improved opportunities for self-use by the public.
- Reintroduce a regular agents' forum.
- Be sure how Extensions of Time (EoTs) are be used and they are not becoming relied upon to support the performance.
- Improve the mobile and council telephone system.
- Deliver an improved training programme for all members and planning officers on each other's roles and responsibilities, giving a collective clarity on policy, decision making, call-in requirements for applications to go to committee and political awareness. This should be open to all councillors but required for all committee members and planning case officers.
- Support the recognised key role of the planning committee Chair with access to specific independent training and mentoring in the role.
- Improve the engagement between committee members and planning officers prior to the committee. This should be done through both formal briefings for committee members and more informal opportunities for committee members to ask questions of case officers in advance of a committee to better enable quality decision making.
- Recognise and support the essential two-way relationship, trust and understanding between the Chair and the lead planning officer of the committee.
- Develop a clear forward plan for items coming to the committee with a regular Chair's briefing and discussion with the lead planning officer of the committee.
- 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, using the policies and professional advice from their officers.
- Have clear guidelines for public on planning committee procedures and decision making, in advance and at meetings
- Improved the production of and public access to the streaming of the planning committee.
- Produce some clear easy to follow guidelines for the public on the complete planning process but specifically for those attending or engaging with the planning committee on the procedures and decision making - take the view as a member of the public!

- Keep the call in process under review whilst the Council's application profile returns to a more expected level.

4.4 **The Planning Policy other service elements**

4.4.1 The Council's planning policy team was consistently spoken about very positively along with the work that they have undertaken to have a suite of planning policy documents available to the authority.

4.4.2 The council has got a good Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) position for charging on development and obviously spending on the impressive public realm of the town centre. They should look to not only share their present learning with other LPAs through groups such as the [PAS CIL Governance work](#) but look to learn from other LPAs in actively promoting to the community how developer contributions collected from individual developments are spent, to help build a more positive outlook on development in the borough. Through working with this group the Council should be ready to engage with the proposed single development levy that has been strong muted in the planning reform agenda.

4.4.3 As already highlighted, there needs to be a clear narrative of how the key local plan policies, HIF bid project and Town Centre Master Plan sit together that is clearly understood by the service, the wider council and the community.

4.4.4 There are some very well-informed community groups and individuals within the borough, with very good understanding of the planning process and the Council's challenges, as well as great knowledge of their communities and areas. The Council should look to embrace them; building on the good work of the recently set up Residents Panel and Community Forum. There were varying messages from the community representatives that we spoke with of the support available to them around neighbourhood planning and information and access to the service. Some said that it has been very good and others said that they did not have any or know about any advice or support available. Make sure that there is a clear and consistent offer of support to communities, information and training around local authority and Neighbourhood Planning to help to bring the community positively into the Council's planning processes.

4.4.5 The service should build on its good past and present work and look to use its strong position to be a leader around new planning challenges in areas such as biodiversity net gain, design codes, developer contributions and the single development levy, digital data and skills and supporting and empowering communities as it moves forward with its next iteration of the local plan and service delivery, and embracing the new planning reform agenda when the details are known.

4.4.6 We don't know what and we don't know when there will be details released about the Government's proposed planning reform agenda but the service should make sure that it is ready to lead into the new agenda. There is not a great amount of detail around what will be required within the digital agenda for planning from Government at the moment but the Council should start to think about how the service can unlock the rich planning data held in the myriad of pdf planning documents available and become a digital data enabled service. You are asking the right questions on digital data and skills but make sure you have options, be ready to move on the potential of a new plan, on decision making, on digital agenda, on an enhanced community role.

4.4.7 The service can already start by building on its history of good work around environmental issue and design and being a leader on the new requirements of biodiversity net gain and on design coding that are present already and will be in the future planning reform agenda.

Recommendations

- Embrace the principles of making data accessible in digital format and making sure the service has good access to specific GIS mapping skills that are going to be required in the future
- Make the next local plan a truly digitally based plan – be a leader in the sector
- Build on the good work already being undertaken on the community engagement through the Residents Panel and Community Forum.
- Have a consistent and clear offer of community support both around Neighbourhood Planning and information and training on how community and residents' groups can engage in the local authority planning process.

5. Implementation, next steps and further support

5.1 Where possible, PAS and the LGA will support councils with the implementation of the recommendations as part of the Council's improvement programme. A range of support is available from the LGA at http://www.local.gov.uk . It is recommended that Woking Borough Council discuss ongoing PAS support with Steve Barker, Principal Consultant, stephen.barker@local.gov.uk and any corporate support with Mona Sehgal, Principal Adviser, mona.sehgal@local.gov.uk

5.2 As part of the LGA's peer review peer impact assessment and evaluation, PAS and the LGA will contact the Council in 6-12 months to see how the recommendations are being implemented and the beneficial impact experienced.

5.3 The author of this report is Steve Barker (stephen.barker@local.gov.uk), on behalf of the peer review team.

5.4 This report was finalised in agreement with the Council on 08/03/2022.

5.5 We are grateful for the support of everyone that contributed to this review.

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