

PLANNING Service Review 2007

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1.0 Scope of the Review

1.1 The scope of the Planning Service Review focused on:-

- How decisions are made within the Council on policy and planning applications
- Value for Money – looking at costs of service relating to performance, satisfaction and outcomes
- Quality and effectiveness of the Service post-Planning Delivery Grant support

1.2 The Peer Review focussed on:-

- Sustainability of the current level of Service post PDG
- Is the Service value for money
- Is the Service providing what the customer wants in the way they want it
- The added value of the AONB team/Heritage and Design team/Development Control team
- Governance and in particular the constitution/scheme of delegation/probity/officer-member relations
- How decisions are made within the Council and with its partners on policy and planning applications
- Capacity to deal with the national agenda and handle the 'day job'.

2.0 Review Process

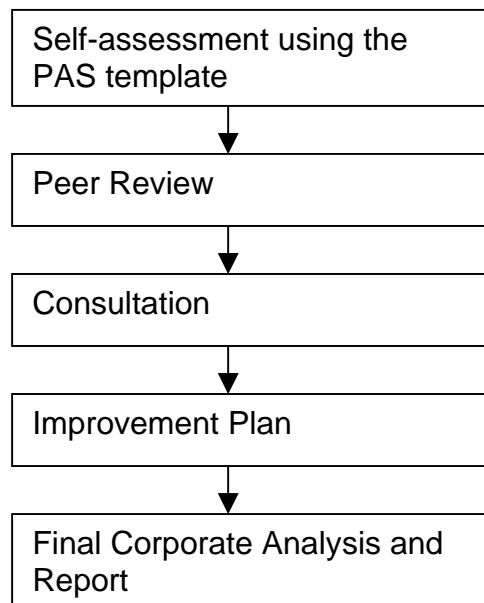
2.1 **Background:** The Planning Service has a proven track record of continuous improvement. Over recent years the Service has taken measures to improve on its service performance and consult with its service users. The Service has had a Planning Improvement Plan (PIP) since 2004, the PIP is continuously reviewed and rolled forward.

2.2 **Current Review Process:** The Council Service and Strategic Review process (based on the principles of Best Value) was adopted in late 2006. The Planning Service is the first Service to be reviewed under the new and more streamlined Best Value methodology. As part of this methodology, a 3% Gershon saving was highlighted as an aspirational target.

2.3 The Head of Planning was keen to carry out a Review of the Service following the successful removal of Planning Standards Authority Status. The Service was keen to celebrate success and demonstrate improvement as well as being externally 'challenged' in order to identify further service improvements.

2.4 The Service Review included an independent peer assessment from the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) and the Improvement and

Development Agency (IDeA). The review process is highlighted in the following diagram



- 2.5 The Organisational Improvement and Environment Overview & Scrutiny Commission have been consulted and updated throughout the Review process.
- 2.6 A copy of the Self-assessment, PAS Report and the Consultation Reports can be found in the appendices.

3.0 Overview of the Planning Service

- 3.1 A copy of the structure of the Planning Service can be found in the appendices. The Committee structure of the Planning Service was replaced in 2005. Three Area Development Control Committees have been replaced with:-
- **Planning Committee** (16 members) – this Committee meets fortnightly to determine all types of planning applications and approves site specific Supplementary Planning Documents.
 - **District Development Committee** (32 members) – this Committee acts as a consultee for development plan policy and proposals for consultation and adoption. It also approves the Council's response to consultations on the Regional Spatial Strategy and development plan policy prepared by other authorities.
 - **District Development Sub-Committee** (16 members) – this Committee determines applications which have been referred to it by the Planning Committee or the Solicitor to the Council, or if the application is considered to be of District-wide importance. It also acts as a consultation and advisory body on the formulation of Local

Development Plan Documents and is a Steering Committee for Member training on planning matters.

- 3.2 The Service currently deals with approximately 3000 applications per year dealt with by 20 case officers and is undertaking an ambitious programme of Local Development Framework (LDF) work. It is on target to adopt the LDF Core Strategy in October 2008 and site allocations, Development Control policies, Development Plan Documents and community sports regeneration area action plan by early 2020.
- 3.3 In 2006/2007, the Planning Service had a budget of £1,724,513 with £124,733 of this coming from Planning Delivery Grant.

4.0 The Review Team

- 4.1 The Review was led by the Executive Director of Corporate Policy and Improvement, the Team also included:-

Head of Planning (DDS)
Performance Manager (DCPI)
Scrutiny Officer (DCPI)
Community Engagement Officer (DCPI)
Assistant Finance Manager (DDS)
Assistant Accountant (DR)
Chief Planner – Forward Planning (DDS)
Chief Planner – Development Control (DDS)

5.0 Structure of the Report

- 5.1 This Report is not intended to be a stand-alone overarching document but to be read in conjunction with the Self-assessment and PAS Report that are to be found in the appendices.
- 5.2 This Report summarises the 4C's that were applied to the Review.

6.0 Compare

- 6.1 The Planning Service was benchmarked against the IDeA's Planning Service Benchmark 2006. This benchmark is designed as a tool to help English planning authorities improve their services, alone or through a process of peer review (the Council chose the peer review option). The benchmark relates directly to both the Comprehensive Performance Assessment and Service Inspection Frameworks. It can be used as a precursor to any CPA or service inspection, as an assessment and improvement tool.
- 6.2 The self-assessment and benchmark PAS Report can be found in the appendices of this report. The main recommendations of the PAS Review are as follows (an update on the actions the Planning Service is taking to address these recommendations can be found in Appendix III).

Leadership and corporate engagement

- Clarify the future role and focus of the planning service at Harrogate and, based on the LDF vision and place shaping ambitions of the Council, agree the future resource requirements
- Plan now for the future, by corporately discussing and agreeing how the Council will respond to identified key risks including the likely RSS housing allocation and PDG exit

Customer focus and community engagement

- Regularly review, improve and develop tailored consultation and engagement opportunities with service users involved in the planning process, including parish councils, and systematically use it to inform service design, delivery and improvement
- Further develop and clearly communicate the customer service standards to cover all facets of the planning service – including a more positive approach to pre-application engagement – and regularly monitor performance against them
- Review and refresh the enforcement policy, and ensure the rationale and approach to enforcement is clearly communicated to all service users

Achieving outcomes effectively and sustainably

- Review and amend the scheme of delegation to make it more efficient and effective, so that it places less of a burden on councillor and officer time
- Ensure the Supplementary Planning Documents (SPD) is developed in relation to all key issues including sustainable development and renewable energy

- Regularly review key activities and processes to ensure an emphasis on achieving quality outcomes, and improve the focus on design quality and sustainability
- Introduce service level agreements with the service units that provide support/services to the planning function to ensure that level of service is sustained and appropriate to current and future needs

People, performance and resource management

- Further develop the performance management of the planning service by developing local performance indicators that focus on quality and impact of developments and value for money
- Develop a learning strategy for the planning service, including a review of the development needs of councillors, to ensure that training is regularly refreshed and updated, and includes wider planning considerations and developments
- Ensure that successes are celebrated, and the learning from them captured and shared (internally and externally), to inform further development and improvement

- 6.3 **National Performance Indicator Comparisons:** The Council has improved on its planning performance in the last three years. The improvements made on processing planning applications within the specified timescales have meant that all of these indicators (BV109a-c) are now in the top quartile of all Councils. In 2005/2006, two of these BVPIs were in the third quartile; the other was in the second quartile.
- 6.4 In comparison to the Council's Value for Money comparator group, the improvements on the processing times were above the comparator group average in 2006/2007.
- 6.5 The Council's performance on its Quality of Planning Service Checklist (BV205) was positioned in the top quartile of all District Councils in 2006/2007 with a score of 100%.
- 6.6 The Council's performance on the percentage of planning appeals allowed (BV204) was placed in the third quartile of all District Councils in 2006/2007. Performance on this indicator decreased slightly in 2006/2007 to 33.3% from 33.0% in 2005/2006.
- 6.7 The Council's performance on building homes on previously developed land (BV106) was in the third quartile in 2006/2007. However, performance improved in 2006/2007 to 77% from 66% in 2005/2006.
- 6.8 The Council's spend per head on planning is below the VFM comparator group average of £17.74 with Harrogate's spend being £15.84. The Council has the lowest Planning Delivery Grant as a percentage of the planning budget of the VFM comparator group.

- 6.9 In 2006/2007 satisfaction with the Planning Service (BV 111) increased by 11% to 63% in comparison with the last survey in 2003/2004. This BVPI was placed in the fourth quartile of all District Councils in 2006/2007. However, the 11% improvement on Harrogate's performance bucked the national trend for other District Councils, where the average decreased from 75% in 2003/2004 to 72% in 2006/2007.
- 6.10 The Council is performing well on the delivery of its Local Development Framework (LDF). The Council is currently out to consultation with its preferred options for sites for homes and jobs and the public examination into the core strategy commencing 22nd April 2008.
- 6.11 Overall, the Planning Service is performing well and offers good value for money. Its costs are below the comparator group average whilst its performance is above the average for the group. Since 2003/2004 performance on processing times has significantly improved whilst at the same time delivering an increase in customer satisfaction.

7.0 Consult

- 7.1 As part of the peer review, the peer review team consulted with a variety of internal and external stakeholders. The full list of consultees can be found on page 4 of the PAS report in Appendix I.
- 7.2 The Best Value User Satisfaction Survey of Planning, which took place between April and September 2006, was also used as evidence. A further consultation of the Council's District Panel took place in July 2007. All of these results have been used as evidence for this Service Review.
- 7.3 **Best Value User Satisfaction Survey (Reported January 2007):** The overall satisfaction with the Planning Service (BV 111) saw an improvement of 11% in 2006/2007. This put satisfaction in 2006/2007 at 63%, compared with 52% in 2003/2004 (the previous survey). This score places the Council in the fourth quartile of all District Councils in 2006/2007. However, the Council's improvement in performance bucks the national trend for District Councils which saw a decrease in satisfaction in 2006/2007.
- 7.4 Respondents were able to give free text comments about the Planning Service, positive comments included:-
- Excellent Service
 - Staff were helpful and offered advice
 - Staff were friendly
 - The website was useful
- 7.5 As well as positive comments received, common areas for improvement included:-

- Lack of conformity between decisions
- Process is too lengthy
- The Planning Officer assigned to the case is the only Officer able to comment on the case
- Lack of communication

7.5 **District Panel Consultation (Reported September 2007):** This consultation repeated the BV 111 question, a 7% increase in satisfaction from the BVUSS Survey was observed, taking satisfaction to 69%.

7.6 **PAS Peer Review (April 2007):** Consultation with key stakeholders including service users was carried out as part of the Review. The Review highlighted inconsistencies in officer comments and views on planning applications. The PAS Report stated that 'there is a genuine desire to make the planning service at Harrogate more customer-focused. It also highlighted the positive feedback received from applicants and parish councils who 'generally value the quality of their personal interactions with planning staff and welcome the opportunity to speak at Planning Committee meetings'.

7.8 In order to address the issues raised from the consultation document, the Planning Service needs to focus on improving customer service whilst at the same time maintaining its current levels of service performance.

8.0 Compete

8.1 This Review has followed the principles of Best Value. A standard principle of Best Value is to look at the market and consider competition, both in terms of the market for carrying out the function and the market for what it provided.

8.2 The Planning function is a statutory function and there is no other competition for this function unlike other service such as sport & leisure.

8.3 A previous Best Value Review of Development Control in 2001 looked at alternative models for service delivery including:-

- Joint staffing with neighbouring councils
- Carrying out the service as an agency by another council
- Providing administrative and customer services by the private sector
- Providing professional and administrative services by a private consultant

8.4 The Service did not take these alternatives forward in the Review and no plans to do so were identified in the Improvement Plan.

- 8.5 It is possible to outsource elements of the Planning Service and consultants are sometimes engaged to help with planning appeals. However, given the concerns of some planning applicants regarding the perceived inconsistencies between decisions, outsourcing the service to private consultants may lead to more concerns.
- 8.6 If the Council would like to further pursue the option of outsourcing elements of the Planning Service, a more detailed Review would have to take place. At present, the Council is only aware of one other Council (Salford) that outsources the Development Control section of the service.

9.0 Challenge

- 9.1 The Review drew on a range of methods to challenge its approach to existing service delivery, including consultation with key stakeholders and compared its performance with other similar authorities.
- 9.2 The main 'challenge' element of the Review came from the involvement of the IDeA and PAS as 'critical friends'. The Peer Review enabled the Council to gain a better understanding of how the Planning Service compared to the benchmark model. It also allowed consultees to express their views about the service to an external review team rather than council employees.

10.0 Conclusions

- 10.1 The Planning Service Review complied to the Best Value principles of the '4 C's'.
- 10.2 In terms of whether or not the Review met its original objectives, this is detailed in the following table:-

Objective	Achieved?
How decisions are made within the Council on policy and planning applications	<p>Achieved</p> <p>The Peer Review identified that the change to the single committee structure has improved consistency and speed of decision-making. It also noted that decision-making by the Planning Committee is clearly informed by policy and conducted in an environment with 'no politics'.</p> <p>The Peer Review concluded that the Council had the necessary mechanisms in place to enable councillors to be involved in the development and review of planning policy.</p> <p>The Peer Review highlighted areas for improvement in identifying whether there are any opportunities for involving scrutiny to add value to policy proposals or to provide challenge to the service. Member training was also identified as an area for further development.</p>
Value for Money – looking at costs of service relating to performance, satisfaction and outcomes	<p>Achieved</p> <p>The Council offers good value for money in terms of its Planning Service. Processing planning application times are placed in the top quartile of all District Councils. The Council's performance on processing times is above the average for its Value for Money comparator group whilst at the same time spending less per head of population to achieve this.</p> <p>Customer satisfaction with the Planning Service is improving and is bucking the national trend for District Councils. Further work needs to be carried out to ensure that customer satisfaction is taken to above average performance.</p>
Quality and effectiveness of the Service post-Planning Delivery Grant support	<p>Achieved</p> <p>The Peer Review highlighted that the Council had identified the risk of planning future services on the assumption of receiving a substantial Planning Delivery Grant. The Review noted that although this risk had been identified it was not clear how it would be managed. Following the Review, the Government has announced that it is increasing planning fees. The Service has profiled the types of fees that it received and has noted that the increase in fees will bridge the gap left by the loss of PDG.</p>
Aspirational 3% Gershon saving	<p>Achieved</p> <p>In 2006/2007, the Planning Service had a non-cash saving of £142,000 on</p>

	salary costs as a result of the move to a single planning committee. The total service cost in that year was £1,724,513, therefore the £142,000 saving represents an 8% saving
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10.3 In addition to these objectives, the Peer Review also included a number of secondary objectives (as detailed in paragraph 1.2). All of these objectives were addressed in the Peer Review. However, in order to answer what the added value of the AONB team/Heritage Design Team/Development Control Team offer the service, further work would be required which is outside of the scope of the Corporate Review.

11.0 Monitoring timescales

11.1 The monitoring timescales for monitoring the implementation of the Service Improvement Plan is:-

Action	Timescale
Update on PAS Report actions to Scrutiny	October 2008
Service Improvement Plan (SIP) agreed by Scrutiny	November 2008
1 st SIP Monitoring Report to Scrutiny	May 2009
2 nd SIP Monitoring Report to Scrutiny	November 2009
IdeA Challenge	To be agreed