

Gedling Borough Council **Planning Service Improvement Plan**

Introduction

This plan has emerged following the peer review of the Planning Service by the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) in March 2007. The PAS review itself built upon the Audit Commission Planning Service Inspection of March 2005, and the improvement plan, which had resulted from that.

Although the PAS review was a 'critical friend' review, it resulted in a number of areas for consideration and suggested actions. These form the basis of this improvement plan, which is intended to continue the strong journey of improvement the service has been on since 2004, and to result in a service, which represents best practice and value in the interests of all the stakeholders who use it. The plan first responds to the 'things to consider' issues in part one, then suggests actions in response to the recommendations section in part two.

To achieve this, the improvement plan will lead to the development of a service plan which clearly sets out how the service, and its officers, contribute to corporate ambitions of the council.

It is intended that progress against the improvement plan will be reviewed on a regular basis and, where appropriate, objectives and aims will be adapted to reflect changes in circumstances or ambition. Once significantly implemented, the success of the improvement plan will be assessed and any further lessons will be acted upon. At this stage it may be appropriate to undertake a follow up review with stakeholders and peers to direct any further improvement requirements and proposals.

The headings used in the improvement plan reflect those used in the PAS review and also the PAS and IDeA Planning Service benchmark model, which formed the basis of the review. However these may develop through the life of the improvement plan, in particular to tie in with corporate aspirations. The headings are;

- Leadership and corporate engagement
- Customer focus and community engagement
- Achieving outcomes effectively and sustainably
- People, performance and resource management

PART ONE

Responses to Things to Consider

1. Leadership and Corporate Engagement

1.1 Vision and Direction

- A need to determine member training needs on planning law and special policy development.
Response; Develop training needs assessment and programme (action A1.1).
- A need for wider political, community and partner engagement in the development of planning policy.
Response; Promote the LDF through partner organisations (actions A3.2, A12.1).
- The vision for the service is currently unclear.
Response; Publish a Planning Service vision, which clearly relates to the Borough Councils priorities (action A3.1).
- Links between the LSP and the Local Development Framework (LDF) need strengthening.
Response; The structural re-location of Planning Policy within the new Strategy and Performance department will bring together all the 'policy' functions of the Council (action A3.2, 4.3, 8.3).

1.2 Integration of Policy and Delivery

- Improving the ownership of planning policies by members.
Response; Introduce regular policy updates for members at planning committee (action A12.1).
- A need to ensure issues relating to out of date policy in the current local plan are fully addressed in the LDF.
Response; Undertake peer review of LDF progress and evidence base to date (actions A2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4).
- Monitoring of Section 106 agreements should be more formalised.
Response; Introduce s106 agreement procedures (actions A10.1, 10.2).
- Moving of the planning policy team into the corporate policy area needs to be carefully managed.
Response; Regular liaison between relevant heads of department and section heads (actions A4.1, 4.3, 12.2).

1.3 Decision-making and Scrutiny

- Engagement of scrutiny in policy development and review.

Response; Discuss with members (actions A1.2, 1.3).

- Stronger links need to be forged between portfolio holder and scrutiny.
Response; A new scrutiny structure is in place which has a general scrutiny committee responsible for improving the focus on key elements of performance and dialogue.

- There are tensions between planning committee member's community representative and planning decision making roles.

Response; Member training to highlight this difference in roles (action A1.1, 1.3).

2. Customer Focus and Community Engagement

2.1 Transparency of Process for Users

- Important elements of the evidence base for Local Development Framework (LDF) have not been published.

Response; Undertake peer review of LDF progress and evidence base to date (actions 2.2, 2.3).

- Elements of the LDF consultation process are unclear.

Response; Undertake peer review of LDF progress and evidence base to date (actions 2.2, 2.3).

- The criteria applied to delegated decisions and the role of the planning delegation panels needs to be clearer.

Response; Publish scheme of delegation and review role of planning panel (actions A5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4).

- Some committee processes could be improved.

Response; Review committee procedure with new Chair of Planning (actions A5.3, 8.4).

2.2 Accessibility

- Having a Planning Officer directly engaged in the corporate equalities group.

Response; Appoint representative (action A5.4).

2.3 Responsiveness to users

- The LDF needs broader and more proactive approach to stakeholder and community involvement.

Response; As part of re-assessment of LDF progress, consider means of encouraging improved involvement (actions A3.2, 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, 12.1, 12.3)

- Service standards should be published.

Response; Publish service standards (action A7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 7.4, 11.1).

- Consultation and engagement are not systematically used to inform service design, delivery and improvement.

Response; A user group has already been established and has commented upon service delivery. Further meetings of this group will be promoted (action A8.1).

- Parish members and residents perceive they lack influence over policy and receive limited feedback in explaining the reasons for decisions.

Response; There is a need to promote broader understanding of the planning process and the role of different groups within this through a co-ordinated approach (action A8.1, 8.2, 8.3).

3. Achieving outcomes effectively and sustainably

3.1 Efficient and effective process

- Planning needs to produce a clearer IT strategy.

Response; Develop an IT strategy (action A15.1, 15.2, 15.3, 15.4).

- Processes are not always working well for users.

Response; This point is not clear. More information will be sought from users of the service (action A 8.1).

- A need for a comprehensive, regular and inclusive approach to pre-application discussions.

Response; Promote the existing development team approach (actions 8.1, 11.1, 11.3).

- Administrative procedures are not always working between the one stop shop and the planning department.

Response; Update staff on procedures and working practices (action A12.2).

3.2 Delivering through partnership working

- Development of a spatial policy is not sufficiently shared with Development Control or with many service or external partners.

Response; Continue DC and policy liaison meetings. Promote LDF progress to LSP and other partners (action A12.1).

- Relationships with partners need to be more inclusive.

Response; Regular update and feedback sessions (action A8.1, 8.2, 8.3).

3.3 Sustainable Stewardship

- The policy base for securing affordable housing has not kept pace with local need or enabled the council to maximise opportunities.

Response; Research into housing need and availability has been commissioned (actions A2.2, 2.3, 2.4).

- Keeping users and members informed about development demands to address the perception that there is too much development in the urban area resulting in 'town cramming'.

Response; Publish findings of up to date research (actions A2.2, 2.3, 2.4).

4. People, performance and resource management

4.1 Capacity and use of resources

- Development Control caseloads are high compared with national standards.

Response; Monitor and report on caseloads, realising resources at agreed trigger points to utilise consultants (actions A14.1, 14.3, 14.4).

- Vacancies are not always filled in a timely manner.

Response; Review vacancies where they arise, use succession planning and seek to fill posts as soon as possible. Review the effectiveness of the process (action A14.4).

- There is a need for IT and e-government champion in planning.

Response; Audit IT skills and appoint champion (actions A15.1, 15.2).

- More corporate commitment to require up to date spatial data.

Response; Updated as part of the LDF process, including review of the evidence base (action A2.1, 9.1, 9.2, 9.3).

4.2 Performance management

- The planning service plan needs to have more value in driving corporate aspirations and priorities.

Response; Service to reflect corporate aims and relate these to service provision (actions A13.1, 13.2, 13.3).

- There are inconsistencies in the way the PDR process is managed.

Response; Set targets for service managers as part of their PDRs (actions A14.1, 14.2).

- Local targets are not monitored at a corporate level.

Response; Incorporate these in service plan(action A13.2, 13.3)

- Keeping performance levels up while improving customer satisfaction.

Response; Regular performance monitoring, highlighting issues and trends, as part of service plan process (actions A8.1, 14.3, 14.5).

4.3 Learning and supportive culture

- A need to ensure all staff in service feel equally, valued, and that achievements are celebrated.

Response; PDRs to reflect individual links to corporate aims and recognise success in achieving these (actions A14.3, 14.5).

- IT training, arising from PDRs, for planning administrations staff is not always realised.

Response; IT skills are audited through PDRs and training needs reflected in Workforce Development Plan (actions A 15.1, 15.2, 15.3, 15.4).

PART TWO

Responses to Recommendations

Leadership and Corporate Engagement

1. Ensure stronger political ownership of planning policies and the LDF
 - 1.1 Enable councillors to take a more positive role in policy development and championing local planning issues, by identifying and addressing training needs on matters of planning law and spatial policy development.
 - 1.2 All councillors' (including parishes') contributions to be effective and appropriate with training given to ensure that they fully understand the role of the LDF and their role in its production
 - 1.3 Strengthen and support a clear and effective role for scrutiny

Actions;

- A1.1 Establish an internal programme of planning training for councillors, addressing issues identified by members, including law and spatial planning, and the tension between members roles as community representative and decision maker
- A1.2 Promote external training courses and conferences for councillors
- A1.3 Create a 'planning newsletter' for councillors to promote awareness of relevant planning issues

2. Review the LDF

Actions;

- A2.1 Submit revised LDS to government office to allow drafting of and full consultation upon amended Core Strategy Issues and Options paper
- A2.2 Undertake Planning Officers Society peer review of progress to date
- A2.3 Develop an action plan resulting from this
- A2.4 Review emerging Core Strategy and DPD in the light of emerging PPS and Government guidance

3. Communicate clearly the role that the planning service and LDF play towards achieving our corporate ambitions
 - 3.1 Develop and communicate a vision and a service plan.
 - 3.2 Build on the relationships already established with the local strategic partnership

Actions;

- A3.1 Clarify the vision of the Planning service, and develop this into a service plan, the format of which may provide a template for service plans throughout the council
- A3.2 Introduce regular LDF briefing sessions at LSP meetings following training for LSP members on the background to the planning system

4. Communication and links between planning policy and the rest of the planning service are not weakened in re-structure.

Actions;

- A4.1 Regular programme of liaison meetings with section heads
- A4.2 Series of Planning Update meetings where all professional officers discuss developments in legislation, procedures and guidance.
- A4.3 Development of the Head of Planning and Environments 'Chief Planner' role to ensure professional planning issues are dealt with consistently
- A4.4 Promote internal consultation on emerging policy documents
- A4.5 Ensure the service plan reflects the Planning service as a whole
- A4.6 Review Policy representation at Planning Committee

Customer Focus & Community Engagement

5. Continue to make clearer to all and increase the understanding of how the planning decision making process works.
 - 5.1 Look again at the current guidance on delegated decisions and see if it can be made clearer.
 - 5.2 Make sure protocols at committee are consistent and are fairly applied.

Actions;

- A5.1 Review the operation of the delegation scheme
- A5.2 Publish clearer guidance on the scheme
- A5.3 Promote awareness of the committee protocols amongst councillors and the public

A5.4 A planner to represent the service at the Corporate Equalities Group

6. Planning delegation panel – Is it still viable, could alternatives be considered?

Actions;

A6.1 Review the operation of the Panel following the last changes in 2006

A6.2 Explore with councillors the alternatives

A6.3 Consider ways of promoting the work of the panel

A6.4 Publish the criteria for deciding which schemes go to the Panel

7. Delivery of service standards to be regularly monitored and publicised.

Actions;

A7.1 Draft and publish service standards relating to the processing of applications, responding to letters, returning phone calls

A7.2 Monitor performance against these on a quarterly basis and report the results to Planning committee

A7.3 Publish the results on the website

A7.4 Review the performance standards on an annual basis to secure continuous improvement

8. Capture feedback and use information to improve service.

Actions;

A8.1 Develop the user forum to promote feedback on the service

A8.2 Promote regular engagement with Parish Councils and statutory consultees

A8.3 Use a wider variety of partner organisations, such as the LSP, to promote awareness of customer and community needs and input into the LDF process

A8.4 Review the form of committee reports and presentations

A8.5 Introduce a process of feedback from the Corporate Complaints procedure

Achieving outcomes effectively and sustainably

9. Review the Affordable Housing policy

Actions;

A9.1 Publish findings of the Greater Nottingham Housing Market Area Assessment

A9.2 Assess the implications of PPS 3 on the existing Affordable Housing policies

- A9.3 Consider updating the Interim Planning Guidance on Affordable Housing
- A9.4 Review the Core Strategy Preferred Options assessment
- 10. Formalise Section 106 contributions through a supplementary planning document.

Actions;

- A10.1 Draft and adopt s106 contributions guidance
- A10.2 Share best practice with other districts
- 11. Comprehensive, regular and inclusive approach needed for pre-application discussions, in particular, majors.

Actions;

- A11.1 Publish protocol for processing major applications
- A11.2 Consider use of Development Agreements
- A11.3 Promote the operation of the Development Team
- A11.4 Consider engagement with ATLAS if adequately large scale applications are expected
- 12. Planning Policy staff to engage with members and partners on a more regular and inclusive basis.

Actions;

- A12.1 Regular updates on LDF progress at LSP and Planning Committee meetings
- A12.2 Monthly DC/Policy liaison meetings
- A12.3 Ongoing regular dialogue with Parish Councils
- A12.4 Promote the role of planning within the LAA

People, Performance and Resource Management

- 13. Produce a Service Plan, linked to corporate objectives and the delivery of the service.

Actions;

- A13.1 Contribute to the development of a new model corporate service plan
- A13.2 Draft Planning Service Plan and consult on content
- A13.3 Update and review on regular basis
- 14. Ensure that the priorities and objectives of the service are integrated into Personal Development Reviews, in order that staff understand their contribution.

Actions;

- A14.1 Establish diary dates for all PDRs one year in advance
- A14.2 Monitor section heads performance against completing PDRs within agreed timescales
- A14.3 Set role requirements, personal skills and personal training and development requirements against objectives which stem from the priorities and objectives of the service plan
- A14.4 Encourage the filling of vacant posts in a timely manner
- A14.5 Ensure all staffs contributions are valued and achievements celebrated

15. All planning staff to have the necessary ICT skills needed to carry out their duties.

Actions;

- A15.1 As part of an authority wide strategy, audit IT skills within planning service
- A15.2 Develop training programme to promote skills development
- A15.3 Use PDRs to review progress against this
- A15.4 Review training in Corporate Training Evaluation process to monitor the effectiveness of training programme