

# WEST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE COUNCIL CABINET

11<sup>th</sup> April 2023

**Councillor Rebecca Breese  
Portfolio Holder for Planning**

<b>Report Title</b>	<b>Planning Advisory Service – Planning Peer Review West Northamptonshire Council</b>
<b>Report Author</b>	<b>Stephanie Gibrat, Assistant Director – Planning and Development</b>  <b>stephanie.gibrat@westnorthants.gov.uk</b>

## List of Approvers

<b>Monitoring Officer</b>	<b>Catherine Whitehead</b>	<b>15 March 2023</b>
<b>Chief Finance Officer (S.151)</b>	<b>Martin Henry</b>	<b>15 March 2023</b>
<b>Other Director</b>	<b>Stuart Timmiss, Executive Director for Place, Economy and Environment</b>	<b>15 March 2023</b>
<b>Communications Lead/Head of Communications</b>	<b>Bethany Longhurst/ Becky Hutson</b>	<b>15 March 2023</b>

## List of Appendices

**Appendix A – ‘Planning Peer Review Report, West Northamptonshire Council’, November 2022.  
Planning Advisory Service**

**Appendix B – Planning Service Action Plan, March 2023. West Northamptonshire Council**

## **1. Purpose of Report**

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- 1.1. To share the findings and recommendations of the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) Peer Review and to provide an update on the resulting Action Plan and next steps for the Planning Service.

## **2. Executive Summary**

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- 2.1 Local Government Review required the amalgamation of four councils, namely Daventry District, Northampton Borough, South Northamptonshire District and Northamptonshire County Council, into one new unitary authority (West Northamptonshire Council or WNC). In bringing together the Planning Service it has been clear that, whilst there are a number of strengths, there have been weaknesses across the four authorities which do need to be resolved to ensure that the best service is developed and delivered for West Northamptonshire's residents and customers.
- 2.2 The key issues identified when bringing the legacy councils together revolved around the differing processes in place, the inconsistent use of IT and variation in technology, a significant lack of resources, staff retention difficulties alongside the challenge of differing organisational cultures. To ensure the implementation of best practice early on in the development of the Planning Service, WNC asked the Planning Advisory Service (PAS), a government funded organisation, to assist and provide peer support.
- 2.3 The report details the background to the PAS Peer Review and its main findings and recommendations. It provides an update on West Northamptonshire Council's response to the Review, proposes an Action Plan for implementation and details the next steps for the transformation of the Planning Service. The report concludes with a proposed mechanism for monitoring and reporting progress on the transformation programme.

## **3. Recommendations**

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- 3.1 It is recommended that Cabinet:
- a) Notes the finding and recommendations of the PAS Peer Review (Appendix A)
  - b) Endorses the Action Plan and the next steps for the Planning Service (Appendix B) and;
  - c) Agrees the proposed mechanism for monitoring and reporting progress on the Action Plan and transformation programme.

## **4. Reason for Recommendations**

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The recommendations proposed:

- Align with those proposed by the PAS Peer Review.
- Ensure corporate support to drive positive change and will ensure the proposed measures are embedded within the Planning Service in the short, medium and long term.
- Ensure accountability and ownership for the implementation of the Action Plan and transformation programme and;
- Represent a positive opportunity to shape a new, fit for purpose unitary planning service for West Northamptonshire.

## 5. Report Background

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- 5.1 The Planning Advisory Service provides consultancy advice, peer support and training on planning and service delivery to local authorities and is directly funded by central government. Peer Reviews are delivered by experienced councillor and officer peers, and they are tailored to meet individual Council needs. The Reviews are designed to complement and add value to a Council's own performance and improvement focus.
- 5.2 At the invitation of the respective Councils, PAS has carried out a Planning Peer Review in both North Northamptonshire and West Northamptonshire to support the two new unitary authorities. West Northamptonshire Council's Review was undertaken in November 2022 with the intention to deliver a comprehensive report on the status of the Planning Service and to assist the new permanent Assistant Director on her arrival in January 2023.
- 5.3 The support offered by PAS throughout the review process and the peer recommendations are welcomed. A copy of the full report is tabled at Appendix A and West Northamptonshire Council's responding Action Plan is shown in Appendix B.

## 6. Issues and Choices

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- 6.1 The PAS Peer Review assessed the Council's Planning Service against the following framework:
- **Vision and Leadership:** the council's leadership and corporate engagement of the planning service in this.
  - **Performance Management:** effective use of skills and resources to achieve value for money and continuous improvement of the planning service, including in decision making on proposals, and whether the service is adequately resourced.
  - **Community engagement:** how the authority understands its community leadership role, especially in terms of accessibility, customer focus and transparency of the planning process.
  - **Partnership engagement:** how the service works in partnership with other stakeholders to balance priorities and resources, address differing views and deliver shared ambitions.
  - **Achieving outcomes:** the achievements of the planning service within the available resources and the planning service's role as a facilitator to change in the area.
- 6.2 Several strengths were identified during the Peer Review. These included:
- Very strong buy-in from senior and officer leadership across the council for significant improvements to the planning service.
  - An emerging vision for the service.
  - A good understanding of what needs to change to move from the existing predecessor council services to one new planning service for the new unitary council.
  - Six improvement workstreams already are established and these are supported by corporate transformation resource as well as resource within the planning service.
  - Strategic partners and the development sector are broadly supportive and understanding of the challenges faced by the service.

- 6.3 In addition, it was reported that the council is in a strong position to deliver housing, has a healthy 5-year supply and its predecessor councils have a track record of delivery. In addition, West Northamptonshire is attractive to investment and planning income is high, covering the cost of the planning service.
- 6.4 The Peer Review acknowledges that West Northamptonshire Council has faced significant challenges dealing with local government reorganisation and the Covid pandemic at the same time. Consequently, the reorganisation of the Planning Service has been delayed and there are several resulting weaknesses and areas for improvement. The Peer Review highlighted the following areas requiring intervention:

#### **Vision and Leadership**

- The planning service is in the midst of significant internal change and staff have felt unsupported and uninvolved.
- Whilst there was an emerging vision there was no sense of ownership for delivery.
- The review found a disconnect and lack of visibility between senior leaders and the teams in the planning service.

#### **Performance Management**

- Planning performance is not strong, appeared to be deteriorating and there was an increasing backlog of undetermined planning applications.
- Despite some strong officer- member working relationships being evident, there was some conduct of concern observed.
- There is not enough business to warrant three area planning committees and their operation varies sending poor signals regarding a single unitary council. In addition, there were concerns raised with the Monitoring Officer regarding the culture and practice observed at one of the planning committees attended.

#### **Community and Partnership Engagement**

- The service remains partially inward looking.
- The review found a lack of customer focus and poor communication from parts of the planning service.
- Town and parish councils are unhappy with the planning service.

#### **Achieving Outcomes**

- Planning services are delivered broadly in the same way as they were prior to local government reorganisation rather than as one unitary council.
- Whilst work has started on producing a single local plan for the area, the planning service has not taken full advantage of place shaping in West Northamptonshire and there is a lack of focus on development schemes that are important corporately.
- There are four legacy systems in place to manage and access data in relation to S106 and CIL which is significant for communities seeking infrastructure improvements.

- 6.5 As a result of the findings above, the Review team has included a table of recommendations in Section 2, page 5, of the Planning Peer Review. This can be viewed in Appendix A of the Cabinet Report.

- 6.6 West Northamptonshire Council welcomes the support provided by the PAS Peer Review and the recommendations proposed. In response the Council has produced an Action Plan for the Planning Service which is tabled in Appendix B of the Cabinet Report.

### **Actions taken and next steps**

- 6.7 Since the Peer Review, the new permanent Assistant Director has started in post and the restructure of the Planning Service is underway. This exercise, alongside a dedicated recruitment and retention campaign, is expected to complete by the end of June 2023. Engagement with staff is underway in order to shape and create one vision, one culture and one Planning Service for West Northamptonshire. An interim Planning Leadership Team has been established and this tier of management will be the first to be permanently recruited to in order to drive forward the required changes.
- 6.8 A productive meeting was held between Senior Officers and officials at DLUHC in February 2023 to discuss the service's development management performance, to provide detail of the service's transformation workstreams and to share good practice. It is proposed to provide a further progress update to DLUHC in 3-4 months' time. The Assistant Director, working with the Corporate Performance team, is reviewing the corporate performance indicators to ensure they are fit for purpose. Progress against these will be monitored weekly by Planning Leadership Team and monthly by Place DMT to ensure a consistent improvement.
- 6.9 A dedicated 'focus week' was held between 20<sup>th</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> February 2023 to address the application backlog. During this period the Development Management Team worked closely together to process new planning applications and to determine existing cases. 125 applications were determined which equates to around twice the average number of decisions usually made in a week. This methodology will be used at intervals should a backlog build up in Technical Support, Development Management or Enforcement.
- 6.10 The Transformation Team continues to support the Planning Service with the identified workstreams needed to facilitate the new structure, embed the one team vision and improve processes. The delivery of a single planning software system across West Northamptonshire Council's administrative area will greatly support the team and the speed, consistency and efficiency of its operation. This will go live on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2023.
- 6.11 A review of the structure of West Northamptonshire Council's Planning Committees has commenced in partnership with the Monitoring Officer and the Democracy and Standards Committee. Following the proposal of the Committee to reduce the number of Planning Committees, a paper proposing the new format and frequency was agreed by Full Council on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2023.
- 6.12 A dedicated Communications Strategy has been drafted for the Planning Service and this will be implemented by the Planning Leadership Team in partnership with the Communications Team to improve the internal and external communications and profile of the service. As well as re-establishing West Northamptonshire Council's Agents and Developers Forum, this will be complemented by a proactive Continuing Professional Development programme for staff, Members and Parish Council Representatives.

6.13 PAS has been invited by the Assistant Director to support the service further with a detailed review of S106/CIL over a six-week period. This work is expected to complete in April 2023 and the constructive input of PAS is welcomed. A further piece of follow up work will be undertaken with the Planning Policy team to support the delivery of the Local Plan and the commissioning of its key evidence base.

### **Accountability and Monitoring**

6.14 Going forward it will be important for the Planning Service to report progress on its performance and the key milestones of the transformation programme. To ensure accountability and an embedded culture of good performance it is proposed to introduce a regular monitoring regime. This will include:

- A weekly review of performance against national targets by the Planning Leadership Team, with a monthly summary provided to Place DMT.
- A monthly progress update to the Leader, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder by the Assistant Director.
- A monthly update to Transformation Board by the Assistant Director and the Transformation Team and;
- A quarterly update to Cabinet and Full Council by the Portfolio Holder.

6.15 The above will be accompanied by regular, informal updates to key partners, stakeholders and service users and in accordance with the Planning Service's Communications Strategy.

## **7. Implications (including financial implications)**

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### **7.1 Resources and Financial**

7.1.1 The PAS Peer Review was funded by the Planning Service's revenue budget and is to be reimbursed by corporate transformation funding. The proposed follow up support work, relating to S106/ CIL and the Local Plan, will be of no charge to West Northamptonshire Council and is to be funded by central Government via PAS.

7.1.2 There is provision within the Planning Service's existing budget to meet the requirements of the proposed restructure and to fund the implementation of the Action Plan.

7.1.3 Should any additional funding be required in the future, this will be subject to consultation with the Chief Financial Officer and the necessary corporate approvals will be sought.

### **7.2 Legal**

7.2.1 There are no specific legal implications arising from the proposals at this stage, however the actions relating to the future structure of West Northamptonshire Council's Planning Committees and any proposed amendments to the constitution and scheme of delegation will need to be considered fully and in consultation with Legal and Democratic Services before implementation.

### **7.3 Risk**

- 7.3.1 There are a number of potential risks for West Northamptonshire Council and the Planning Service should the recommendations not be agreed by Members. These include a high reputational risk to West Northamptonshire Council.
- 7.3.2 As with all local planning authorities, there is a significant risk that central government (DLUHC) may place the Planning Service into 'special measures' and remove its planning decision making powers if performance remains inconsistent and below national targets. Furthermore, it is critical that key stakeholders and users of the Planning Service receive a consistently good service which demonstrates clear progression towards excellence over the course of the Action Plan.
- 7.3.3 Without a clear vision, leadership and accountability for the delivery of the Action Plan there is a risk of poor staff morale, low retention and an inability to attract new talent to Planning Service.
- 7.3.4 Ultimately, the Planning Service has an instrumental role in shaping the future of West Northamptonshire, its housing delivery, economic growth and inward investment and sustainable place making. Without a proactive and fully functioning Planning Service there is a risk to delivery and the Council's ability to address local needs and achieve wider corporate aspirations.

### **7.4 Consultation and Communications**

- 7.4.1 Internal and external consultation was undertaken by PAS during the Peer Review in order to prepare the recommendations detailed in the report. This included consultation with staff within the Planning Service, senior officers, Councillors, agents and developers and Parish Council representatives.
- 7.4.2 As mentioned in the main body of the report, a dedicated Communications and Engagement Strategy has been drafted and this will be implemented by the Planning Leadership Team in partnership with the Communications Team to improve the internal and external communications and profile of the service. As well as re-establishing West Northamptonshire Council's Agents and Developers Forum, this will be complemented by a proactive Continuing Professional Development programme for staff, Members and Parish Council Representatives.

### **7.5 Consideration by Overview and Scrutiny**

- 7.5.1 No comments have been sought or received by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in relation to this report and its recommendations to date.

### **7.6 Climate Impact**

- 7.6.1 There is no direct climate impact associated with the Planning Peer Review and West Northamptonshire Council's proposed Action Plan.

### **7.7 Community Impact**

7.7.1 There is a clear community impact associated with quality of the Council's Planning Service. The Planning Service is a front facing service and its decision making directly affects local communities. Therefore, as mentioned above, it is critical that key stakeholders and users of the Planning Service receive a consistently good service which demonstrates clear progression towards excellence over the course of the Action Plan.

7.7.2 In addition, building reputation and increasing community confidence in the service is paramount. The additional support work programmed with PAS and relating to S106/CIL, the proposed Communications Strategy and the Continuing Professional Development programme for the team, Members and Parish Councils will seek to address this.

## **8. Background Papers**

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8.1 The relevant background papers are tabled in Appendices A and B of this report.