

Planning Service Peer Challenge

Huntingdonshire District Council

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1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report summarises the findings of a Planning Service peer challenge of Huntingdonshire District Council (HDC), organised by the Local Government Association (LGA) and Planning Advisory Service (PAS) and carried out by its trained peers. Huntingdonshire is a largely rural district with an area of 350sqm and has excellent transport links. It has several market towns and villages, based around Huntingdon and a population of 184,000. It has close relationships with Cambridge to the east, Peterborough to the north and Bedford to the south-west.
- 1.2 PAS were invited to Huntingdonshire District Council (HDC) in response to a recommendation of the Corporate Peer Challenge held in May 2024. The agreed focus of the peer challenge is on how the planning service can better deliver corporate priorities – particularly those on inclusive growth, the climate crisis and the environment. It also highlights specific topics e.g. the ‘no amendments’ policy and the general responsiveness of the Development Management (DM) service.
- 1.3 There is a strong sense of vision for place, regeneration, inclusive growth, thriving town centres and responding to the climate and biodiversity crisis. The new joint administration (elected in 2022 after 47 years of Conservative control) has put a Place Strategy and Corporate Plan in place that sets clear direction. It’s recognised by the Leader and the Chief Executive that the Planning Service has an important role in delivering the aims and ambitions of the corporate plan.
- 1.4 The Planning Service at HDC has been on the road to recovery since April 2022 when the Planning Service brought back together as a single service. Staff are positive and keen to see the service improve and be part of making that change successful. The Council is now clearly committed to supporting, resourcing and the continued improvement of its planning service after some years of performance challenges and under investment.

Appointing a Chief Planner in 2022 was an important step in providing clear leadership for the service. This has been borne out by the level of recovery experienced by the service in the last two years.

Looking forward from 2024, this is a pivotal moment to consolidate these improvements and invest the time and resources required to take the next steps towards creating a resilient, sustainable, efficient and effective service, aligned to corporate priorities and providing good customer service.

- 1.5 A key priority for the Council is getting the new Local Plan in place. It is critical to delivering corporate priorities through planning and other internal and external services. The target adoption date for the Plan is 2027. In the meantime, there is an important role for the Director and Senior Planning Managers to translate the corporate plan aims and objectives into practical priorities for planning. This will help provide clarity for the planning service and assurance to senior managers and leaders that Planning is helping to deliver corporate objectives at HDC.
- 1.6 To help create a positive and consistent approach to development management, we suggest a review of the structure of the Planning Service to bring together the Development Management Teams under a single Head of Service/Manager. This will help to ensure a more consistent approach to service delivery, customer service, process and outcomes. (see paragraph 6.6). How this is done is a decision for HDC.

- 1.7 To assist with service modernisation we go on to recommend a comprehensive Service Improvement Programme to be supported by a dedicated programme manager. We suggest this should cover matters including:
- process improvement review,
 - modernisation of ICT/Digital project,
 - restructuring the service,
 - culture change to empower staff,
 - customer service standards and
 - an income generation project.
- 1.8 Officer and councillor relations are positive and respectful, and more support and training are recommended for councillors on some of the more complex and technical planning issues, to better understand how planning supports the delivery of corporate priorities, to monitor progress and understand the limits and rules within which planning operates.
- 1.9 Planning Committee should focus on the most important and controversial planning applications. The scheme of delegation needs to support a more strategic approach, especially through the call-in arrangements, which currently allows for consideration of applications for two or more homes. The bar set is set far too low and allows call ins by Parish and Town Councils. As a matter of priority, the scheme of delegation should be reviewed to make it clearer, transparent and raise the threshold for delegated decisions.
- The right internal specialists should be at committee when required to provide their expert advice for councillors. We would also encourage external consultees to be present, where possible. We found this is not always happening. We also recommend more training for planning committee councillors to help them better understand the practicalities of committee and their role, including clarity on the overturn procedure.
- 1.10 There is scope to improve working with partners and communities. This can largely be helped by setting up the right vehicles for collaboration and engagement at the early stages of plan-making and decision taking. Parish and Town Councils need to have clarity on the level of support and service they can expect from the planning service.
- 1.11 Huntingdonshire has a planning service that is performing reasonably well compared to other local planning authorities. It has made significant steps towards improvement, having turned a corner and is delivering high quality development schemes. There is a real opportunity now to take the next steps towards comprehensive transformation. This will take investment and time. The Local Plan has a key role in supporting the council's ambitious plans for a future Huntingdonshire. Following the recommendations in this report, PAS expects to see a more integrated, effective and efficient, customer facing planning service, with clarity of its role and focussing on delivering the right outcomes for Huntingdonshire.

2. Recommendations

This section summarises the main recommendations of the Planning Peer Challenge Team. More detail on the reasons for each can be found in the main body of the report (for easy reference the relevant theme is set out in column one). It is important that the Planning Service integrates these recommendations into its own transformation/service plan and is clear about 'what success looks like'. This will help to ensure that the recommendations in this report are right for Huntingdonshire and aligned to a clear set of outcomes and measures.

Theme 1 – Vision and Leadership

Theme 2 - Performance and Management

Theme 3 - Community and Partnership Engagement

Theme 4 - Achieving Outcomes

Theme 1	R1	<p>Corporately recognise the value of the Local Plan - prioritise, resource and adopt a Local Plan that will help to deliver corporate priorities</p> <p>Achieve this by raising corporate awareness and support for the Local Plan to deliver corporate priorities (what and how); facilitate better collaborative working with internal and external partners; ensure effective engagement with communities; and consider a review of resources in the team to ensure the right level of experience is available to support the Local Plans Team to support rapid progress (new style plan).</p>
Theme 1	R2	<p>Consider Reviewing the role and membership of the Local Plan Advisory Group</p> <p>To ensure there is effective cross party working and consensus building for a Local Plan which is being prepared across two administration terms.</p>
Theme 1	R3	<p>The Planning Service needs to create a clear strategy for delivering the Place Strategy and Corporate Plan</p> <p>Improve clarity on how planning can deliver corporate goals, it is suggested that the leadership of the planning service translates the strategic vision and corporate priorities into clearly articulated strategy on how Planning can support this and set out what success will look like. .</p>
Theme 1 Theme 4	R4	<p>Training for Councillors and Planning Committee</p> <p>Support less experienced councillors by securing training for planning/economy/environment portfolio leads such as training provided by the LGA and Planning Advisory Service (Leadership Essentials). Planning Chair mentoring is also recommended for the Chair and Vice Chair of Planning Committee (PAS). Additionally, review the way Planning Committee Councillors are trained and consider PAS 'mock committee' training.</p>
Theme 1	R5	<p>Revise the Scheme of Delegation</p> <p>Urgently review the scheme of delegation to ensure that Planning Committee is focused on making decisions on significant and controversial planning applications. It also needs to be clearer and more transparent.</p>
Theme 4	R6	<p>Develop a Corporately supported Communications Plan for the Planning Service</p> <p>This will help to enhance the reputation of the planning service and encourage more self-service. Key successes (key decisions, CIL/S106 spend) should be reported - consider a newsletter for members/parish and town councils and one for Planning Agents; and review the website. This should include innovative approaches such as videos, use of digital platforms etc.</p>
Theme 2	R7	<p>Develop and implement a long-term (3-year) Planning Service Improvement Programme – which should include:</p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Identify project management resource to support and manage the programme b. DM Process Improvement Review – to streamline processes, improve efficiency, release capacity and take considered risks. This should include a review of standard letters and templates. c. ICT/Digital Modernisation Project supported Corporately – Review of current ICT system for DM – decide on whether to change or make best use of functionality of current system. In the short term, prioritise essential performance information for managers (including performance on pre-application service). d. Consider the structure of the Planning Service – to meet the needs of the Corporate Plan/Place Strategy; better align the service. Examples include the three DM Teams (look at mix of experience and grades in teams), consider career grade policy for planners, add senior/experienced officer grades in Teams etc. e. Culture change programme – to empower staff and achieve corporate priorities and ICARE values across the planning service. f. Income Generation Project – develop a vision, plan, achievable target, priorities and monitoring including customer feedback.
Theme 2 Theme 4	R8	<p>Improve Pre-application Advice Service (linked to R6f above)</p> <p>Review charging , quality and length of advice and monitor speed and performance. We suggest reviewing in consultation with a planning agent/developer working group – to broaden range of options/types of pre-app advice.</p>
Theme 2	R9	<p>Urgent - Short Term (1-6 months) Wins should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Ensure sufficient short term capacity/resource is available and implemented promptly when required to provide cover for absences. b. Review/change 'no amendments' policy c. Reduce over-reliance on extensions of time d. Better performance information for DM Managers (see R6c), include pre-app performance e. ICT/Digital – agree actions corporately to address ICT challenges to ensure efficiency of current processes and decision-making. f. Give annual development appraisals to staff in line with emerging corporate policy. g. Planning Committee – consistent planning reports, templates and presentations. To be read in conjunction with changes to R5 Scheme of Delegation . h. Secure dedicated legal advice on planning matters and legal agreements.
Theme 2	R10	<p>Consider preparing planning guidance on Householder Extensions</p> <p>This will enable self-service and more certainty for customers, better understanding for Parish and Town Councils and support</p>

		DM to make faster and clearer decisions whilst creating capacity.
Theme 2 Theme 3	R11	Update Planning Enforcement Policy Current policy last updated twelve years ago so in need of updating to reflect current priorities and resources and will help manage customer and Parish/Town Council expectations.
Theme 3	R12	Develop and agree a Planning and Parish and Town Councils Service Framework/Protocol This should clearly set out parameters for how the planning service will support the 79 parish and town councils - to help manage expectations and better manage resources. This will cover DM, Local Plan and Enforcement matters and should be agreed by HDC. Consider alongside R14 and R16.
Theme 3 Theme 4	R13	Set up clearer arrangements for better collaborative working between the Planning Service and key services and partners This should include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular meeting with County Council – and cover Local Plan, DM and Planning Committee support. • Internal Services Group – for engagement and collaboration on the Local Plan (see R1), performance on comments on planning applications. • Identify main point of contact in planning for council led projects • Setting up a Partnership Board with external stakeholders • Training between services on what they do and upcoming projects.
Theme 3 Theme 4	R14	Set out clear Customer Service Standards This will help the service provide the good and responsive customer service it aspires to have. We suggest setting out clear expectations for customers and officers on the level of service that can be expected and performance monitoring. We also suggest an annual Customer Satisfaction Survey with clear measures of success. Consider alongside R12 and reported through R6.
Theme 4	R15	Refresh and relaunch the Planning Agents and Developers Forum A refresh and restart will help improve attendance. Changes should include clear agendas reflecting the matters to be covered at the Forum and take a collaborative approach that allows the Forum to input into the shaping of the planning service and local plan.
Theme 3 Theme 4	R16	Update the Statement of Community Involvement To provide information to local communities and Parish and Town Councils as well as setting clear expectations of developers to engage early on larger schemes. Links with other recommendations.

3. Scope of the Review

- 3.1 Huntingdonshire District Council asked the peer challenge team to assess how the planning service can better deliver the spatial objectives and corporate priorities of the District Council. This has largely arisen from a recommendation in the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge for the District Council which reported in May 2024 - for a 'review of the Planning Service to ensure that within the planning policy framework the council's priorities are being delivered, e.g. climate, environment and inclusive growth.'
- 3.2 Particular attention was also asked to be paid to benchmarking and performance of the development management service and opportunities for ICT digital improvements with more detail summarised below.
- 3.3 The peer challenge team reviewed the planning service structured across four broad themes, each designed to address a critical areas of planning service delivery and taking account of the changing context. These are:

Theme 1: Vision and leadership - How well does planning help to deliver corporate objectives, and how effectively do councillors and officers work together to deliver shared goals? Are corporate expectations for planning realistic and how does the service communicate activity?

Theme 2: Performance & Management – How does the service perform compared to similar areas including benchmarking of workloads? Is the service culture clear? How effectively are workloads managed, and how well are performance, staff talents, and capacity optimised? How effective is the management of service areas including planning policy, enforcement, development management and the developer contribution functions? How well does the service utilise technology and digital tools and how well is the service positioned to respond to national planning reforms?

Theme 3: Community & Partner Engagement - How well does the service engage with communities and stakeholders, and is there transparency in decision-making processes? How effectively does the planning service collaborate with council departments and statutory consultees? How do key partners and stakeholders (businesses and developers) perceive the planning service?

Theme 4: Achieving Outcomes – How well is planning delivering development and regeneration ambitions? Are areas of the service properly resourced to achieve these ambitions? Is planning doing all it can to delivery environmental improvements? What will help ensure the service is resilient for change and a new future?

- 3.4 On site, the peer team engaged in a series of interviews, workshops, and site visits, meeting with staff, councillors, developers, stakeholders and community representatives. The peer challenge review was an intense period of meeting as many people and groups as possible. Whilst we met some smaller developers/planning agents and parish councils, we recognise that this was a limited number of individuals and may not be representative all views across the district. Comments made and views received are considered carefully and triangulated by the team before conclusions are drawn and recommendations made.
- 3.5 It is important to stress that this peer challenge is not an inspection: it is improvement - focused and designed to complement and add value to the Council's own performance and improvement plans. The peer challenge is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment but for the members of the peer team to draw on their experience and knowledge and reflect on the information presented to them and what they observed on site.

- 3.6 This report is a summary of the peer team's findings. Naturally, the peer challenge process represents a snapshot in time and will inevitably touch on things that the Council is already addressing and progressing.
- 3.7 The PAS peer team has presented a verbal summary of this report and recommendations to an audience made up of those who took part in or were interviewed for the peer challenge.
- 3.8 We would like to thank the community representatives, councillors, staff, customers and partners for their open, honest and constructive responses during the peer challenge process. All information collected is on a non-attributable basis. The team was made to feel very welcome and would especially like to mention the invaluable assistance and excellent onsite support provided by Huntingdonshire's planning team.

4. Planning Advisory Service (PAS)

- 4.1 PAS is part of a Local Government Association (LGA) programme which is funded primarily by a grant from the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG).
- 4.2 PAS's principal mission is to ensure that local planning authorities (LPAs) are continuously improving in their execution and delivery of planning services.
- 4.3 To achieve this, the PAS work programme focuses on:
- a) Helping local government officers and councillors to stay effective and up to date by guiding them on the implementation of the latest reforms to planning.
 - b) Promoting a 'sector-led' improvement programme that encourages and facilitates local authorities to help each other through peer support and the sharing of best practice.
 - c) Providing consultancy and peer support, designing and delivering training and learning events, and publishing a range of resources online.
 - d) Facilitating organisational change, improvement and capacity building programmes – promoting, sharing and helping implement the very latest and best ways of delivering the planning service.
- 4.4 PAS also delivers some of its services on a commercial basis, including change and improvement programmes for individual and groups of planning authorities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

5. The Peer Team

5.1 The Huntingdonshire Peer Challenge Team brought together experienced professionals and councillors across local government and planning services:

- **Councillor Bill Stevens**, Planning Committee Chair, Plymouth City Council
- **Councillor Asima Shaikh**, Cabinet Member for Inclusive Economies, London Borough of Islington
- **Simon Cole**, Assistant Director of Planning and Development, Ashford Borough Council (Lead Officer)
- **Mark Dickens**, Assistant Director Planning, Manchester City Council
- **Liz Hobden**, Peer Challenge Manager, PAS

6. Theme 1 – Vision and Leadership

6.1 The council has developed and agreed an ambitious vision for the future of Huntingdonshire in the overarching Place Strategy and Corporate Plan. The Leader and the Chief Executive share this well-defined vision for inclusive growth, investment, the environment and place-making; and to capitalise on new tech industries unable to locate in growth hubs like Cambridge. The council is led by a new joint administration made up of five groups signed up to the shared vision. Positively, we saw there is a consensus between all political groups welcoming growth and development in Huntingdonshire. The Leader and Chief Executive see an important role for Planning in delivering these ambitions which needs to be better-communicated and realised across the planning service.

6.2 It is useful first to set out the context of the Planning Service in recent years. In 2019, following a senior restructure, the planning service was divided into two distinct services with two different corporate reporting lines. The Development Management Service, comprising area-based DM teams, enforcement, validation and conservation and environment was led by the Planning Service Manager (Development Management) who reported to the Chief Operating Officer. Planning Policy, Implementation, Strategic Development (along with economic development) were called the Strategic Growth Team and led by the Strategic Growth Manager, reporting direct to the Corporate Director (Place). Between 2019 and 2022 the Development Management Service experienced challenges in retention and recruitment, over reliance on agency staff, delays in decision-making and a lack of investment and improvement.

6.3 Since 2022, there have been big changes and improvements in the Planning Service - the two parts of the planning service, separated into Development Management and Strategic Growth Teams in 2019, were brought back together under a new Chief Planner. The huge strides in improving the Planning Service since then needs recognition. There has been a significant reduction in the backlog of applications, improved performance and continued delivery of strategic development sites. During our meetings we heard positive feedback about the Chief Planner and, particularly, the Strategic Planning Team. We also observed good relations between councillors and officers, and, at Planning Committee, there is a respectful relationship between officers and members. Positively, this demonstrates that there is a desire to improve, however this is not a static exercise, and there needs to be continuous progress and a clear understanding of the end goal and 'what success for the service looks like'.

Looking forward from 2024, this is a pivotal moment to consolidate these improvements and invest the time and resources required to take the next steps towards creating a resilient, sustainable, efficient and effective service aligned to corporate priorities, providing good customer service and which is resilient to adapt to upcoming national changes to planning.

6.4 The Local Plan is the key planning vehicle for delivering the corporate vision and priorities. The local plan needs resources, the support and attention of senior leaders (across all political groups) and managers if it is to be successfully delivered. The current Local Plan – though over five years old – remains ambitious with plans for 20,100 homes and 14,400 new jobs to 2036. The government's revised national housing numbers (published Dec 24) propose an increase for Huntingdonshire from 804 dwellings per annum (dpa) to 1213dpa, which the new Local Plan (LP) will be required to plan for. Local Plans take a long time to prepare and adopt – the HDC LP is timetabled to be adopted in 2027 taking account of the accelerated new style local schedule with gateways as proposed by the government's planning reforms. As the Plan preparation falls across two administrative periods, PAS supports an approach where even more focus is given to building cross party consensus. This can be done by a review of the terms of reference of the Local Planning Advisory Group (LPAG) to clarify its role to provide a steer to officers and report to Cabinet.

6.5 Work is underway to ensure the emerging Local Plan will deliver corporate priorities including preparing joint studies and aligning the local plan with internal team strategies. However, we heard feedback from internal teams that they would like to be more involved and collaborate at an earlier stage in plan-making. For example, in preparing briefs for studies. We recommend setting up an Internal Services Group to ensure studies, plans and strategies are joined up at key stages and benefit from other service oversight and potentially other services resources.

6.6 We were asked to look at benchmarking resources in the planning service. Turning to the Local Plans Team, although we think the Team probably has the right number of posts in the establishment, we think that there are insufficient senior roles. This will be especially important to create resilience given the new style plan route with an accelerated timetable alongside anticipated changes to the National Planning Policy Framework and increased housing needs.

6.7 In terms of planning decision-making (the three planning applications teams), feedback from political leaders, internal teams, councillors, businesses and developers there is the perception of two contrasting cultures between the DM/Specialist Teams and Strategic Planning Team. The area-based DM Teams and Specialist Team are perceived as more risk averse, less flexible, less communicative and less clear on council priorities. The Strategic Planning Team is seen as more flexible, positive and responsive. These perceived differences could be a result of the split of the planning service in 2019 - the DM Teams experienced a turnover of staff, have higher volumes of work, with backlogs of applications and there has been less collaboration and shared experience across the service. An example is within the area-based DM Teams and Specialist Team there appears to be a lack of awareness, pragmatism and prioritisation (in dealing with applications) to help to deliver council priorities and social value. We recommend a number of actions to support change, including a clearer translation and communication of the corporate goals into planning priorities by senior planning managers, a more aligned planning applications service and a review of the 'no amendments' policy.

6.8 The Implementation Team collects Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and Section 106 contributions, and make sure they're distributed and spent in a timely way – this is important for local as well as strategic infrastructure. CIL income last financial year was high (£12m) - reflecting the level of housing development underway in HDC. Although these sums need to be spent in line with legislation, regulations and legal agreements, they can align with corporate and local priorities (up to 25% of CIL goes to Parish and Town Councils if there is a made Neighbourhood Plan). We recommend planning managers raise the profile of this work by providing more briefings and publicity linking it back to planning and corporate plan goals.

6.9 Development Management Committee (DMC), is the 'shopfront' of Huntingdonshire's planning service and has an important role in making decisions on significant applications that enable growth and investment needed in Huntingdonshire. It is important that the Committee is allowed to focus on larger, controversial and complex planning proposals. To this end we recommend the current scheme of delegation (which is very complicated and sets an unusually low threshold for planning applications to be decided at DMC) is reviewed **as soon as possible**.

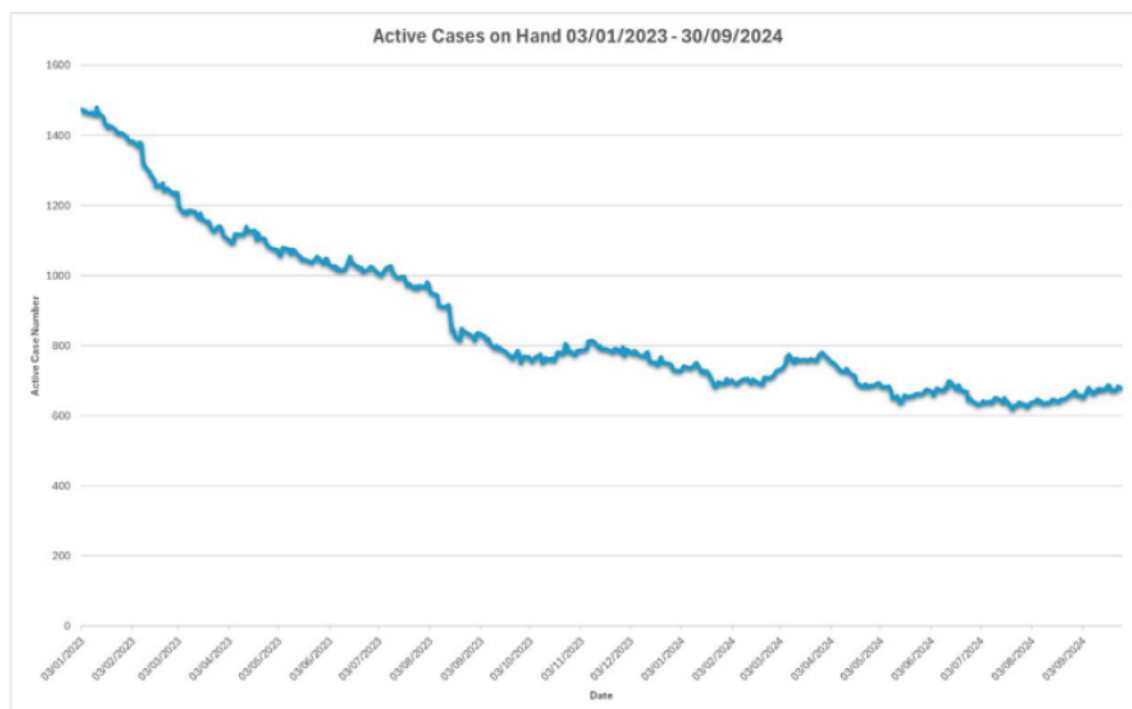
6.109 During our time on site, the peer challenge team identified several opportunities to support the planning committee. The Chair and Vice Chair, we also suggest should consider taking advantage of being mentored by an experienced Chair of Planning Committee through LG/PAS. Committee members more generally (especially newer members) may benefit from PAS 'mock committee training' – where various committee

scenarios can be played out. Consideration should also be given to committee members receiving specific training on the local overturn procedure and the role of councillors in any consequent appeals – at the moment these roles are not fully understood.

7. Theme 2 – Performance and Management

Performance Overview

7.1 Huge strides have been made in improving the performance of Development Management and Enforcement services since 2022. This is credit to staff, managers and the new chief planner. Successes include a reduction in longstanding backlogs of planning applications and there is no longer a reliance on agency/temporary staff to support the service. We are advised that on average 95% of applications are delegated to officers for determination – which is just short of the national average of 97%. There have been major achievements with the Enforcement cases having gone down from 1000 live cases on hand to 400 (over a longer period).



7.2 To assist with tackling the backlog, a 'no amendments' policy was introduced in October 2022. This involves not allowing amendments to planning applications (excluding strategic cases) once validated, therefore increasing reliance of applicants/developers on the pre-application advice (which was relaunched at the same time). This enables them to get their applications right the first time. However, we found that the policy is being applied inconsistently – with small amendments allowed for some applications and for majors. The continued use of the policy, now the backlog is significantly reduced, is having a harmful impact on the reputation of the planning service (within and outside the council) as it appears to be resulting in higher than national average refusal rates (at over 20% - with 10% nationally). Arguably it's also adding to a negative culture in the DM Teams and disempowering officers. There are merits, in the right circumstances, in limiting the number of amendments allowed per application and encouraging applicants to use the pre-application advice route, but we strongly recommend a **review of the policy immediately**.

7.3 In terms of national performance indicators, the speed of performance for planning applications currently stands at 88% (decisions within time) for majors and 86% (decisions within time) for non-major applications. The performance sits comfortably within nationally set targets (60% majors and 70% non-majors). However, there is a reliance on extension of time agreements to meet targets. These are set to be abolished by the Government in line

with proposals from the previous government, so the service needs to start to reduce its reliance on extensions of time as soon as possible in line with overall improvements (see R9 urgent short term wins). In our meetings with Planning Agents, we heard that, in their experience, eight week targets for non-major applications are rarely met (one agent said not one of their recent 64 planning application decisions was made within 8 weeks).

7.4 A lack of dedicated legal advice for the planning service (currently provided jointly) is leading to delays in agreeing and signing s106 agreements and this is having a detrimental effect on determination times for Major applications. The Peer Team understands that a review is being undertaken of current legal support and concerns will be expressed through this process.

7.5 The pre-application advice service relaunch is welcome and considered necessary alongside the 'no amendments' policy. But in terms of performance, officers rarely meet deadlines for responses. For example, householder pre-application advice on average takes 9 weeks (rather than the 4-week target) whilst larger schemes can take longer - pre-application advice on proposals for 10-49 dwellings takes on average 20.4 weeks. This makes the high cost to developers of pre-application advice harder to justify and further impacts on the service's reputation. There should be clear expectations set and met.

7.6 The management, distribution and spend of CIL and s106 income is well organised and efficient. This is critical for delivering infrastructure and given the number of Parish and Town councils in Huntingdonshire. CIL income stood at £12m last year, reflecting the amount of development going on in the district.

7.7 There are some delays caused by waiting for responses from internal and external consultees. This is impacting on the speed of decision making. We heard that some consultees have backlogs and can take months to comment, such as flood risk advice. See R13 for a proposed approach to address this through collaborative working arrangements.

Management and Culture

7.8 We understand that the two parts of the Planning Service were brought back together in 2022. This, with the appointment of a Chief Planner at the helm is positive and has led to tangible improvements to the service. The Chief Planner is well regarded by the business community, the development industry and staff.

7.9 To build on the momentum created by Planning Service consolidation, the service should now look at ways (such as via a review of the structure) to progress bringing the component parts together more effectively. This will help to ensure there is a more consistent and positive culture across the service.

7.10 We were asked to review whether the resources in the service are adequate for the amount and type of work. The focus here is on the Development Management Area and Strategic Teams where recruitment and retention challenges are greatest (see paragraph 6.5 for Local Plans resourcing). Our view is that the number of planning officers in the DM Service is about right for the volume of work received (once the backlog has been cleared). Through a reorganisation of the DM Teams (see R7d) there is scope to look at the grades and types of roles in the service to better reflect the type of work; the area teams are dealing with a high volume of small applications and could utilise more staff on junior grades. There will also be an opportunity to look at more apprentices and introduce a career grade policy to help the service 'grow its own' planners. The concerns raised by staff about lower pay and grades than surrounding authorities can also be addressed. This should help with better use of resources and retention and recruitment of staff.

7.11 The lack of reliance on agency staff is to be commended. But we noted there are some temporary vacancies in key roles being covered internally. We suggest that if these

vacancies are for over three months there should be longer term solutions. This will support resilience in the DM and Planning Service.

7.12 To improve DM performance, it is critical for managers and team leaders to have access to timely, effective and efficient performance data. Currently managers and team leaders have to self-serve from the Uniform system (see ICT and Digital below). We recommend that performance data is automated and provided to on a weekly basis.

7.13 In terms of staff management, officers in the Planning Service receive regular one-to-ones, but don't receive an annual development appraisal. This reflects past practice in HDC. We were advised that appraisals will be introduced through the upcoming corporate Workforce Strategy. Given the imperative to improve the planning service and retain staff, we recommend that these be introduced as a priority to support, develop and retain staff particularly in the context of service challenges, changes and improvements. Appraisals also go towards providing a golden thread from corporate priorities to the planning service to individual planning staff.

7.14 The culture of the DM Area Teams is risk averse. Managers should be encouraged to empower staff to take balanced and calculated risks and allow them to learn from their mistakes. This is all about having a supportive culture that enables staff to develop and grow. Planning applications services are all about weighing up issues, evaluating proposals and making decisions. A more empowering culture will lead to a more efficient service that is value for money, better understanding of council priorities (such as social value) and result in better staff retention.

Process and Validation

7.15 We were impressed by the DM Administration Team which, though holding vacancies, has taken a positive approach to improve process, clear the backlog, introduce change and update templates/letters. We also heard good feedback on the Team's responsiveness to Freedom of Information requests.

7.16 We did find, however, that the processing of planning applications still involves unnecessary steps, stages and hand offs between teams. For example, validation of planning applications is done by the admin team. These are then passed to Team Leaders to allocate to officers to check that validation has been carried out correctly – sometimes this transfer and the additional validation can take days if not weeks. This risk-averse approach extends to other parts of the DM process and decision-making including sign offs limited to a small pool of senior officers. Unnecessary delays, extra work and inefficient use of resources are the result. There is a desire in the Admin Team to make changes, but these are being held back by current processes and approaches. We recommend a process improvement review involving all staff be carried out on all stages of the process from receipt to implementation, including in signing off decisions.

ICT and Digital

7.17 Uniform, the system used by DM in HDC, though regarded as reliable (but non-flashy) and used by many DM services, is not being used to its full functionality. To address this the Technical Team relies on irregular support from a private consultant to incrementally improve the system. An example of an important but unused function is electronic workflow – a tool which helps planners manage their planning application caseloads. It also provides managers with better performance information. This is a sign of the historic under-investment in the Service which needs to be addressed.

7.18 We strongly advise that Uniform is reviewed in good time before the contract is up for renewal. This is a crucial opportunity to secure good system support for a modern DM Service for the future. We recommend a full ICT/Digital modernisation programme, agreed corporately, is developed and implemented with the support of the council's IT Team (see R7). This requires investment, but we consider this essential for the efficient and effective planning service which HDC seeks. It will enable better use of resources and create capacity to focus on value added tasks and improving customer service.

7.19 In the meantime, we recommend that the right time and IT support is provided to increase the functionality of the current system – as mentioned above – to provide workflow and performance data amongst other things to address day to day challenges (see R9).

Customer Service

7.20 We heard that on average 500 calls a month are received by the Customer Service Team largely relating to individual planning applications, delays and a lack of communication by planning officers. It was good to hear the management team is keen for customer service to improve and have arranged training to help. We also heard of the example of excellent customer service provided by an individual officer – where emails and calls are answered in a timely way. The result has been positive feedback and barely any calls relating to their cases reaching the Customer Service Team. This demonstrates the benefit of a proactive, customer focused approach in saving time and stress for all parties.

7.21 Channel-shifting customers towards the website for self-service and support will reduce the call on officer time and give support to customers 24/7. We recommend improving the website as part of a communications plan for Planning (R6).

7.22 Customer service can often be the first casualty when there's a backlog of planning applications. For example, newly issued mobile phones are not turned on. A more customer-focused culture needs to be rebuilt now that the backlog has been cleared. We therefore recommend that customer service standards be agreed and published by the planning service. This will help to provide clear expectations for customers and of officers.

Income Generation

7.23 Income generation is important for the Planning Service to supplement planning application fees and help it cover more of its costs, allowing investment in the Service. The main examples are pre-application advice, planning performance agreements, charging for specialist services (including other councils), and some councils charge for amendments. The Government has also committed to carrying forward legislation to increase planning application fees from April 2025, which will also help.

7.24 The pre-application service has largely been a focus of income generation (£150k to date this financial year) alongside planning performance agreements (PPAs - £268 over past 2 years)). But the income needs to be sustainable and the service reliable and respond to customer needs. Planning agents feel that too much detail is required up front, and this requirement is applied rigidly. This is reflected in the examples of pre-app advice shared with the peer team. There are concerns that it takes too long to receive advice (see above), the advice was often non-committal and the charges very high (ranging from £400 for householder advice with £33k for the largest scheme). From the experience of the Peer Team, these are among the highest charges nationally. We recommend an review of fees to ensure the service aligns with the fee, the introduction of performance management of pre-application responses and a review of the length and quality of advice. A more flexible approach should also be considered so agents/applicants don't incur unnecessary costs for detailed drawings (see [PAS Pre-application advice good practice](#)).

Planning Performance Agreements (PPAs) are an effective way of raising income with many councils using this income to secure temporary experienced and senior staff in response to fluctuating demand. To assist with this strand of work, we recommend prioritising PPA templates and training for officers.

Comprehensive Service Improvement Programme

7.25 To bring these strands together we recommend that the Planning Service secures a dedicated programme manager resource to develop and implement, with the support and involvement of planning service staff, a programme of comprehensive service improvements. Given the need to carry on delivering the service in parallel, the programme may take up to three years to implement, so prioritisation will be essential. We have also suggested urgent actions to support the DM Service in the short term.

Planning Guidance

7.26 A high proportion of applications received in HDC are householder applications. We heard these can be time consuming for applicants to submit and officers to determine. The 'no amendments' policy currently means this can be an area of friction with customers. There could be significant time saving, and a win win for all parties, by providing online guidance on householder extensions and alterations. This will enable more applications to be submitted right the first time, better manage expectations and reduce the need for amendments/refusal of applications. There are numerous exemplar versions that could be adapted to be HDC specific.

8. Theme 3 – Community and Partner Engagement

8.1 The Place Strategy has been prepared with stakeholders and partners and provides the overarching strategy for the future place and inclusive economy for Huntingdonshire. This and the Corporate Strategy 2023 are ambitious and are setting direction for the emerging Local Plan which will help to deliver the priorities, such as through new homes, affordable homes and workspace. The Chief Executive and Leader are very committed and working hard to build relations with key stakeholders - large employers, businesses and developers interested in investing in Huntingdonshire.

8.2 We met with a range of businesses, developers and planning agents to hear their feedback on the planning service which was mixed. On the positive side, larger developers working in Huntingdonshire praised the quality of service provided by the Strategic Development Team (which deals with applications of over 200 new homes, renewable energy and complex cases). The team has a number of experienced planners and urban design officers who are aware of 'the big picture' and corporate priorities in Huntingdonshire. There are clear positive approaches here which should be adopted more widely.

8.3 We heard from a few planning agents, who submit the smaller applications where there are higher volumes of work, that it's not possible to contact officers, applications take a long time to determine, and officers seem unable to make decisions and are risk averse. Whilst they said the service was poor, they qualified this by saying it was a 6 or 7 out of 10 service compared to comparable planning authorities nearby.

8.4 The business leaders we met expressed frustrations with delays in the planning service, lack of communication, and what appeared to be a disconnect between corporate goals and planning decisions, even on allocated sites. The recommendations in this report are aimed at helping to address these concerns including the service improvement programme and setting clear customer service standards.

8.5 Turning to the Local Plan, good progress is being made with engagement. Scoping of the Plan, proposed sites along with a call for sites has very recently completed consultation. At the time of the visit, we understand that over 3000 responses had been received via a local plan portal and several Roadshow events held around the district. We heard some negative comments on both the portal and roadshow events (e.g. the portal timed out, lack of displays at the roadshow) - we suggest now is a good time to listen to and review the approach to improve later stages of Local Plan engagement.

8.6 The seventy-nine Parish and Town Councils in Huntingdonshire are active, interested and provide an active community of engagement. However, they are frustrated and critical of the Planning Service and want more contact with planners and enforcement officers and to be engaged better and earlier on the local plan. We felt the expectations of the many Parish and Town Councils can no longer be met by the planning resources available to the council. We recommend the district council agrees a service protocol for Planning and Parish and Town Councils. This should include instructions on how to self-serve using the website. Where information is not publicly accessible, clearly outline what, who and how the planning service can be contacted and include training available and propose frequency of joint meetings. We think this will enable a reset in relations between HDC councillors and the town and parish councils.

8.8 Although the Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) has been updated relatively recently we noticed it doesn't include the need for major developers to engage communities on upcoming developments at the earliest possible opportunity. Setting out this requirement

and expectations will promote better engagement with HDC's active communities and relieve pressure on DM services down the line.

8.9 Strategic partners and statutory consultees gave a strong sense of positive relationships with HDC, with a number engaged early and effectively on the local plan and in delivering strategic infrastructure. There was a clear desire expressed for more structured links to the HDC planning service, particularly from those keen to deliver strategic infrastructure. We think this can be achieved by formalising contact (meetings with agreed regularity) to help create better understanding of each other's priorities and challenges. In turn, DM teams should be made aware of these and prioritise responses by importance.

8.10 There was a mixed picture in terms of partners' timeliness in giving comments, which is a frustration for the DM Service and is delaying decisions. This requires proactive work upstream by senior managers in Planning and potentially in the Senior Leadership Team (see R13).

8.11 We also met with Teams in the council that engage regularly with DM, Implementation Team and input into the Local Plan. These teams are important in helping to link the planning service to delivering other strategies in the district. The Teams were, again positive about individual officers in the DM Service. They are engaged in the Local Plan but asked that they be engaged at the earliest opportunity on studies, policies and new ICT software such as Exacom (used for s106/CIL).

8.12 In terms of the DM Service – the Internal Teams felt there was a disconnect between planning and council projects that are delivering council priorities. They said DM seem more 'rulesy' and less flexible than the Strategic Planning Team. One officer said 'it feels like we're on different sides'. Alignment of the Service with corporate priorities is important but is achievable whilst ensuring its quasi-judicial role is maintained. There should be a recognition of the regulatory role of planning, but also its ability to enable and deliver wider objectives. This can be helped by better connecting these strategic priorities to planning and placemaking goals, building the confidence of planning officers and sharing training and understanding between services (this was offered by some internal teams). Planning should be engaged in corporate projects at the right time. Creating culture change in the service to enable more pragmatism, empowering staff to take calculated risks, and prioritisation (see para 7.14) will also be key to introducing these changes.

9. Theme 4 - Achieving Outcomes

9.1 There have been positive achievements in the Planning Service. Since its adoption in 2019, the local plan has helped to identify key sites and enable delivering of significant numbers of new homes, jobs and infrastructure in Huntingdonshire – it plans for 20,100 new homes by 2036 and 14,400 new jobs. There is also an enviable 6.49 five-year housing land supply in the district.

However, the soon to be published new housing needs will be increasing. This makes it even more of an imperative to review and adopt the new local plan to address the emerging new housing numbers and consequently help protect valuable sites from unwanted development. The local plan review is critical to taking these changes forward and there needs to be a strong focus on supporting its progress to adoption in 2027.

9.2 There is a consensus of views in Huntingdonshire District Council wanting to see investment in the district including inclusive growth, new homes and improved infrastructure. This bodes well for all political groups to agree the emerging Local Plan. We think this will be assisted by a focussed review terms of reference and operation of the Local Plan Action Group.

9.3 The District has an excellent track record of delivering new homes, including affordable homes. (1239 new home completions in 2023 with 494 affordable completions in 23/24). We visited one of the district's strategic sites at RAF Brampton. We were impressed by the quality of development being brought forward which has been helped by close working between the Strategic Planning Team (planner and urban design officer) and developer. We heard more support for this approach from the other developers of strategic sites in the district. Effective working on these sites is positive and collaborative and helping to deliver positive outcomes for residents of Huntingdonshire. These demonstrate the vital role Planning plays in supporting good growth and positive outcomes for the District.

9.4 The level of development underway in the district means CIL and S106 income is buoyant. Hunts was an early adopter of CIL and is an exemplar authority for operating and spending CIL and s106. The outcome is well managed and timely spend on community and strategic infrastructure. A recent review of CIL governance has also taken place. One challenge for the Planning Service is the lack of dedicated legal advice. We recommend a new approach to providing legal advice required by the service to ensure timely decisions on larger planning applications as currently these are causing significant and unnecessary delays to issuing planning decisions (see R9h)

9.5 In terms of planning on a more strategic level. Huntingdonshire DC has close links with surrounding districts and cities. It falls within the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA), with Cambridgeshire County Council having statutory responsibility for matters relating to highways, archaeology and Lead Local Flood Authority. The CPCA is responsible for helping to coordinate and deliver investment in key road improvements and NSIPs with the county and districts. These make an important contribution to Huntingdonshire Place Strategy and Plan and HDC is taking an active role. This bodes well for any future working on a strategic development strategy (SDSs) for the area.

9.6 There needs to be modernisation and investment in the planning service; and a key step to achieving this will be an ICT/Digital modernisation programme as part of a comprehensive service improvement programme. However, support for this change is not limited to ICT, it is recognised that there is a key role for communications to support the promotion of positive change within Planning Services. We consider this essential to deliver the DM Service that HDC aspires to have. To achieve a modern planning service this requires a focus on culture change in the DM team to move away from a risk averse

culture towards empowering and developing staff. Importantly, more efficient working will release time and capacity for value added tasks - enabling a reset of relations with businesses, developers, customers internal teams and planning agents and allowing planners to deliver council priorities. The Service is in a good position now to build on its recent improvements. This momentum, along with implementing the recommendations proposed, whilst providing the support and investment required, will lead to a resilient service able to respond positively to the future changes ahead.

10. Implementation, next steps and further support

It is recognised that the Council and service will want to consider and reflect on these findings.

To support openness and transparency, we recommend that the council shares this report with officers and that they publish it for information for wider stakeholders. There is also an expectation that the council responds to the finding in the report and develops an action plan to be published alongside the report.

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 from the [LGA](#) and [PAS](#) is available on their websites. Some specific areas of support that the authority might wish to look at includes:

- [Development Management Challenge Toolkit](#)
- [Pre-applications advice good practice](#)
- [Improving governance of developer contributions](#)

It is recommended that Huntingdonshire District Council discuss ongoing PAS support with Liz Hobden, PAS Principal Adviser, liz.hobden@local.gov.uk and any corporate support with Kirsty Human, Senior Regional Adviser, kirsty.human@local.gov.uk at the Local Government Association.

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.

The author of this report is Liz Hobden (liz.hobden@local.gov.uk), on behalf of the peer challenge team.

This report was finalised in agreement with the Council on 03/03/2025.

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