



To:
Planning Committee 24 March 2021

Report by:
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RE: Planning Advisory Service Review of Planning Committee

Wards/parishes affected: All

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) jointly commissioned the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) to undertake a review of the City Council and SCDC Planning Committees, as well as the Joint Development Control Committee (JDCC) in early spring 2020. This was in the context of the ongoing implementation of the Shared Planning Service including the programme of service improvements, process and procedural alignments associated with it.
- 1.2 The review was delayed by several months until the late summer/autumn of 2020 because of Covid19 and lockdown, as all pending PAS review projects were put on hold at that time. However, the review of the City Council Planning Committee has now been completed and the final PAS report is attached to this report as Appendix A.
- 1.3 The report contains a range of findings, conclusions and recommendations. Many of these relate to issues that the Shared Planning Service has already identified as part of its service improvement programme such as updating and streamlining Committee report templates, the approach to officer presentations and the review of the Adjourned Decision Protocol. Other report recommendations are already being implemented such as the programme of member development sessions that began in October 2020 or require member consensus to proceed with, such as the review of the Planning Committee Scheme of Delegation.
- 1.4 A key recommendation in the report is the setting up of a joint member/officer group on a task and finish basis to oversee the implementation of recommendations arising from the report (or to agree the reasons for not implementing specific recommendations if applicable). A report requesting approval of the setting up of the group will be taken to Planning and Transport Scrutiny Committee /the Executive

Councillor in June 2021. Meanwhile, the Planning Committee should give consideration as to their representation on the group so that this information can be considered by the Scrutiny Committee in due course.

- 1.5 Whilst the majority of the PAS report focuses on Planning Committee, it also includes a “light touch” review of the Joint Development Control Committee (JDCC), whilst noting that the JDCC’s Terms of Reference were recently updated in 2020. Notwithstanding this, some of the PAS report recommendations may be equally applicable to the JDCC so a short update report will be provided to the JDCC on 14 April 2021.
- 1.6 A similar process has already been undertaken by SCDC in relation to the PAS Review report of the SCDC Planning Committee. The SCDC Planning Committee considered the report on 13 January 2021. A Planning Committee Development Group, comprising of six members (three from the Planning Committee and three from the Scrutiny and Overview Committee) and relevant senior officers has been set up to oversee implementation of the report’s recommendations.

2. Recommendations

- i) To note the content and recommendations set out in the Planning Advisory Service report.
- ii) To note that a further report will be taken to Planning and Transport Scrutiny Committee/Executive Councillor in June 2021 to recommend the setting up of a joint member/officer group on a task and finish basis to oversee implementation of the PAS report recommendations or, where appropriate to agree the reasons for not implementing specific recommendations and more specifically set its terms of reference
- iii) To consider the representation that Planning Committee should have on the group and to advise Scrutiny Committee/the Executive Councillor of its views.

3. Background

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Context

- 3.1. As part of the ongoing implementation of the Shared Planning Service, a programme of service improvements has been carried out by the planning service throughout 2020 and this will continue into 2021-22. Some of the specific improvements have been/will be included in the Service Plan 2020-2021 and emerging Service Plan for 2021-2022. The objectives for the service improvement programme include alignment and streamlining of processes and procedures wherever possible to maximise efficiency, learning from best practice across the country and making best use of resources. The two Councils operate three Planning Committees across the Greater Cambridge area, all of which function in a different way so there is also an opportunity to review best practice across the three Committees. It is within this context that both Councils jointly commissioned the

Planning Advisory Service (PAS) in early spring 2020 to undertake a review of their Planning Committees as well as the Joint Development Control Committee (JDCC).

- 3.2. Given the Shared Planning Service's ongoing improvement programme, the brief to PAS identified a number of areas that it would be useful for PAS to consider as part of the review. These included the Planning Committee Scheme of Delegation and the City Council's Adjourned Decision Protocol.
- 3.3. Due to Covid 19 and lockdown which resulted in all pending PAS reviews being put on hold in the spring of 2020, the review was delayed until the late summer/autumn. The review has now been completed and the final PAS report is attached as Appendix A to this report.

Review Process

- 3.4. The process carried out by PAS as part of their review included the following elements:
 - Review of some virtual Planning Committee meetings during July, August and September 2020.
 - Meetings with key members including the planning lead member, Chair of the Planning Committee and other members of the Planning Committee in September 2020.
 - Meetings with key Council officers including the former Chief Executive, Joint Director of Planning, Assistant Director Delivery, Development Management Delivery Manager and legal officers in August and September 2020.
 - A stakeholder engagement meeting with the City Council's Residents Forum in September 2020.

Report Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations

- 3.5. The review findings, conclusions and recommendations are set out in detail in the PAS report attached as Appendix A. Key findings and conclusions include the following:
 - The Council demonstrated a quick response to Covid19 and lockdown by adapting to move the Planning Committee to an on-line platform, minimising disruption to the Committee cycle and putting in place appropriate guidance and information.
 - In the context of Covid 19 and lockdown, the Planning Committee had retained a good focus on public engagement and in maintaining capacity for the public to speak at Committee.
 - The Council performs well in terms of the overall quality of planning decision making, noting the low number of appeals allowed measured against the Government Performance Indicator.
 - Planning Committee members have a clear understanding of their roles in determining planning applications. However, there needs to be careful attention on occasions where roles are in danger of being blurred under pressure from external influences or where roles as ward councillors could influence decisions.
 - There are good opportunities for enhanced specialised learning and development through the new Member Development Programme.
 - There is a good level of cross-party support in the approach to debates at Committee and general consensus on key planning issues.

- A standard checklist of key detailed planning issues for officers would avoid these being debated at Committee.
- Increased use of pre-briefings by developers/agents and involvement of Planning Committee members, ward councillors and the public in pre - application briefings would improve/streamline the Committee process. There should be stronger collaborative working and improved communications between members and officers outside the Committee process. Part of this could be achieved by having member site visits with officers and consideration should be given to this.
- There should be more dialogue between members and officers in advance of Committee on points of detail and clarification so that these matters can be dealt with beforehand rather than at Committee.
- Consideration should be given to the review of the Planning Committee Scheme of Delegation - noted that the Committee currently considers a high volume of minor and householder applications contributing to Committee meetings being very long. The member call in process should be reviewed. The Council needs to consider what kind of Planning Committee it wants given the long length of Committee and very detailed nature of the debate, even on minor applications. In the view of PAS, Planning Committee should be reserved for the largest and most contentious type of applications.
- Member political aspirations and values are running ahead of the Development Plan system and further consideration should be given as to how to address this, to manage expectations.
- A review of the Adjourned Decision Protocol should be considered.
- Officer reports are too long and this issue should be reviewed with reference to best practice. Officer presentations are generally good but too long at times. Quality assurance of officer reports needs to be improved. More directive reports that clearly signpost issues where a balanced planning judgement is required would improve the effectiveness of the Committee process.
- There are opportunities identified to improve the customer experience of the virtual Planning Committee process
- Learning from best practice from other Councils indicates an opportunity for further collaborative working between members and officers.

3.6. Eleven recommendations are set out in the PAS report. Some of these have already been implemented such as the introduction of the Member Development Programme. Others are being considered through the planning service review that is due to take place during 2021/22 which will include a review of development management processes and procedures, including Committee report templates and length of officer reports and presentations etc.

3.7. The PAS report recommends the setting up of a joint member /officer group on a task and finish basis to oversee the implementation of the report recommendations or, as the case may be to reject any recommendation(s). A report will therefore be prepared for Planning and Transport Scrutiny Committee/Executive Councillor in June 2021 recommending the setting up of the group. Planning Committee are asked to consider their representation on the group and so that Scrutiny Committee/the Executive Councillor can consider this information.

4. Implications

a) Financial Implications

Other than the costs arising from the review process itself, there are no direct financial implications arising from the PAS report, although if some of the recommendations are implemented such as the review of the Delegation Scheme and reduction in the length of Planning Committees and officer reports and presentations, this would reduce the costs to the Council of running Planning Committee meetings and reduce member and officer time spent on them. .

b) Staffing Implications

There are no staffing implications directly arising from this report.

c) Equality and Poverty Implications

d) Environmental Implications

None

e) Procurement Implications

None.

f) Community Safety Implications

None.

5. Consultation and communication considerations

Engagement with Planning Committee members, the Executive Councillor, relevant senior officers and residents groups took place as part of the review process.

6. Background papers

None

List of Appendices

Appendix A –Planning Advisory Service review report of Cambridge City Council Planning Committee completed January 2021

Inspection of papers

If you have a query on the report please contact Sharon Brown.