



Planning Peer Review – Return visit

**Mole Valley District Council**

26 February 2020



## Introduction

Mole Valley District Council invited the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) back to check progress against the original recommendations of the Planning Peer Review in 2018. Anna Rose, Head of the Planning Advisory Service & Brett Leahy, Head of Planning and Building Control, London Borough of Redbridge attended. This consisted of a day of meetings on site following analysis of progress from material submitted by Jack Straw, Executive Head of Planning and Environment.

This return visit is light touch and as such PAS will not provide a full, detailed report of our findings. Instead we focus on headlines and our suggestions for next steps.

The team received a warm welcome from Mole Valley and we would like to thank everyone for being so generous with their time and open with their commentary.

## Trust and respect

It is clear from all our conversations that the **trust** between members and the teams in the planning service is **much improved**. The new Head of Development Management has prioritised these relationships and has instigated a **new training programme for committee members**, a suggested **revision to the scheme of delegation** and an **increased role for case officers at committee** to begin to change the culture of planning in the district. Reports to planning committee have also been improved to cover the main considerations more clearly. The improvement that this recent appointment has made to the service was widely noted as was the support that the planning portfolio holder had shown during this period.

Unfortunately, there are still many applications making it on to the committee agenda that are minor in nature. We were told that the revised scheme of delegation that will be issued shortly would remedy this. There is no doubt that the changes proposed will be critical in freeing up time and space to consider larger applications arising through the local plan process.

Discussions confirmed that **key information needs to be presented to members in a consistent manner**. Currently information is provided on an 'as and when' basis which makes it hard to digest as one coherent narrative. A paper attached to the development management committee papers could bring data on housing delivery and appeals together with application performance statistics. This would add to the new practice on appeals, whereby case officers provide a one-page summary to aid members understanding.

## Recruitment and retention

The Chief Executive is driving forward a new approach to recruitment and retention of hard to fill posts and is piloting a new way of spotting talent and succession planning. This needs to be fast tracked within the planning service where there are some stubborn vacancies being filled by contractors.

There is also a need to recognise talent and nurture this to improve retention across the service. More use needs to be made of the **validation team as a 'nursery' for the planning service**. It is far easier to get non-planners in and train them up than it is to recruit at the more senior levels.

The planning service has an adequately resourced establishment when compared with other Councils of a similar size and workload. There was mention, during our visit, of lower salaries than adjacent authorities. We felt that some of the **problems with recruiting** could be resolved by a **simple change of job title**. As an example, using Principal Planner rather than Team Leader would not only standardise the structures across policy and development management but would also have the effect of reducing salary expectation.

### **Operational resilience**

We got a general impression that **resilience is still an issue**. Whilst much of the improvement work is in place and operational, it is still at an early stage. It takes some time before good practice becomes habit and through this embeds into the culture of the organisation. Without continuous attention the good work on customer service, staff 121s, team meetings, PDRs and peer support will drift to make way for the daily demands of the planning service. There is evidence that **people management and customer care are the victim of more pressing demands**.

Whilst most of the attention thus far has been internally focussed, it is now time to turn to face the customer. The main issues to be addressed are **communication, consistency and care**. **Developer forums** are an excellent way of getting feedback on the service you provide but can also be used as a means of engaging an important group in new initiatives and critically the local plan. **Pre-application advice** was stopped as there was no resource available to deliver it. This needs to be reinstated and quickly. It is not only a means of ensuring consistency of advice, but it is also one of the only means of receiving an income outside of planning fees.

We welcome the **draft customer charter**. This is a good step forward in terms of setting expectations and providing a means to measure progress. It is important that this document is **tested with customers** before it is adopted by the Council. We have heard that there are issues with call answering, responding to messages, consistency of advice and communicating progress and outcome. The customer charter must address these issues that matter to customers of the planning service. Engaging customers in the production of key documents is a great way of spreading the message about continuous improvement as well as listening to their concerns.

### **Local Plan**

We were **really pleased** to see that the Council had put a **regulation 18** consultation on their local plan out to the public. This is the culmination of a huge effort by the policy team and the planning policy working party (PPWG). This is a positive step and is sure to attract a large audience. A local plan needs strong leadership at both an officer and political level and it also needs momentum. Plans

that are left to drift suffer from lapsed evidence bases and increased costs which local government can ill afford.

We would suggest that the local plan is set to a **detailed project plan** which is **managed corporately**. It is important that the PPWG is brought into this project plan so that time commitments and key decision points for cabinet are known well in advance. A project plan will also allow you to test whether your current governance and oversight of the plan is fit for purpose and whether this will need to change as the plan progresses.

## **Enforcement**

Enforcement was a big issue for everyone in the original review. The backlog has reduced from 617 open cases in September 2018 to 370 open cases in February 2020. Talking to the planning teams and politicians it became clear that from all perspectives the situation was much improved. The **updated enforcement plan** was being collaboratively developed. The increased use of the validations team to triage new enforcement complaints was speeding up the process and there were more resources available to deal with complaints when they came in. This is all positive, but your current means of presenting data doesn't tell the same story. We would suggest that you **review your data** and ensure that it looks to express open and closed complaints as a minimum.

There is more work that can be done to cut down on the **hand offs** between validations and enforcement. This follows a pattern of **checking** and **handoffs** across the service. Mentoring and training achieve far better long term improvements than any number of checks in a process.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear significant progress has been made and now it is important to maintain and build on that progress. The following key actions have been identified;

- Consider the most appropriate project management and governance to take the local plan forward.
- Reinststate the pre-application advice service.
- Introduce developer forums.
- Test draft customer charter with customers.
- Review structures in planning to remove additional management tiers - clarify roles, responsibilities and management chains.
- Review 'checking' and 'hand offs' to increase personal responsibility and bring efficiencies.
- Introduce new key data paper for planning committee. Make it a full narrative for performance to include plans, decisions and delivery.
- Produce a plan for a 'grow your own nursery' in the validations team.



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