

EXECUTIVE

22nd December 2022

Report Title	Planning Advisory Service Peer Review – Report and associated Action Plan
Report Author	George Candler, Executive Director of Place and Economy
Lead Member	Cllr David Brackenbury - Executive Member for Growth & Regeneration

Key Decision	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Is the decision eligible for call-in by Scrutiny?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Are there public sector equality duty implications?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information (whether in appendices or not)?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Applicable paragraph number/s for exemption from publication under Schedule 12A Local Government Act 1972	

List of Appendices:

Appendix A – PAS Peer Review Final Report

Appendix B – NNC Peer Review Action Plan

Appendix C – Proposed NNC Planning Transformation governance arrangements

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. To advise the Executive of the findings of the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) Peer Review, as set out in its report. To invite the Executive to consider the proposed Action Plan developed to respond to the issues raised and recommendations arising from the Peer Review report.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1. In September 2022, a peer review of the Council's Planning service was undertaken by a PAS Peer Review Team. This included an extensive set of interviews and focus groups with a wide range of internal and external stakeholders.

- 2.2. The details and outcomes of the Peer Review are set out in a PAS report which is appended to this report. The report sets out a series of recommendations for the Planning service. The recommendations are designed to help the service through its current transformation journey which includes the bringing together of five legacy local planning authorities into the Council to form a single harmonised and high-performing planning service for North Northamptonshire.
- 2.3. In response to the Peer Review, this report sets out the Council's intention to harness the advice and recommendations received, and to plan a detailed programme of transformational activity through the appended Action Plan and proposed governance arrangements are also proposed that will oversee the progress of this work.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1. It is recommended that the Executive:
- a) Note the content of the PAS Peer Review Report and its recommendations
 - b) Consider and approve the PAS Peer Review Action Plan (as set out in **Appendix B**)
 - c) Approve the formation of a Planning Transformation Board and associated governance arrangements (as set out in **Appendix C**) to oversee the planning transformation activities associated with the Peer Review and Action Plan
 - d) Agree that the progress of transformation in response to the PAS Peer Review recommendations is reported back to Scrutiny Commission on a six-monthly basis
 - e) Agree that the PAS Peer Review Report and associated NNC Action Plan are published on the Council's website as soon as reasonably practicable
- 3.2. Reason for Recommendations –
- To maximise the benefit of the advice and recommendation received from PAS through their peer review of the Council's Planning service
 - To ensure that the Council puts in place an appropriately resourced detailed transformation plan that will lead to a single harmonised Planning service that maximises efficiency and cost effectiveness.
 - To ensure that customers and stakeholders of the Planning service receive maximum benefit from a harmonised and efficient service
- 3.3. Alternative Options Considered –
- The alternative option would be to reject the findings of the PAS Peer Review and to either continue operating the current planning service delivering

business as usual, or to formulate transformation plans for the service having no regard to the advice and recommendations of the PAS Peer Review Team. These options are not advised as not implementing the recommendations would not see the service develop.

4. Report Background

- 4.1. In April 2022, it was agreed through discussion between the Leader of the Council, Chief Executive and representatives of PAS that a Peer Review of the Council's Planning Service would be undertaken by PAS in September.
- 4.2. PAS are a part of the Local Government Association and are funded by government. Among other activities, PAS undertake peer reviews for local planning authorities. These operate through a 'sector led' approach, where local authorities help each other to continuously improve.
- 4.3. It is recognised that the Planning Service is in a period of transition as the five former legacy authority planning services come together to form a single NNC Planning Service. It was considered that a peer review would provide helpful and timely advice that could be used to shape the future NNC planning service, ensuring that it is able to maintain high performance and be fit for the future.
- 4.4. The scope of the Peer Review was agreed as follows:

Theme	Questions
<p>Vision and leadership - how the authority demonstrates leadership to integrate planning within corporate working to support delivery of corporate objectives</p>	<p>Is leadership across the planning service clear and consistent?</p> <p>Are strategic priorities across all of North Northamptonshire well understood by officers across the service? Linked to this do they understand their role in supporting the delivery of the broader organisation's goals? How is the spatial vision for the area as set out in the Local Plan (Joint Core Strategy and Part 2's) considered corporately? Is there sufficient understanding and ownership across the council and coordination with other corporate priorities / aspirations?</p> <p>How is the planning service regarded across the council and how does the planning service regard other parts of the council?</p> <p>How is the relationship between councillors and officers? What initiatives are in place, especially given the age of the council, to support relationships across the service?</p>

<p>Performance and Management - the effective use of skills and resources to achieve value for money, and the effectiveness of processes (and the roles of officers and members) in decision-making on development proposals.</p>	<p>Taking account of legacy practice and the ambition to have a consistent approach is the council clear about where the service is strong, and where improvement and change is needed?</p> <p>Is the governance structure for decision-making efficient and effective for a council of this scale and nature? Are the role(s) of councillors in decision-making clear and understood?</p> <p>Is the council clear about its resource, performance and delivery across the planning service including planning enforcement?</p>
<p>Community engagement – how the authority understands its community leadership role and community aspirations and uses planning to help deliver them.</p>	<p>How well does the service engage with, listen to, and respond to different communities within North Northamptonshire?</p> <p>How well does the service meet the communities’ needs? Is the level of service consistent and is it clear to communities how they can access it? How could customer service be improved, for example through the use of technology?</p>
<p>Partnership engagement – how the authority works with partners to balance priorities and resources to deliver agreed priorities.</p>	<p>How do strategic partners and the development sector experience the planning service?</p>
<p>Achieving outcomes - how well the service leverages national and local planning policy to deliver the sustainable development and planning outcomes its community requires.</p>	<p>Is the way the service is delivered making the best of the council’s combined resources?</p> <p>Taking account of the internal audit report of January 2022 is the governance framework for the negotiation, monitoring, collection and allocation of Section 106 obligations clear and understood across the council? Does this include how developer contributions can support the council’s wider corporate budget programmes? Is there clearly defined leadership and ownership of this area of work within the council?</p>

- 4.5. The PAS Peer Review team included a mix of elected members, officers and representatives from PAS:
- Peer Review Manager: Bridget Downton
 - Lead Officer: Tracy Darke (Shropshire)
 - Officer: Anna Lee (Dorset)
 - PAS consultant: Rachael Ferry-Jones
 - Conservative Peer: Philip Broadhead (Deputy leader and portfolio holder for growth & regeneration at Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council)
 - Labour peer: Lewis Herbert (Deputy Mayor and Committee chair for the Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority)
- 4.6. In advance of the Peer Review, officers provided PAS with a range of information and data relating to the Planning Service as requested by PAS. This was to provide the Review Team with background information that would enable them to understand the historical context and current position of the Planning Service and ensure the Review Team could make the most effective use of their time on site in North Northamptonshire.
- 4.7. The Peer Review Team were on site during the week commencing 26th September 2022. During this time, they attended a meeting of the Planning Policy Executive Advisory Panel and the Thrapston Area Planning Committee. They also conducted an extensive series of meetings with a wide range of members and officers within NNC and external stakeholders such as developers, planning agents, town and parish councils and statutory consultees.
- 4.8. Following completion of the Peer Review, a final report has been provided by PAS, which is included at **Appendix A**. This sets out the findings of the Peer Review Team and a series of recommendations for the Council, in order to help progress the transformation of the Planning Service into a single, unified and high performing service.
- 4.9. In order to ensure the successful transformation of the Council's Planning Service and to get the best outcomes from the recommendations of the Peer Review, an Action Plan has been developed (included at **Appendix B**) that is designed to put in place a plan to respond to the PAS report recommendations.
- 4.10. It is also proposed that the Council should put in place governance arrangements through a Planning Transformation Project Board and Project Team. The purpose of the Project Board, although not formally constituted, will be to act as a member advisory body and to oversee the delivery of the Action Plan and further transformation project work that will be developed through the detailed transformation plan called for in Recommendation 3 of the PAS report. Proposed governance arrangements for the Planning service transformation are included at **Appendix C**.

5. Issues and Choices

- 5.1. The purpose of inviting PAS to conduct a peer review of the Council's Planning service was to provide independent review and advice on how to proceed with the service's transformation journey, as it moves from the five former legacy local planning authorities to become a single harmonised planning service for North Northamptonshire.
- 5.2. Through a Peer Review Team consisting of experienced elected members and officers, the Council has the opportunity to benefit from their advice and recommendations. The team carried out considerable analysis of the service's current position and engaged in extensive consultation with a wide range of its internal and external stakeholders. This, together with a wider knowledge of where best practice exists across the country has resulted in a PAS report and recommendations that can assist the Council in guiding the transformation journey of the Planning service and maximising the opportunity that local government reorganisation presents to develop a high-performing single harmonised Planning service.
- 5.3. The Council could choose to reject the findings of the PAS Peer Review if they failed to agree with the content of the report and its recommendations. Should this be the case, then the options open to the Council would be to either continue operating the current planning service that delivers business as usual, or to formulate transformation plans for the service ignoring the advice and recommendations of the PAS Peer Review Team.

6. Next Steps

- 6.1. The next steps following this report are:
 - If approved the publication of the PAS Peer Review report and associated NNC Action Plan on the council's website
 - Implement the governance arrangements for Planning transformation activity as presented at Appendix C
 - Commence work as set out in the Action Plan including the identification of the resources necessary to undertake the programme of transformation

7. Implications (including financial implications)

7.1. Resources, Financial and Transformation

- 7.1.1 The PAS report is clear that the scale of transformation required to move to a single planning service is significant and that some of the timescales are challenging, particularly around replacing legacy ICT systems. Page 8 of the PAS report identifies that *'Transformation of that scale takes a significant amount of resource and work needs to start very soon. A comprehensive service transformation plan including reviewing committee structures; IT and*

officer structures, with a resourced programme to deliver it, is needed. The council needs to consider how to resource this plan and programme because transformation work needs to happen at the same time as delivering the “day job”.

- 7.1.2 In order therefore to develop and deliver a comprehensive transformation plan, it will be necessary to consider both financial and human resources necessary to undertake this work alongside maintaining current business as usual for the Planning service.
- 7.1.3 It is proposed to develop the detailed transformation plan as a part of the work detailed in the Action Plan attached at Appendix B. In developing the detailed transformation plan, work will be undertaken to identify the resources and funding necessary to progress the transformation activities alongside maintaining the planning service ‘business as usual’ activities. Although the detailed resource requirements are as yet unknown, the cost of this resource is unlikely to be met through existing budget provision. . It is anticipated that they will lead to efficiency savings in the long term.
- 7.1.4 Alongside the in-house planning resource that will be required from subject matter experts (SME) to undertake transformation activity through SME Working Groups, resource input will also be required from a number of other areas of the Council. These are identified in the ‘Dependencies’ column of the Action Plan. Among the dependencies, there will be a requirement for significant involvement from the Place & Economy Transformation Team. Discussions with the Transformation Programme Manager are in progress to consider how the Transformation Team can resource this, however it should be noted that when developing the detailed Transformation Plan, the pace of progress will be influenced by the ability of other service areas to input capacity into the transformation activity when required.

7.2 Legal and Governance

- 7.2.1 Recommendation 9 of the PAS Peer Review calls for a review of the Planning Scheme of Delegation and planning committee structure. In undertaking the work associated with this, there will be a need to ensure that the Council continues to operate a legally sound planning service and that all planning decisions are robust and able to withstand the potential for legal challenge.
- 7.2.2 The changes will, if approved be implemented into the Council’s constitution.

7.3 Relevant Policies and Plans

- 7.3.1 A variety of policies and plans are relevant to this report, such as the Local Development Scheme, Planning Scheme of Delegation and Planning Protocol. These will be fully considered and identified as a part of the detailed transformation plan.

7.4 Risk

- 7.4.1 The risks associated with this report are in not progressing with an Action Plan and the associated transformation activity. As identified through the PAS Peer review report, there will be a need to commit financial and human resource into the transformation programme over and above the Planning Service's business as usual activity. The result of this however will be a product that provides an efficient and cost-effective planning service for North Northamptonshire that is able to help deliver planned growth for the area, make great places and assist in leveraging inward investment into North Northamptonshire. Should the Council choose to proceed with the implementation of the Action Plan, the transformation programme will have its own risk register.
- 7.4.2 Should the Council choose not to agree an Action Plan that responds to the PAS recommendations, there is a risk that the Council continues to operate a disjointed service that cannot meet the expectations of its customers and that fails to realise the efficiencies that can be delivered through transforming the function into a single, harmonised planning service.

7.5 Consultation

- 7.5.1 As a part of the PAS Peer Review, significant consultation was undertaken, both internally with a wide range of elected members and officers and externally with a variety of stakeholders, such as developers, planning agents, statutory consultees and town & parish councils, details of which are included within the PAS report attached at **Appendix A**.

7.6 Consideration by Executive Advisory Panel

- 7.6.1 This report has not been considered by an Executive Advisory Panel (EAP).

7.7 Consideration by Scrutiny

- 7.7.1 This report has not been considered by the Scrutiny Commission. It is intended that there will be opportunity for the Scrutiny Commission to consider the progress of the planning transformation activity at appropriate points during the programme of works.

7.8 Equality Implications

- 7.8.1 Equality implications will be fully considered as the programme of detailed transformation activity is developed to ensure that all activity is appropriately assessed and that the obligations of the Equality Act are met.

7.9 Climate and Environment Impact

7.9.1 The Council has an opportunity through elements of the planning transformation programme to realise efficiencies that will have a positive climate and environment impact. The assessment of this will be fully considered as the programme of detailed transformation activity is developed.

7.10 Community Impact

7.10.1 The programme of detailed transformation work that will be developed as a part of the Action Plan will provide opportunity for the Council to improve the planning service delivered across the community, both in terms of policy development and placemaking through planning decision-making and appropriate enforcement. Work will also be undertaken to ensure that the Planning service engages positively with external stakeholders and seeks to maximise the gain from developer contributions to ensure that appropriate levels of infrastructure are provided to mitigate the impacts of new development upon local communities.

7.11 Crime and Disorder Impact

7.11.1 There are no specific crime and disorder implications relating to this report. Further consideration will be given to crime and disorder as a part of the development of the detailed transformation plan.

8 Background Papers

8.1 None