

## HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

**Title/Subject Matter:** Planning Services Peer Review

**Meeting/Date:** Development Management Committee – 19 May 2025

**Executive Portfolio:** Planning (Cllr T. Sanderson)

**Report by:** Head of Planning, Infrastructure & Public Protection

**Wards affected:** All

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### **Executive Summary:**

Between the 6<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> June 2024 Huntingdonshire District Council undertook a corporate peer challenge. As part of the action plan to address the recommendations of that report a peer review of planning services was undertaken between the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> November 2024. The final report was received in March 2025.

The Huntingdonshire Peer Challenge Team brought together 4 experienced professionals and councillors across local government and planning services.

The report (appendix 1) sets out 16 recommendations. That report recognises the enormous positive strides the department has made since April 2022, and offers suggestions for further improvements.

The next steps are to prepare an action plan or the delivery of change. Workshops have been undertaken with officers and members of the Development Management Committee. A developer forum will be convened to discuss the recommendations of the Peer review.

The Council has engaged a Change Programme Lead officer to oversee the development, implementation and reporting of the action plan.

The Committee is

### **RECOMMENDED**

- (a) to receive the PAS Peer Challenge report, Appendix 1, and note the recommendations; and

- (b) to note an Action Plan will be brought back to the Development Management Committee within a timescale to be agreed with the Portfolio Holder for Planning, in consultation with the Chair of the Development Management Committee.**

## 1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 Following on from the Corporate Peer Challenge in June 2024 planning services undertook a Peer Review in November 2024. The Planning Services Peer review final report was received in March 2025. In accordance with the Councils adopted iCare values, being accountable, and the interests of transparency it is important that this document is made public to enable understanding of the journey the service has been on to date, and the opportunities that lie ahead to make further improvements.

## 2. ANALYSIS

- 2.1 Recommendation 6 of the Corporate Peer Review recommends that the Council retains its focus on Growth. Planning services is the key delivery vehicle to ensure the Council delivers on its growth ambitions. The subject of planning is undergoing significant change at a national level including LURB and the NPPF revised in December 2024. The NPPF is clear that planning policies and decisions should help create conditions in which businesses can invest, expand and adapt, and that significant weight should be placed on the need to support economic growth. Alongside, the government is clear we have a need for additional housing and Huntingdonshire District Councils now has an annual housing need of 1213 dwellings pa. It is anticipated that there will be further national changes to the system in the near future, including the proposed national scheme of delegation and removal of Extension of Time agreements. The peer review of planning services is a health check to ensure that the service is agile to respond to national changes in the planning system and can better deliver corporate priorities, including inclusive growth. It reviews the journey the department has been on and makes recommendations for service improvements to modernise and deliver an efficient service.

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

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- **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

The Peers were at HDC for 3 days between the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> November 2024 and in that time they undertook the following to inform their report:

- Discussions/workshop with officers from across the service
- Discussions/workshop with officers from outside of the service.
- Discussion with Chief Executive.

- Discussion with the Leader and Cabinet.
- Discussions/workshop with a cross section of councillors from the Development Management Committee and the Local Plans Advisory Group.
- They reviewed Development Management Committee (recorded)
- Engagement/discussion with a cross section of businesses with experience of recent applications.
- Discussions/workshop with planning agents.
- Discussions/workshop with applicants for strategic sites.
- Discussions/workshop with Parish Councils
- Discussions/workshop with Stakeholders.

The Peer Review also offers the opportunity to recognise the enormous improvements made within the service alongside recommendations for further improvements to deliver an efficient service for residents and businesses that supports the national, regional and local growth ambitions. 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.

2.3 The Peer Review recognises that HDC planning performs reasonably well compared to other authorities, and is exemplar in the approach to CIL. It recognises the huge strides made in improving performance within Development Management, and the significant reduction in live enforcement cases.

2.4 The report sets out a number of recommendations under four themes

- Vision and Leadership
- Performance and Management
- Community and Partnership Engagement
- Achieving outcomes.

The full report is available at appendix 1.

2.5 The recommendations are:

1. Corporately recognise the value of the Local Plan - prioritise, resource and adopt a Local Plan that will help to deliver corporate priorities
2. Consider Reviewing the role and membership of the Local Plan Advisory Group
3. The Planning Service needs to create a clear strategy for delivering the Place Strategy and Corporate Plan
4. Training for Councillors and Planning Committee
5. Revise the Scheme of Delegation
6. Develop a Corporately supported Communications Plan for the Planning Service

7. Develop and implement a long-term (3-year) Planning Service Improvement Programme
  - a. Identify Project Management Resource
  - b. DM Process Improvement Review
  - c. ICT/Digital Modernisation Project to be supported corporately.
  - d. Consider structure of Planning Service
  - e. Culture Change Programme
  - f. Income generation
8. Improve the Pre-application Service
- 9. Short- term**
  - a. Ensure sufficient capacity
  - b. Review 'No-amendments policy'
  - c. Reduce reliance on Extensions of Time
  - d. Better performance information
  - e. Corporate agreement to address ICT /digital challenges
  - f. Implement annual appraisals ( aligns with Corporate Peer Review)
  - g. Consistent reports to Planning Committee ( to be read in tandem with amendments to Scheme of Delegation)
  - h. Secure dedicated legal advice.
10. Consider preparing planning guidance on Householder applications
11. Update Planning Enforcement Policy
12. Develop and agree a Planning and parish/Town Council Service Framework/Protocol
13. Set up clearer arrangements for better collaborative working between the Planning Service and key services and partners
14. Set out clear Customer Service Standards
15. Refresh and relaunch the Planning Agents and Developers Forum
16. Update the Statement of Community Involvement

### **3. KEY IMPACTS**

- 3.1 The Council is legally required to comply with planning legislation, and must adhere to established procedures and regulations when dealing with planning applications, along with the development of any policies and guidance that form part of the statutory Development Plan.
- 3.2 The government recognises the importance of the planning system in unlocking economic growth and is putting in place measures at a national level to accelerate decision making. Through a programme of continued improvement planning services remains agile and responsive to change at national, regional and local levels.
- 3.3 The Huntingdonshire Place Strategy sets out the ambition for Huntingdonshire 2050, with aims to improve lives of all our residents, communities and businesses through 5 journeys. It is necessary for planning services to be solution-focussed to support the delivery of the Council's ambitions and give confidence to stakeholders, communities and businesses.

#### **4. WHAT ACTIONS WILL BE TAKEN/TIMETABLE FOR IMPLEMENTATION**

- 4.1 In March 2025 an officer workshop was held to positively shape the formation of an Action Plan.
- 4.2 In April 2025 a new Change Programme Lead officer joined Planning Services (Recommendation 7a). They are responsible for the development, management and implementation of an Action Plan.
- 4.3 A workshop with Members of the Development Management Committee will be held on the 13<sup>th</sup> March.
- 4.4 A workshop for engagement with agents/developers is being scheduled.
- 4.5 The above will inform the action plan, which will be brought back to the Development Management Committee, with a progress update.

#### **5. LINK TO THE CORPORATE PLAN, STRATEGIC PRIORITIES AND/OR CORPORATE OBJECTIVES**

[\*\(See Corporate Plan\)\*](#)

- 5.1 Action 54. Continue the Development Management Improvement programme to improve the performance of the planning service.
- 5.2 The recommendations and general insight the peer report highlights will assist in delivering against the corporate objective of doing our core work well, delivering good quality, high value-for-money services with good control and compliance with statutory obligations.

#### **6. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from receipt of the Peer Review.

#### **7. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1 As identified, a Change Programme Lead officer has joined the LPA in April 2025. Outcomes of the Action Plan will inform future budget bids, where necessary and will have oversight of the S151 officer.

#### **8. LIST OF APPENDICES INCLUDED**

Appendix 1 - Planning Service Peer Challenge

#### **9. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

Text. None

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