

Assessment of the current Development Management Service: August 2021

The POSe Review of the Development Management Service

The Council appointed the Planning Officer's Society Enterprises (POSe) to carry out a Peer Review of the Development Management Service in November 2019.

The review was undertaken at a high-level focusing on what changes are necessary or desirable to make the service fully fit for purpose over the next three to five years.

The Council wished to commission an external review of the service which would look across the board at all aspects of the service. It is considered best practice for a service to regularly review:

- Performance
- Structure and resources
- Procedures and processes
- Pre apps engagement
- Use of extensions of time
- Reporting to the Planning Committee and its effectiveness
- Use of conditions and monitoring
- User satisfaction and alternative models for delivery.

In particular the review was to explore the scope for further streamlining of procedures and working practices as well as identifying existing good practice.

The Review Team was remained mindful of the financial pressures upon local authorities, and the need for staff structure and numbers to be economical and efficient as well as the difficulties in recruitment of good quality planning staff, and the need for pragmatism in any new staffing proposals.

The Peer Review highlights a number of Actions that the Review Team recommended that the Council consider implementing in order to turn the Service from a Good to Great Service.

It must be recognised that creating an exemplary service will not be entirely dependent on completing each of the improvements or actions set out in the Action Plan. Aspects of the Action Plan can be grouped together as projects and in some cases there will be overlaps. For example, delivering excellent customer service links into a number of different actions but also into the wider corporate aims set out in the Corporate Plan.

The Service will need to consider how to deliver more for less whilst looking at the use of IT to improve efficiency and ease of access to information for residents. Whilst improvements have been made to the Council's website, for example, there will need to be further work once the Council acquires a new website platform as part of the Council's Digitalisation Strategy

It is important that consideration is also given to other potential improvements that may not be explicitly identified in the Action Plan. For example, there is currently an audit of our Planning Database being carried out where the suppliers are reviewing how we are currently using the system compared to how it could be used. This is to assist training but also to ensure that our systems are used as efficiently as possible.

Whilst work on each of the actions will commence, it must be recognised that they cannot be dealt with in isolation and that there still needs to be a strategic and holistic review of the Service – to transform it into more of a customer focused enabling service. The actions will be the building blocks for bigger changes although it should be recognised that cultural change cannot happen overnight

What does good look like?

The Peer Review (Section 6) suggested the “blueprint” for good practice in any English authority should include the following:

1. An up to date fully NPPF compliant local plan, locally specific, reflecting corporate objectives, in place at the earliest opportunity;
2. Clear corporate objectives for the service, endorsed by Members;
3. Evidence of at least a 5-year housing land supply to meet the standard methodology
4. A comprehensive Infrastructure Delivery Plan signed off by all relevant partners;
5. A clearly expressed policy regarding the use of S106 obligations setting out when they will be required, for what purpose and the necessary mechanisms to ensure delivery as well as a clear approach to CIL;
6. A pre-applications service including PPAs and charges, a protocol for involving Councillors on significant cases and MOUs with key consultees;
7. An efficient proactive development management service that meets all statutory and local targets and offers good customer care and consistent planning advice, using up to date technology and delivering, enabling, monitoring and enforcing quality outcomes;
8. A proactive approach to implementation including masterplans and/or development briefs for significant sites, regeneration schemes and proactive care for the historic environment;
9. A strong approach to design;

10. A valued, motivated and skilled team of officers, working as an integrated planning service with appropriate performance management systems and training opportunities;
11. An effective scheme of delegation, mandatory training for Councillors especially those sitting on the Development Management Committee, clear and transparent Committee procedures with clear coordinated professional planning advice available to Members; and
12. Adequate resources to deliver all of the above, including a fit for purpose IT system and hardware.

The rest of this report is structured around these 12 items.

Local Plan / Policy Framework

Hart has an up to date fully NPPF compliant local plan, locally specific, reflecting corporate objectives. Since the date of the review (November 2019) the following documents have been published, adopted or 'made':

Hart Local Plan (Strategy & Sites) 2032 adopted April 2020

The Council successfully defended the adoption of the Local Plan from a legal challenge.

Neighbourhood Plans 'made':

- Fleet Neighbourhood Plan made 28 November 2019
- Hartley Wintney Neighbourhood Plan made 28 November 2019
- Hook Neighbourhood Plan made 27 February 2020 following legal challenge in early 2020
- Crondall Neighbourhood Plan made 6 May 2021 following legal challenge threat Feb 2020
- Crookham Village Parish Neighbourhood Plan made 6 May 2021

The team are currently supporting Yately Town Council as it prepares a Neighbourhood Plan.

Other publications providing planning guidance:

- TAN - Privacy, Daylight and Sunlight published Nov 2020
- Affordable Housing Informal Development Guidance updated and published July 2021

Regular publications updated include:

- Annual Monitoring Report (AMR)
- 5 year Housing Land Supply
- Brownfield Register

- SANG capacity August 2020
- SANG allocations criteria + updated tariff April 2021
- Infrastructure Funding Statement (IFS)

Corporate objectives for the service

Hart has clear corporate objectives for the Service, endorsed by Members. The Hart Corporate Plan was adopted in 2018 and covers the period 2017 to 2022. Hart District Council's Vision for 2040 was adopted in 2019 [*Recommendation 2, 4, 5, 7, 9*].

The Council's Corporate Plan and Vision 2040 feed into the Annual Service Plans. The 2020/21 Service Plans were reviewed by Overview & Scrutiny Committee in March 2021 and adopted by Cabinet in April 2021.

The Overview & Scrutiny working group were consulted on draft key performance indicators in March 2021. Development Management Statistics were circulated to Members of O&S and Planning Committee in July 2021. The joint working group in September can review the latest statistics alongside the KPIs.

5-year Housing Land Supply

The Council published the 5-Year Housing Land Supply as of 1st April 2020 in September 2020. The team are currently working on the figures for 2021.

This document sets out Hart District's five-year supply of housing land as of 1st April 2020. It is based on an annual requirement of 423 homes in the Hart Local Plan (Strategy & Sites) 2032. As at 1st April 2020, Hart had a 5-year supply of 2,599 homes, or 10.2 years supply.

Infrastructure Delivery Plan (IDP)

As part of the evidence base for the Hart Local Plan 2032 the Council published the Hart Local Plan (Strategy & Sites) 2016-2032 Infrastructure Delivery Plan in February 2018. This IDP was part of the evidence base with formed part of the public examination of the Hart Local Plan.

As part of the evidence base to inform the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) Charging Schedule the Council is producing an update to the 2018 IDP. There will be further engagement with key partners in early Autumn, and this will form part of the consultation on the Charging Schedule later in the year.

S106 / CIL

A report on CIL was presented to Overview & Scrutiny Committee in July 2020. The Committee welcomed the report and agreed to recommend to Cabinet that Officers undertake the processes to implement the Community Infrastructure Levy.

Cabinet considered a further report in September 2020. Cabinet resolved that Officers commence the processes to set the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) Charging Schedule.

Overview & Scrutiny Committee considered a CIL Update report in December 2020. As the project proceeds, Overview & Scrutiny Committee will have the opportunity to consider the draft CIL charging schedule prior to both planned public consultations.

Pre-Applications and PPAs

The Service has introduced a new approach to pre application advice on major sites. Applicants have been keen to engage in this bespoke service. New pre-application fee charging was introduced in April 2021 as part of the Council's setting of the fees and charges [*part Recommendation 11*].

Since the review in November 2019, the sites include:

- Hartland Park Phase 2
- Hartland Park Phase 3
- Grove Farm
- Bramshill House
- The Elvetham
- Bartley Wood, Hook

There is an on-going review of the Pre-App process in general for advice on smaller proposals.

Efficient & proactive Development Management Service

Following the POSe review, the DM team are implementing a series of actions and improvements in the pursuit of becoming an efficient and proactive DM service that not only meets all statutory and local targets but offers high levels of customer care. This includes providing consistent planning advice and utilising up-to-date technology together with delivering, monitoring and enforcing quality outcomes.

Linked to the DM Action Plan is a continued review of case management following a project management approach. Further emphasis is being placed on the customer experience, regular contact and response times. Due to the increase in planning

applications, and consequential higher caseloads for individual Officers, arrangements are being made for additional resources to provide additional capacity. This will enable Officers to deliver more efficient and proactive case management with enhanced levels of customer service [*part Recommendation 42*].

Earlier restrictions on Officer site visits due to Covid-19 risk assessments have been gradually relaxed when appropriate, with Officers now able to conduct all site visits subject to normal procedures (such as pre-arranging unaccompanied internal visits for Listed Buildings and pre-checks that there are no self-isolating occupiers). This has had a positive effect on determination timescales.

Alongside additional resourcing, the DM team is continuing to explore the use of existing resources and opportunities to streamline processes.

There has been a review of the process of registration and validation of planning applications. This will simplify the process with BSU and the planning team [*part link to Recommendation 12, 13, 39*]

New protocol on Extensions of Time (EoT) was implemented August 2021 for new applications, especially householder applications [*Recommendation 8*].

New simpler checklist approach implemented for Delegated Reports on householder applications with no objections was implemented August 2021 [*part Recommendation 26*].

On 2nd September Cabinet will consider an update to the Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) to reflect the recommendation contained within the Peer Review [*Recommendation 15, 16*]. This will bring forward a reduction in consultation length on planning applications from 28 days to 21 days, which is in line with the statutory requirement. This provides an additional week where Officers can determine planning applications following receipt of comments to provide speedier decisions and allow for those comments to be considered and actioned where appropriate. At the same time the SCI will reconfirm the approach to Site Notices which was introduced under emergency powers during Covid, in line with the Peer Review 'to cease the posting of site notices except where required by statute'. This SCI will also be updated to reflect changes to the planning policy elements; although this will need to be reviewed further with the planned changes to the national planning system

We are looking further into how other Councils have improved their planning systems using Systems Thinking. We are reviewing the learnings from Stratford-on Avon approach which was implemented a few years ago.

Proactive approach to implementation

The DM team has a proactive approach to implementation and when appropriate will consider the use of masterplans and/or development briefs for significant sites. This begins at the pre-application stage and continues through the various application stages.

Since the Peer Review the Council has taken a new approach to the review of Conservation Area Appraisals. The Council is providing advice and guidance to Parish and Town Councils to work with external consultants. The approach is leading to a new style of appraisals, with more succinct precise and useable documents. Odiham Parish Council is the first to adopt this innovative approach.

The Council is reviewing options in relation to the existing Article 4 Direction which prevents office to residential permitted development on our key employment sites. This needs to be considered in light of the recent national changes in this respect.

Similarly, following the Government's announcement on First Homes, a cross service team has been established to consider the implications, and the Council's response. This is likely to lead to further guidance, and maybe a supplementary planning document.

Urban Design

The DM Team has been continuing a strong approach to the importance of design within the pre-application and planning stages. This reflects the national emphasis on creating beautiful places and increasing design focus.

The Council has worked with a well-regarded Urban Designer (Dr Stefan Kruczkowski; co-author of Building for a Healthy Life) on urban design matters for major developments.

In the Summer of 2020, Dr Stefan Kruczkowski provided Member Training on Building for a Healthy Life.

Following Member Training the Council started using Building for a Healthy Life as a design guide.

The revised NPPF 2021 sets an expectation that all local authorities should prepare local design guides or design codes and alongside this MHCLG has published the National Model Design Code. The Council is currently considering design options for achieving this whilst still utilising Building for a Healthy Life as a high-level Design Code.

Valued, motivated and skilled team of Officers

As outlined above, there are procedures in place for recruitment to assist the short-term increase in workload for the DM team overall and to cover the interim promotion for one member of staff. Permanent recruitment is underway for one Planner post and interviews have been scheduled for the permanent Development Management & Building Control Manager post.

Focus is continuing on Continued Professional Development, coaching and/or mentoring opportunities for staff members with mid-year Personal Development Reviews (PDRs) a prime opportunity to review Officers' own aspirations. Mid-year PDRs are also a key time to highlight the team's successes and individual contributions made by Officers.

Planning Committee / effective scheme of delegation

The Council has an effective scheme of delegation, there is already mandatory training in place for Councillors especially those sitting on the Development Management Committee. There is a clear and transparent Committee procedure with coordinated professional planning advice provided to Members within Officer reports and during the Committee meetings.

The DM Action Plan has highlighted areas for consideration in respect of Planning Committee and they are being progressed.

Adequate resources

In respect of having a fit for purpose IT system and the relevant hardware, many changes for home working have delivered improvements in this area. Following the commencement of an audit of the IT system used by the DM team, improvements are being explored and implemented [*Recommendations 46, 47, 48*].

In the period since the POSe Review (November 2019) one Planner has left the DM team and one Senior Planner went on maternity leave. The current Planning Manager is leaving shortly and one Principal Planner will be leaving the Council in the autumn.

Steph Baker has been appointed as the interim Development Management & Building Control Manager until the end of November. The interviews for the permanent appointment are being held on Friday 20th August.

To replace the Planner who left, a permanent Planner post is being advertised from Monday 9th August. Another permanent Officer has been moved to full-time DM duties

initially for a 3 month period, as opposed to the previous split between DM and Planning Enforcement work.

Two contractors joined the DM team on Monday 2nd August to cover the Planner post and back-fill the Senior Planner role. Two further contractors are being recruited to provide the additional capacity that the team requires.

A Structure Chart of the DM Team was sent to all Members Audit Committee on 30th June 2021. An updated Structure Chart was shared with all Councillors as part of the presentation for Member Induction on Tuesday 3rd August 2021.