

Report to: Planning Committee

13 January 2021

Lead Officer: Sharon Brown, Assistant Director Delivery

Planning Advisory Service Review of Planning Committee

Executive Summary

1. South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) and Cambridge City Council jointly commissioned the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) to undertake a review of the SCDC and City Council 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.
2. The review was delayed by several months until the summer 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 SCDC Planning Committee has now been completed and the final PAS report is attached to this report as Appendix A.
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 and the approach to officer presentations. Other report recommendations are already being implemented such as the Chair's Brief meetings that have been put in place ahead of Planning Committee and the programme of member development sessions that began in October.
4. The Council has agreed to set up a joint member/officer Planning Committee Development Group to oversee the implementation of the report recommendations. The group includes three nominated members from Scrutiny and Overview Committee and three from Planning Committee, as well as senior officers from the Shared Planning Service. The objective is to implement the report recommendations within a 3 month period of publication of the report. It is therefore intended to update Planning Committee again on progress in April 2021.
5. The final City Council Planning Committee review report (which includes the JDCC) is also due to be received shortly and is likely to be reported to the City Council Planning Committee in February. There will be a need to review the City report recommendations against those contained in the SCDC Planning Committee review and to ensure that implementation of common

recommendations is aligned across the two Committees (and the JDCC) where appropriate.

Key Decision

6. No

Recommendations

7. It is recommended that Planning Committee:
 - a) notes the content and recommendations set out in the Planning Advisory Service report.
 - b) notes the arrangements put in place for the Planning Committee Development Group that will oversee implementation of the report recommendations.
 - c) agrees that an update report on progress of implementation of the report recommendations should be provided to Planning Committee in April.

Details

8. 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 South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) and Cambridge City Council jointly commissioned the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) in early spring 2020 to undertake a review of SCDC and Cambridge City Planning Committees as well as the Joint Development Control Committee (JDCC).
9. 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 Council's Scheme of Delegation and Chair's Delegation process, given that these had already been the subject of recent changes and that there may be a need for further changes in due course.
10. 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 summer. The review has now been completed and the final PAS report is attached as Appendix A to this report.
11. 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.
- Meetings with key members including the planning lead member, Chair of the Planning Committee and other members of the Planning Committee in August.
- Meetings with key Council officers including the Chief Executive, Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development, Assistant Director Delivery, Strategic Sites Delivery Manager, Development Management Delivery Manager and legal officers in August.
- A group of four stakeholder engagement meetings with Parish Councils on 15 and 16 September.

12. 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 and Parish Councils to speak at Committee.
- Planning Committee members have a clear understanding of their roles, the plan led system and local plan policies and good accountability for decisions.
- The Committee have demonstrated the ability to take difficult decisions on significant, large scale major developments such as Waterbeach Barracks and the Wellcome Trust Campus.
- The revised Chair's Delegation process provides improved transparency.
- Challenges created by Covid 19 and lockdown, the continued high pressures for development within the Greater Cambridge area, as well as the scale of changes required to consolidate the ongoing implementation of the Shared Planning Service have impacted on the planning service's ability to move forward on some service improvements -and some of these are relevant to the Committee review.
- Further improvements are therefore required in terms of joint working between members and officers and in terms of a number of process and procedural issues (eg officer presentations, committee report templates, increasing the number of member briefings) to increase the effectiveness of the operation of Planning Committee.
- There are also opportunities identified to improve the customer experience of the virtual Planning Committee process and in terms of engagement with the Parish Councils.
- Learning from best practice from other Councils also provides an opportunity for further collaborative working between members and officers.

13. Nine recommendations are set out in the report in Appendix A. Some of these have already been implemented such as the re-introduction of the Chair's Brief meetings prior to Planning Committee and the member development programme.

Quarterly parish meetings with the three Development Management (DM) teams are being rolled out from February 2021 and other parish engagement is continuing including through parish walkabouts with DM team managers and officer attendance at parish meetings and ongoing individual major development site coordination meetings.

14. A joint member/officer Planning Committee Development Group has been set up to oversee the implementation of the PAS report recommendations. This includes six members -three from Scrutiny and Overview Committee and three from Planning Committee -Councillors: Richard Williams, Nick Wright, Anna Bradnam, John Batchelor, Pippa Heylings and Judith Rippeth. The group will be chaired by Jeff Membury, Head of Transformation and attended by other senior relevant planning service managers. It is envisaged that there will be a three month programme for implementation of recommendations -however where there are any longer term implementation issues identified such as Review of the Scheme of Delegation, the timescale for these will be agreed.
15. The City Council Planning Committee and the JDCC have been subject to similar reviews and the final report on these is expected shortly and is likely to be reported to the City Council Planning Committee in February. There will be a need for the two Councils to coordinate in terms of any common recommendations arising from the reviews to ensure alignment of implementation/outcomes where possible.
16. In conclusion, it is recommended that Planning Committee note the PAS report findings, conclusions and recommendations and the arrangements put in place to oversee implementation of the report recommendations. Planning Committee is requested to agree that a further report update on progress should be provided in April.

Options

17. As there are no decisions for Planning Committee to make arising from this report, other than agreeing that an update report should be provided to Committee in April, there is no need to consider any options.

Implications

18. In the writing of this report, taking into account financial, legal, staffing, risk, equality and diversity, climate change, and any other key issues, the following implications have been considered: -

Financial

19. The Council has incurred financial costs in commissioning PAS to carry out the Planning Committee review. However, there would be no direct costs associated with implementation of the recommendations as most of the recommendations would already be picked up through the Shared Planning Service's improvement programme. There will be indirect costs associated with individual components

arising from the report recommendations eg costs of external presenters for individual member development programme sessions but these will be limited.

Legal

20. The PAS review report has been shared with 3C Legal Services. The Planning Committee Development Group will be able to call on legal advice as required. Legal advice will be sought directly on any individual proposals to implement changes arising from the report recommendations where there are legal implications eg review of the Scheme of Delegation.

Staffing

21. There are no staffing implications arising from this report.

Risks/Opportunities

22. The report provides a number of recommendations for improvements to the operation of the SCDC Planning Committee. It is important that these recommendations are implemented in a timely way, following publication of the report to minimise any future risks and maximise opportunities in terms of improvements and refinements to practices and processes eg review of the virtual committee process to improve the customer experience. It is also important that key elements arising from implementation of the recommendations that have corporate and wider implications such as the review of the Scheme of Delegation are clearly mapped out. This is the reason why the Planning Committee Development Group has been put in place to ensure that this happens, that the implementation of the report recommendations is monitored and kept under review and any decisions are made quickly.

Equality and Diversity

23. There are no equality and diversity issues arising directly from this report. Any equality and diversity issues arising directly from implementation of any individual report recommendations will be considered as the proposals move forward but these are likely to be limited.

Climate Change

24. There are no Climate Change implications arising directly from this report.

Health & Wellbeing

25. There are no health and wellbeing implications arising from this report.

Consultation responses

26. None

Alignment with Council Priority Areas

27. The main objectives for commissioning the PAS review of the SCDC Planning Committee were to ensure that the Committee is operating as effectively as possible, to review the operation of the Committee in the context of best practice from around the country and to align and streamline Committee processes wherever possible, as part of the wider Shared Planning Service improvement programme. Implementation of recommendations arising from the PAS review report will therefore contribute towards delivery of all the Council's Priority Area objectives, given the importance of the role of the Planning Committee in achievement of associated outcomes.

Background Papers

None

Appendices

Appendix A -Planning Advisory Service Review report -South Cambridgeshire District Council Planning Committee -November 2020

Report Author:

Sharon Brown, Assistant Director Delivery