



Harrogate Borough Council

Planning service peer review report



Harrogate Planning Peer Review

24th-26th April 2007

This is the report of a planning peer review of Harrogate Borough Council undertaken 24th – 26th April 2007. The report compares the planning service of the council to the benchmark of an ideal planning service developed by PAS and the IDeA, comments on areas of good practice and makes recommendations on areas for improvement. Peer review is part of an ongoing change process, whereby the resultant recommendations from it should, along with CPA recommendations, inform improvement planning.

The Planning Advisory Service (PAS) aims to facilitate self-sustaining change and improvement in the local authority planning sector. PAS helps councils provide faster, fairer, more efficient and better quality services.

PAS is funded by the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and is part of the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA). Building on the IDeA's work in the local government sector, PAS supports local planning authorities throughout England to develop both their capacity and capability to deliver services and the best possible outcomes for their communities.

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Summary

Harrogate Borough Council is clearly committed to improving and further developing its planning service. The council is aware of most of the key planning issues and the areas it needs to address, and already has a service improvement plan in place and a track record of improvement. The council asked for the peer review as an opportunity to inform the internal best value review of the planning service and also to help equip it to more effectively contribute to the delivery of council, sub-regional and regional priorities. The council now needs to take action to address the identified areas for improvement.

The council's performance against planning performance indicators, particularly those relating to speed of determining planning applications, has improved significantly over the past year, to the extent that the council is no longer classified as a planning standards authority. This is a key achievement that should be celebrated. It is now important for the council to consider how it balances future speed and efficiency with service quality and further responsiveness to user needs and requirements. For example, customer expectations regarding the level of pre-application service need clarifying and managing, and the responsiveness of services to parish council requirements could be developed further.

There is an understanding from both the managerial and political leadership of how planning can contribute to the delivery of the council's overall aims and objectives, and a recognition that planning is an important service for Harrogate. This has been reflected to date by the way that the service has been resourced. The Planning Delivery Grant (PDG), for example, has been used solely for the planning service, and the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) best practice officer/caseload ratio has been used to justify additional resourcing of its development control service in light of the recognised need to improve performance. These are clear strengths. However, the drivers for resourcing other parts of the service such as enforcement are less clear and need reviewing as the council considers the further development and future role of the planning service.

Information and the e-planning facilities provided by the council's website are excellent, and well regarded and valued by service users. The planning service has clearly embraced the use and potential of information technology to improve processes and practice and has plans in place to continue this. However, there needs to be more systematic and regular review of practice to focus on achieving efficiency and modernisation across the service. There are some key processes, such as the scheme of delegation that could be made more efficient.

Whilst there are many examples of good practice at Harrogate, there is scope for the council to further develop its learning and development culture so it can innovate and apply good practice more regularly. In doing this it will be able to take increased professional and political pride from a highly rated planning service. Feedback and learning needs to more systematically inform policy development, and enable continuous improvement of service design and delivery. In turn this would make it more responsive to users' needs and the demands of a modern and proactive planning function.

The council has many of the required building blocks in place for further improvement, and having improved service performance there is now a clear opportunity to focus on, and achieve, a greater customer responsiveness to shape the future role of the service. In doing this the council needs to agree now how it will manage and respond to key future risks identified such as resourcing of the service when PDG is no longer available, and a potentially high housing allocation required by the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS).

Recommendations

There are suggested actions contained within the body of the report, which the council should respond to, but listed below are the key issues we suggest the council needs to consider. The following recommendations seek to build upon existing strengths and aim to further equip Harrogate Borough Council to effectively deliver the desired improvements and developments in planning. They should be built into the service improvement plan.

Leadership and corporate engagement

- (i) Clarify the future role and focus of the planning service at Harrogate and, based on the LDF vision and place shaping ambitions of the council, agree the future resource requirements (*see paragraphs 26-27 and 88-90*).
- (ii) Plan now for the future, by corporately discussing and agreeing how the council will respond to identified key risks including the likely RSS housing allocation and PDG exit (*see paragraphs 28, 82, 90-91 and 100*).

Customer focus and community engagement

- (iii) Regularly review, improve and develop tailored consultation and engagement opportunities with service users involved in the planning process, including parish councils, and systematically use it to inform service design, delivery and improvement (*see paragraphs 50, 55-58 and 89*).
- (iv) Further develop and clearly communicate the customer service standards to cover all facets of the planning service - including a more positive approach to pre-application engagement - and regularly monitor performance against them (*see paragraphs 48-49, 54, 59 and 73*).
- (v) Review and refresh the enforcement policy, and ensure the rationale and approach to enforcement is clearly communicated to all service users (*see paragraphs 62-63*).

Achieving outcomes effectively and sustainably

- (vi) Review and amend the scheme of delegation to make it more efficient and effective, so that it places less of a burden on councillor and officer time (*see paragraphs 37 and 68*).
- (vii) Ensure that Supplementary Planning Documents (SPD) is developed in relation to all key development issues including sustainable development and renewable energy (*see paragraphs 75 and 83-84*).
- (viii) Regularly review key activities and processes to ensure an emphasis on achieving quality outcomes, and improve the focus on design quality and sustainability (*see paragraphs 70, 72 and 85*).
- (ix) Introduce service level agreements with the service units that provide support/services to the planning function to ensure that level of service is sustained and appropriate to current and future needs (*see paragraph 78*).

People, performance and resource management

- (x) Further develop the performance management of the planning service by developing local performance indicators that focus on quality and impact of developments and value for money (*see paragraph 97*).

- (xi) Develop a learning strategy for the planning service, including a review of the development needs of councillors, to ensure that training is regularly refreshed and updated, and includes wider planning considerations and developments (see *paragraphs 40 and 92-93*).
- (xii) Ensure that successes are celebrated, and the learning from them captured and shared (internally and externally), to inform further development and improvement (see *paragraphs 101- 104*).

Background

- 1 The visit to Harrogate planning service was part of a programme of reviews undertaken by the Improvement and Development Agency for local government (IDeA) and the Planning Advisory Service (PAS). A peer review is designed to help the service assess its current achievements and its capacity to change, and continue to improve.
- 2 The basis for the assessment is a specially constructed benchmark of the ideal, fully effective planning service. The benchmark focuses on four key organisational themes: leadership and governance, customer focus and community engagement, achieving outcomes effectively and sustainably and people, performance and resource management. The planning service produced a Self Assessment using the benchmark, in advance of the review; this provided key areas for the team to focus their research.
- 3 The peer review is not an inspection, rather it offers a supportive approach, undertaken by friends, albeit 'critical friends', and its intention is to help the planning service identify its current strengths, as well as what it needs to improve
- 4 Peer review is part of an ongoing change process, whereby the resultant recommendations from it should, along with CPA recommendations, inform improvement planning
- 5 The members of the peer review team were
 - Pat Reid, Head of Planning, Stratford-on-Avon District Council
 - Nick Burden, Head of Regulatory Services, Wansbeck District Council
 - Councillor Martin Curtis, Fenland District Council
 - Paul Clarke, IDeA Review Manager
- 6 The programme for the visit was organised and agreed in advance. The on-site work included a variety of activities designed to enable members of the team to meet and talk to a spectrum of internal and external stakeholders. Examples of activities the team undertook are:
 - desk review of materials prepared by Harrogate planning service prior to the on-site work
 - received a presentation by the Planning Service senior management team
 - discussions with the political and managerial leadership of the council
 - discussions with Committee Chairs and Executive members
 - discussions with the senior management of the planning service
 - discussions with a range of internal stakeholders
 - telephone discussions with a range of key stakeholders
 - workshops for frontline staff, planning service managers, service users and representatives of some residents/community groups
- 7 The team was very appreciative of the genuine welcome and hospitality provided by the service. We would like to thank everybody that we met during the process for their time and contributions. The way in which the needs of the team were taken care of in the build up to the review and whilst on site, deserve a special mention.

- 8 The feedback presentation on the last day of the review reported our key findings. This report gives a more detailed written account of the findings of the review and is structured around the four main organisational themes within the benchmark used for this peer review.
- 9 PAS promotes and supports a culture of change, learning and improvement within local planning authorities to achieve fairer, better quality and faster planning services. PAS plays a major role in supporting local planning authorities across England to meet the challenges of The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 and the Sustainable Communities agenda. Peer review is a new programme being developed by PAS. The peer review programme aims to help individual planning services understand how well they are performing and support them in achieving real improvement.
- 10 The benchmark described in this document is a new benchmark of an ideal planning service as developed by PAS and IDeA. It will form the basis of Peer Reviews until further notice. The benchmark reflects changes in both the Corporate Performance Assessment (CPA) for 2005 and Service Inspection frameworks, as well as the legislative changes in the planning service.
- 11 The benchmark takes into account the new statutory base for the delivery of the planning system, including the provisions for the preparation of Local Development Frameworks (LDF) and the inter-relationship with the preparation of Council's Community Strategies, Local Transport Plans, Regional Spatial Strategies and Regional Housing and Economic Development Strategies. It is expected that the benchmark will evolve as it is used.
- 12 Each of these four themes is further divided into a number of elements - see table below:

Themes	1. Leadership and Corporate Governance	2. Customer focus & community engagement	3. Achieving outcomes effectively & sustainably	4. People, performance and resource management
Elements	1.1 Vision and direction 1.2 Integration of policy and delivery 1.3 Decision making and scrutiny	2.1 Transparency of process for users 2.2 Accessibility 2.3 Responsiveness to users	3.1 Efficient and effective processes 3.2 Partnership working 3.3 Sustainable stewardship	4.1 Capacity & use of resources 4.2 Performance management 4.3 Learning and supportive culture

Context

- 13 Harrogate is a large and geographically diverse borough, and covers 505 square miles with a population of 155,349, of which 2% are from black and ethnic minority communities. The borough has three main urban settlements – the Victorian spa town of Harrogate (population 72,989), the medieval market town of Knaresborough (population 14,761) and the cathedral city of Ripon (population 15,922).
- 14 In the west of the borough nearly half of the area comprises the relatively sparsely populated Nidderdale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) with its upland farming, moorland and internationally important wildlife. Whilst to the east there is low lying flat arable farmland and many villages.
- 15 The borough lies between the cities of Leeds and Bradford to the south, and the district of Richmondshire in the north; the city of York, and District's of Hambleton and Selby in the east, and the Yorkshire Dales National Park in the west. The District is part of the County of North Yorkshire and local government service delivery is spilt between the Borough Council and North Yorkshire County Council.
- 16 Unemployment within the borough is relatively low compared to the national average, and the borough forms an important part of the Leeds City Region economy. Conference and exhibition tourism has been a prominent feature of the town of Harrogate since the end of World War II, and business attracts over 350,000 visitors per year, supporting about 5,000 jobs throughout the borough. Holiday tourism is also an important component of the boroughs' economy as is information technology and the food industry. There is a buoyant housing market based on very high land values, and as a result many local people find it impossible to afford to buy or rent homes on the open market. As such affordable housing is a key priority for the Council.
- 17 The borough has relatively good transport links, including a road infrastructure consisting of the A61 linking Ripon in the north and Harrogate with Leeds in the south, and the A59 to Skipton in the west and York in the east. The A1(M) runs north-south through the borough and provides good road links with the national motorway network. The Leeds/Harrogate/York rail line provides rail services within the borough at Harrogate and Knaresborough, whilst Leeds Bradford International Airport provides access to air travel. The 'flagship' 36 bus service between Ripon, Harrogate and Leeds has been running with a new bus fleet and increased frequency for several years now.
- 18 The council has a current Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) rating of "fair" (2004), and aims to be an "excellent" Council by 2010. It has a ten year vision "to make Harrogate a better place to live, work and visit by preserving its heritage, enhancing its unique environment, delivering first class public services and encouraging everyone to share in its success". Seven priorities have been identified to deliver the vision:
 - Affordable Housing - ensuring people have access to housing opportunities throughout the District.
 - Traffic and Transport - ensuring the provision of a transport network that will provide access to public transport in all areas and provide integrated facilities including car parks.
 - Keeping the District Safe – ensuring communities across the District are safe and secure and that they feel safer.

- Caring for the Environment - ensuring the enhancement and protection of the natural and built environment District-wide.
 - Supporting our Local Economy - ensuring a robust and varied economy that benefits local people and creates employment opportunities in rural areas and the market towns across the District.
 - First Class Public Services – ensuring that the services delivered throughout the District meet the needs of customers, are accessible and of a high quality
 - Organisational Improvement – a commitment to invest in improving the organisation by being a good employer and building its organisational capacity to deliver first-class services and increase its service performance.
- 19 The council has a net revenue budget of £23.1million for 2007/08. It employs approximately 1,500 staff across four departments – Resources, Community Services, Corporate Policy and Improvement and Development Services (which includes Planning Services).
- 20 The council has a Leader and cabinet system of governance. The Cabinet consists of the Leader and six executive portfolio holders, including a portfolio holder for planning and transport. At the time of the review the political composition of the council was 27 Conservative, 22 Lib Dem and 5 Independent councillors. In terms of councillor involvement in planning matters, there is a:
- Planning Committee (16 members) - Meets fortnightly. Determines all types of planning applications and approves site specific Supplementary Planning Documents.
 - District Development Committee (32 members) – acts as a consultee for development plan policy and proposals for consultation and adoption. It also approves the Council's response to consultations on the Regional Spatial Strategy and development plan policy prepared by other authorities.
 - District Development Sub-Committee (16 members) - determines applications which have been referred to it by the Planning Committee or the Solicitor to the Council, or if the application is considered to be of District-wide importance. It also acts as a consultation and advisory body on the formulation of Local Development Documents and is a Steering Committee for Member training on planning matters.
- 21 The structure above replaced three Area Development Control Committees in November 2005. In terms of the planning service itself, it has achieved significant improvements in performance. Prior to 2007/08 the Council has been a planning standards authority for four years in succession. But recent improvements in performance have been sufficient to end formal engagement by the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG).
- 22 The service currently deals with approximately 3,000 applications per year dealt with by 20 case officers. The Local Development Framework (LDF) is progressing well. The Core Strategy was due to be submitted in April 2007, but has been deferred pending the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) housing allocations, and the Council is now looking to submit in September 2007.

1. Leadership and corporate engagement

1.1 Vision and direction

Strengths

- There is recognition from managerial and political leadership of how planning contributes to the council's aims and objectives
- The service seeks to influence higher-level sub-regional and regional strategies
- The LDF is identified as a priority in the corporate plan, and the involvement of key partners and agencies has been sought in its development

Areas for improvement

- The mission statement and future vision for the service is not clear
- The focus to date has been on performance. Whilst performance still needs to be a priority further focus is required on quality, customer service and place shaping

- 23 There is a clear understanding of the importance of planning in Harrogate by the managerial and political leadership, and an appreciation of its "critical" role in delivering council priorities, including affordable housing and caring for the environment. The strategic importance of the Local Development Framework (LDF) is acknowledged and is identified as key to delivering four of the Council's twelve strategic actions within its corporate plan.
- 24 There are councillors and officers who "champion" planning issues at the full council, cabinet and corporate management levels. For example, the portfolio holder for Planning and Transport has recently delivered a presentation to full council emphasising the importance of the LDF, reporting improvements in service performance and raising awareness of key future planning issues and challenges such as meeting demanding new housing targets. The service also receives strong personal support from the Chief Executive, Director of Development Services and the Council Leader.
- 25 The council shapes and influences regional and sub regional strategies. For example, the Chief Planner (Forward Planning) is a member of a 'Technical Advisory Group' established by the Regional Assembly to assist in the preparation, monitoring and review of the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS). Through this process it has been possible to ensure the needs and aspirations of Harrogate inform the emerging RSS. The council also seeks to influence other important sub-regional and regional policy via its involvement in the Leeds City Region Development Programme, and through councillor representation on the Regional Planning Forum and Regional Assembly.
- 26 The council was designated a planning standards authority for four years in succession (2003/04 – 2006/07), so understandably the focus of the planning service has been on improving service performance as measured by the planning Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPs). Now that performance has improved significantly and the council is no longer a designated standards authority, there is a need to agree and more clearly communicate the future vision and role of the planning service at Harrogate. A service plan for 2007/08 is yet to be developed setting out a mission statement for the planning service. The service aims and

ambitions for improving customer responsiveness and how it will contribute to the council's place shaping ambitions are therefore not clear.

- 27 There is a planning improvement plan in place that lists three key service objectives, but the plan is predominantly made up of a series of specific improvement actions and tasks without a clear link to corporate priorities or community strategy shared ambitions. The council might consider amalgamating the improvement plan and service plan (once developed) into one overall plan that includes a clear vision for the service with priorities and objectives that directly correspond with the delivery requirements of the councils' Strategic Plan.
- 28 There are positive examples of where the identified needs of the planning service are reflected in the council's financial plans, e.g. Planning Delivery Grant (PDG) monies are retained for planning. But clarifying the role and expectations of the planning service will help ensure that the service plan is effectively resourced and deliverable, i.e. agreeing corporately the focus of a planning service the council wants and needs, and ensuring that the council's financial strategy recognises the importance of planning and its resource requirements – particularly in light of the current reliance on PDG funding for both staffing and service improvements.

1.2 Integration of policy and delivery

Strengths

- The planning service contributes to the development and review of key policy and strategy via various corporate working groups
- Action has been taken to improve linkage between development control and planning policy
- There are examples of the planning service working effectively with other services, e.g. helping to deliver high levels of affordable housing in conjunction with the housing service

Areas for improvement

- Consider how to further develop the collaboration between planners and the Local Strategic Partnership to ensure that the Community Strategy becomes a "sustainable community strategy"
- There is limited evidence of a "golden thread" between the community strategy, corporate plan, and service plans.

- 29 The planning service contributes to the development and review of the councils' key policies and strategies via various corporate working groups. For example, the Planning Strategy Group (PSG) is led by the planning service and is made up of senior officers from across the council including economic development, leisure and housing. The Group was established to ensure the council's corporate interests are appropriately reflected in the RSS and LDF. It also looks to ensure correlation between the Regional Spatial Strategy, the Local Development Framework, and other strategies with which the Council is involved such as Housing and Economic Development.
- 30 Planning also has representation on other important working groups such as the Transport Working Group ensuring that it is positioned as a critical player in the development and review of council plans and strategies. A good example of planning working effectively with other parts of the council to achieve policy

outcomes is the high levels of affordable housing achieved. The service also actively engages with other authorities and agencies in the sub-region. For example the Golden Triangle Partnership to address the delivery of affordable housing, the Leeds City Region Authorities Group to improve connectivity to the borough, and Strategic Flood Risk Assessment with Craven and Richmondshire.

- 31 The planning service at Harrogate is “traditionally structured” with a split between Development Control and Forward Planning sections (plus Building Control). There is evidence of good liaison and joint working between the two sections, and examples of initiatives and actions to develop the working relationship and arrangements further. For example, a weekly “training” session is held to encourage knowledge sharing and input from all teams into key issues, such as which policies to save as part of the LDF.
- 32 Other initiatives to encourage cross team working include the weekly major applications meeting which adopts a development team type approach that often involves officers from Development Control, Heritage and Planning Policy (and other parts of the council when required), and the Development Documents Working Group which helps facilitate development control input to planning policy and strategy.
- 33 An effective working relationship between development control and policy staff exists. This will need to continue to ensure that policy continues to be interpreted and applied consistently. This is important given that some stakeholders perceive there to be inconsistent decision-making and that the Area of Outstanding National Beauty (AONB) is on occasions used too readily as a reason for rejecting development proposals (see paragraph 75).
- 34 Planning issues feature in the Community Strategy developed by the council and its partners via the Local Strategic Partnership (Harrogate District Strategic Partnership (HDSP)). To help ensure further linkage between planning and the Community Strategy, its vision has been adopted as the vision for the emerging Core Strategy, whilst the involvement of partners has been sought during the process of developing the LDF. The Chief Planner (Forward Planning) is a member of the LSP Officer Group. The council should consider how to further develop the collaboration between planners and the HDSP to ensure that the Community Strategy becomes a sustainable community strategy that fully aligns the spatial planning objectives of the LDF with shared local priorities.

1.3 Decision-making and scrutiny

Strengths

- There are mechanisms in place to enable councillor involvement in planning policy development
- Councillor/officer relationships are generally viewed as positive and constructive
- Training for councillors involved in planning is compulsory

Areas for improvement

- There appears to be limited engagement of scrutiny in planning policy development and review
- Councillor training appears to be light-touch and could be developed further

- 35 In terms of councillors' roles in the planning process the council appears to have the necessary protocols and procedures in place. This includes a comprehensive code of practice which covers different aspects including pre-application discussions, councillor site visits and dealing with representations. The code may need to be reviewed in light of a new national code of practice due shortly.
- 36 The council has mechanisms in place to enable councillors to be involved in the development and review of planning policy. For example, the District Development Committee acts as a consultee for development plan policy and proposals for consultation and adoption. It also approves the councils' response to consultations on the RSS and development plan policy prepared by other authorities. The Development Sub-Committee acts as a consultee and advisory body on the formulation of LDF documents.
- 37 Councillors and officers are generally positive about their respective roles and relationships appear to be based on mutual trust and respect. Relationships between planning service management and key councillors involved in planning are generally good, with councillors valuing the advice provided by planning officers. The councils' scheme of delegation enables a high number of planning application decisions to be taken by officers – currently approximately 90%. This has enabled the service to achieve much improved application processing times. However, there is clearly scope to review the efficiency of the current scheme so that it places less of a burden on councillor and officer time (see also paragraph 68) and becomes less complicated and cumbersome.
- 38 Linked to this is the demand of a fortnightly planning committee meeting on councillors' time. Whilst the move away from three Area Development Control Committees to a single district wide Planning Committee in November 2005 has clearly improved consistency and speed of decision-making, there is a risk that fortnightly meetings – held in the daytime – put an unsustainable demand on councillors, and staff. There is also a need to consider whether this makes meetings more or less accessible to service users such as applicants and objectors who may wish to attend meetings. The council should be mindful of this potential risk as it continues to regularly reviews the performance of the current committee and assesses the impact of the changes made to the committee structure.
- 39 The Planning Committee appears to be conducted in an environment with “no politics”, and decision-making is clearly informed by policy. It is aided by reports described as good quality and “comprehensive”, and a Powerpoint display of

application plans and colour photographs. Where the committee wishes to make a decision contrary to an objective policy of the Local Plan, or where officers advise the decision is unreasonable and risks an award of costs, the matter is referred to the Development Sub-Committee. This mechanism has been introduced to ensure probity. But it is perceived by some stakeholders – including some parish councils – as being unnecessary and in some instances “undermining” the Planning Committee.

- 40 Training is compulsory for councillors involved in the planning process, i.e. members of the Planning Committee and Development Sub-Committee. This is good practice. However, the training appears to be a fairly light touch approach and the council should consider how to further develop training and development for councillors with a planning role. For example, it might look to develop training and development activities based on a role description or the PAS elected member skills framework, and broaden the scope to include wider planning considerations and developments.
- 41 The council should also consider providing some form of structured and regular training or information to help further build understanding in parish councils and other local groups to enable them to play a full and productive part in the planning process whilst understanding the remit within which the council itself has to operate. This will help them to become more effective as consultees and generally raising planning issues, and improve their engagement in, and understanding of, key planning policy and the planning process. Some authorities, for example, have invited parish councils to training modules with their councillors to help better inform them.
- 42 There has been limited involvement of overview and scrutiny to date in planning, in terms of policy review and development and performance. Whilst this is not an issue in itself there appears to be a lack of clarity about whether scrutiny is able to consider planning policy. Overview and scrutiny councillors will shortly be involved in planning via the best value review of planning they are overseeing. But the council should consider whether there are other opportunities for scrutiny to add value to policy proposals, or provide challenge to the service. For example, how it is managing key future risks identified and assisting in the achievement of the councils priorities.

2. Customer focus and community engagement

2.1 Transparency of process for users

Strengths

- The basis of decision-making is clear, policy focussed and assisted by good visual aids at committee
- Information and guidance on the planning process is available online and highly valued by a range of users
- The service has a customer charter in place – “Our Service to You”

Areas for improvement

- The decision-making process is not clearly communicated to all users, in particular the process that determines what goes to committee, and what doesn't
- It is important to ensure that the process and proceedings at committee meetings is explained to those in attendance

- 43 The council has sought to ensure transparency in some of its planning processes. For example, the public are allowed to speak at Planning Committee, and site visits are undertaken prior to committee meetings. There is guidance available setting out how the community can be involved in the development of planning policy via a Statement of Community Involvement (SCI), which has met the test of soundness (judged to be sound by independent planning inspectors). There are other examples of how the Council has sought to improve transparency in its planning service and processes, including making information and guidance available to users via the Council website (see paragraphs 46, 53 and 69).
- 44 The Planning Committee provides an environment where the basis of decision-making is clear, policy focussed and assisted by good visual aids. The committee meeting could be improved further by ensuring that the process and proceedings are clearly explained at the start of the meeting for the benefit of those attending who are not regular attendees.
- 45 Less clear to service users is the process for determining what goes to committee for decision and the matters that are delegated to officers. The council should consider developing a simple summary of the (revised) scheme of delegation, and making it accessible. For example, including it in the wide and comprehensive range of information and guidance about the planning process available online via the councils' website.
- 46 Information on the website includes service performance reports, online planning application information, the LDF including Statement for Community Involvement (SCI), Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs), Planning Committee dates, minutes and agendas, frequently asked questions and much more. The standard and range of information is excellent, and the council has clearly decided that this is an effective channel through which to increase awareness and transparency of the service and has invested resources to continue the development of e-planning capabilities. In doing this it will be important that the council ensures that the information provided on the website passes the “plain English” test.
- 47 Similarly, whilst the information provided on the website, and the ability to interact with the planning service via it, is highly valued by a range of service users -

including some parish councils, agents and community groups - the council may need to consider developing its' offline channels of information to meet the needs of its' various service users.

- 48 A customer charter - "Planning our service for you" - exists that includes standards relating to opening hours and response times. However, the Charter applies only to development control and was introduced in 2002. The council should consider reviewing and updating the Charter so that it encompasses all facets of the planning service, along with more generic standards such as speed of response to telephone enquiries, particularly as this was an area where many services users felt there was scope for improvement (see paragraph 54). It will be important for the standards to be widely communicated to all planning service users, be embedded into planning service delivery, and performance monitored against the standards.
- 49 The council should provide more detail and clarity about the level of pre-application advice and guidance that will be provided. Many service users had different levels of understanding and expectations regarding the level of service they could expect, and there was a perception that this was often dependent on capacity of the individual case officer rather than a service standard (see also paragraph 59). The council has recognised this as a key area for improvement.

2.2 Accessibility

Strengths

- The SCI sets out the different means of engaging the community and identifies groups that are hard to reach
- The Planning Enquiries Team and the duty officer and technician system help increase accessibility to the service
- The website has achieved the "Bobby" standard and made good progress against PARSOL

Areas for improvement

- There is little evidence of diversity issues being integrated into service delivery or strategies
- Some customers perceive the service to be inaccessible at times

- 50 A comprehensive Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) identifies the different service users and sections of the community that the planning service needs to engage with during the planning process. It sets out the different means of engaging the community and identifies hard to reach groups. There are examples of where engagement has been tailored to the needs of a particular audience. For instance, work on the LDF Core Strategy has included formal meetings with developers and agents, informal workshops for member of the public, a newsletter sent to all households and businesses and a specially designed questionnaire sent to all schools and colleges.
- 51 Generally there is little evidence of diversity issues being integrated into the design of services or development of planning strategies. There are, though, arrangements are in place to provide the SCI and other LDF documents in large print, on audio cassette, Braille or other languages. The council also has a

corporate Diversity Strategy that aims to mainstream diversity issues into service delivery.

- 52 Service delivery has been designed partly with increasing accessibility in mind. For example, a Planning Enquiries Unit and duty officer and technician system have been put in place. The Enquiries Team is a dedicated response team accessible face-to-face, by phone or by email during office hours Monday-Friday. It handles an average of 640 visitors and 1,254 telephone enquiries per month and provides a comprehensive front-of-house service that is described as “helpful and professional”. A duty officer system has been introduced whereby a planning technician joins the Enquiries Team on a rota basis and a planning officer is “on call” ensuring that accessibility to professional planning advice is available on demand at the reception area. The council should consider whether there are other opportunities for planning officers to get involved front of house to improve accessibility and customer responsiveness further.
- 53 The website has also been used effectively to improve accessibility. For example, the Bobby Worldwide Web Accessibility Standard has been applied to the website. This is essentially guidance on how to improve the accessibility and usability of a website. In essence it tests out the number of “clicks” a user would have to apply to reach the various parts of the site and access information from the homepage. The website was considered to have improved significantly over the past two years by many stakeholders, including agents, and is felt to have improved the accessibility of the service. The council scores 21 out of 21 on the Pendleton criteria for e-Government (criteria measuring how much of a Local Planning Authority’s planning service is available online and how easy it is to use) and has been assessed as making good progress against the PARSOL (Planning And Regulatory Services Online) standards.
- 54 Some customers, however – including agents and parish councils – find the service to be inaccessible at times. In particular, telephone calls are reportedly not returned, and feedback and responses not always provided within timescales promised. As mentioned above (paragraph 48) the council should consider expanding its current customer service charter to cover responsiveness to enquiries which are made through the various communication channels (e.g. telephone, email, and letter).

2.3 Responsiveness to users

Strengths

- There are some examples of customer feedback being used to shape improvement and change
- Customer satisfaction with the planning service is increasing

Areas for improvement

- The value added by pre-application engagement is not being fully realised and is seen by some officers as a barrier to meeting performance targets.
- The current approach to pre-application advice is inconsistent and does not meet user expectations
- The service to parish councils needs developing further to ensure better responsiveness
- The resourcing of the enforcement service needs reviewing to meet customer expectations/requirements
- The council should consider introducing more forums and mechanisms for listening to service users

- 55 There is a genuine desire to make the planning service at Harrogate more customer-focused. Initiatives have been considered to make services more responsive to identified needs and ensure a two-way dialogue. For example, neighbour notifications are about to be introduced. The Planning Improvement Plan proposes that a Planning Agents forum be established in September 2007, and the council is considering extending this to a service users' panel. In doing so it will be important that feedback is provided to those who participate in terms of how the council is responding to their views and using them to shape and inform service design and delivery, i.e. "closing the loop". There is a need to ensure that consultation and engagement is systematically and explicitly used to inform service design, delivery and improvement.
- 56 The council has a citizen's panel which is used on an annual basis to gain customer feedback on council services. It also has a corporate complaints system which sets clear procedures and timescales for the investigation and reporting back on complaints. There are examples of feedback, including complaints, informing and shaping policy and practice. For example, improvements have been made to officer reporting on delegated applications.
- 57 There has been positive feedback on the planning service from applicants and parish councils who generally value the quality of their personal interactions with planning staff and welcome the opportunity to speak at Planning Committee meetings. The quality of consultation and communication with parishes is generally considered to be good and responsive. For example, the council will send out a hard copy of the application and plans they are consulting on, which is valued by many of the parish councils.
- 58 But more could be done to build on the positive relationships with parishes and increase the responsiveness of the service to their needs. As mentioned previously (see paragraph 41) the council should consider some form of structured and regular training or information to help build understanding in parish councils and

other local groups. It should look to build on the annual meetings it has with parish councils, perhaps by having a meeting or forum that focuses specifically on planning issues.

- 59 There was also feedback from customers suggesting inconsistencies in officer comments and views on planning applications and a need to improve timescales for feedback and advice, especially during the application process. The biggest issue with regard to a perception of inconsistent responsiveness is the provision of pre-application advice. As mentioned (paragraph 49), some service users have mixed perceptions as to what level of service could be provided at the pre-application stage.
- 60 The current approach appears to be inconsistent and ad hoc, largely impacted on by the individual case officers' workload at the time, and does not meet customer expectations. Some officers appear to view the provision of pre-application advice as a barrier to achieving the performance targets for speed of processing applications, rather than an opportunity to save time, costs and frustration, and optimise the potential of a site and deliver better quality development outcomes.
- 61 Given that the service has a best practice caseload/officer ratio, which has significantly improved its' performance and there is a dedicated team to handle initial enquiries, there is an apparent opportunity to embed pre-application discussions as a comprehensive, regular and inclusive part of its approach to determining planning applications. In considering this the council should ensure there is clear guidance on the involvement of statutory consultees, and how the views of councillors and the local community are introduced at an early stage.
- 62 There are also mixed perceptions about the responsiveness of the enforcement service. Some stakeholders described the service as "pretty good" and responsive ("they came out quite quickly"). However, others view the service as unresponsive and under resourced to perform an effective function in an area such as Harrogate which covers over 500 square miles and where the protection of the environment and public interest is of up most importance to many of its residents.
- 63 It is important that the councils' rationale and approach to enforcement is clearly communicated to all service users, particularly residents and complainants. The current enforcement policy is old (although not necessarily out of date), and the refresh and review of this policy scheduled for 2007/08 should present an opportunity for both wider engagement and awareness-raising, and consideration of its level of resourcing. It may also result in the council adopting a more risk-based approach to its' planning enforcement.
- 64 Despite the mixed perceptions, overall customer satisfaction with the planning service is increasing. The recent Best Value (BVPI 111) Customer Satisfaction Survey shows an increase during the last three years in the percentage of people satisfied with the service – rising from 52% in 2003/04 to 63% in 2006/07.

3. Achieving outcomes effectively and sustainably

3.1 Efficient and effective processes

Strengths

- The levels of officer delegation and a revised committee structure have enabled quicker decision-making
- “E-planning” is used to improve efficiency and effectiveness of processes
- The planning service has embraced the use of ICT and there is a clear electronic service delivery strategy

Areas for improvement

- The scheme of delegation is effective but not efficient
- There is a need to ensure that the outcomes and added value of changes and improvement activities are clearly understood
- There is no systematic review of development outcomes regarding quality and impact
- There is a need to further clarify the relationships between front and back office functions to maximise benefits to the service user

65 The council has significantly improved its performance in processing planning applications - BVPI 109a, 109b and 109c (speed of determining applications for developments) - to the extent that the Council is no longer classified as a planning standards authority. This is a notable achievement, and one that should be celebrated by the Council.

66 The improvement in performance has been helped by:

- a move from three Area Development Committees to a single district-wide Planning Committee
- a high percentage of decision-making delegated to officers (90%)
- positive resourcing of the Development Control service (using the PAS benchmark of 150 cases per officer)
- effective use of information technology
- introducing a development team approach for major applications

67 The move from three area based committees to a single committee was not universally supported at the time of the decision, and there is still some dissatisfaction and lack of understanding by some customers (including parish councils) of why the restructure occurred. It has, though, undeniably helped improve the speed and efficiency of decision-making, and there appears to be increasing support for the current structures.

68 Whilst the current scheme of delegation enables a relatively high percentage of delegated applications, it is complicated and demands a disproportionate amount of officer and councillor time – particularly via a lengthy weekly review meeting

including the Chair of Planning Committee, Head of Planning, Chief Planner (Development Control) and a range of case officers. The council did consider amending the scheme shortly after the introduction of a single Planning Committee, but it should now look to review the scheme to make it more efficient and less cumbersome. In doing this the council should consider whether there may be scope to increase the amount of delegation further.

- 69 "E-planning" has undoubtedly helped to improve service performance. The council is making significant progress against the PARSOL better planning services, and has embraced the use of information technology to improve processes and practice. For example, agenda compilation is now done through Uniform, and there is a range of Development Control Practice Notes and other internal guidance available via a shared folder ("Plan Info") – enabling planning officers to have easy access to relevant guidance. E-consultation is also used to undertake consultation with partners and some statutory consultees.
- 70 There are a range of other actions and initiatives planned as part of the Planning IT Project Plan. It is important that developments remain on track, such as the "idocs" system (see paragraph 94). Whilst process improvements are identified, the improvements in terms of better outcomes and improved quality of service are not always clear. Similarly the actions listed in the improvement plan could benefit from having a stated outcome as well as an output (deliverable).
- 71 A development team approach is now used to deal with major planning applications. It has been welcomed by agents, helped the council to improve its performance against BVPI 109a (determination of major planning applications within 13 weeks), and ensures expert advice is available such as transport and highways in addition to a range of internal specialist officers such as landscape, ecology and conservation. It also facilitates non-planning input, for example housing input to the consideration of an application for a care home to help address the affordable housing implications.
- 72 However, it is not clear how development outcomes are monitored in terms of their quality and impact on the ground. The annual review of development schemes has not been undertaken since 2001, and similarly the Design Awards Scheme was suspended in 2003/04. The council should consider whether there would be added value in re-introducing these, or similar, measures to help promote and ensure quality developments.
- 73 The Planning Enquiries facility clearly adds value to the service, and helps to maximise the utilisation of professional officer time, but there is scope to further clarify and build the relationships between "front of house" staff and planning officers. The council should consider providing opportunities for teams to come together to explore how the working relationship can be developed further to benefit the service user. For example, the weekly training hour could be used to develop revised customer standards with input from both teams, while the duty planning officer could be positioned in the Enquiries Team, as happens with the planning technician rota system.

3.2 Delivering through partnership working

Strengths

- There is a recognition of the importance of the AONB and parish councils in the planning process
- There are examples of working with public and private sector partners on developments
- There are good cross departmental working arrangements and relationships

Areas for improvement

- There are some perceptions that the AONB is sometimes used to restrict development unreasonably
- Inter-departmental working is very dependent on personal relationships
- There is scope to develop relationship with parish councils further

- 74 There are examples of where the planning service works in partnership to achieve common goals and aspirations. For example, the council is the lead authority for the Nidderdale AONB, with joint working at both councillor level via the Joint Advisory Committee and officer level, and a relationship with the AONB which is considered to be “extremely good”. The AONB management plan and annual reports set out details of the joint aims and arrangements for partnership working. The AONB is a regular consultee on planning applications within its area, and the council recognises the value and importance of its input to the planning process. There may be an opportunity to broaden the scope of applications that the AONB is currently consulted on.
- 75 As pressure for developments in the AONB continues to grow, there is also scope to build on the excellent relationships with the AONB to develop a SPD on sustainable development and renewable energy, to take a more proactive approach. This is particularly important given the perception of some stakeholders that the very existence of the AONB is sometimes used to restrict development (see also paragraph 33).
- 76 There are examples of partnership working with other agencies, including partner organisations and the private sector. For example, the preparation of a development brief for Harrogate Bus and Railway station has involved the working with the County Council and Network Rail, as well as a private landowner. Examples of where the council is represented on important regional and sub-regional partnerships and groups have already been mentioned (see paragraphs 25 and 30).
- 77 The council also recognises the importance of parish councils and community groups in the planning process and has proactively sought to engage them throughout the LDF development. Parish councils have generally welcomed this opportunity. The preparation of SPDs has involved close partnership working, for example preparation of Village Design Statements, the Landscape Character Assessment and the Biodiversity Action Plan involved high levels of consultation with local community groups.
- 78 In terms of building internal “partnerships” within the council, the planning service has recognised the importance of developing effective relationships with other

service areas, such as housing, legal services and environmental health, and working arrangements are well established. A service level agreement exists with Legal Services but other services appear to operate effectively without this, and rely on good inter-departmental relationships between individual officers. The council may wish to consider how it can protect the level of service in the long term, perhaps by introducing further service level agreements.

- 79 There is scope to further develop a partnership approach with service users to ensure service improvement. The proposed agents' meetings (paragraph 55) are a good step towards this but need to be seen to deliver tangible results in terms of developing a more responsive service. A more pro-active relationship with, for example, parish councils could be similarly developed to ensure the services are responsive to local needs and based on mutual understanding (see paragraphs 41 and 58).

3.3 Sustainable stewardship

Strengths

- There are examples of achieving housing development of a good quality in line with current guidance and in particular with regard to affordable housing
- There is a clear policy and approach to Section 106 agreements that secure and maximise community benefits
- The council has in-house specialism that adds value to the planning service
- SPDs are being developed in some areas, e.g. equine development

Areas for improvement

- Consider the need for further SPDs on sustainable development and renewable energy
- There is no formal review of design quality or design award scheme
- It is unclear how the risk of a high future housing allocation will be managed

- 80 Specialist officers qualified and experienced in architecture/urban design, landscape, ecology, heritage, conservation, and building control act as "consultants" to internal staff by leading or contributing to the development of policy or guidance. They also work with development control officers on planning applications, including advising on development in conservation areas and affecting listed buildings. The specialist officers often hold internal surgeries; receive direct consultation from development control and share knowledge and learning at the weekly training hour sessions for planning staff.

- 81 The council has a clear policy and corporate approach to securing community benefits via planning obligations. For example, Section 106 policies are explained in SPDs relating to open space/village halls, primary education and affordable housing. There are examples of achieving housing development of a good quality in line with current national guidance and in particular with regard to achieving high levels of affordable housing, and also ensuring open space and social facilities were provided following negotiation. For example, the development at St George's Road in Harrogate.

- 82 However, affordable housing levels do not currently meet local need, and this remains a priority for the council and is a major objective for the LDF Core Strategy. The RSS is likely to impose demanding targets regarding new housing allocations for the borough, expected to be in the region of 400-800 houses per year for the next 15 years. Whilst this challenge has been acknowledged, it is not clear how the risk of not being able to demonstrate how the housing land supply required will be managed.
- 83 The Local Development Scheme (LDS) sets out how the council intends to deliver “sustainable spatial outcomes”, while a range of other SPDs exist, seeking to achieve high quality outcomes, for example, guidelines for equestrian development in the Nidderdale AONB and design guide for house extensions and garages.
- 84 There is scope to develop further SPDs, for example on renewable energy. The council has recognised this and there are plans to include policies to promote sustainable construction and energy efficiency in the Core Strategy. This is important given uncertainties and mixed stakeholder perceptions of the Councils’ policies on sustainable development and renewable energy (paragraph 75).
- 85 Through a mixture of policy, design guidance and effective development management the local distinctiveness throughout the borough is generally protected and reinforced. For example, design briefs have helped retain, and in some cases re-introduce, the character of the town centre in terms of, for instance, canopies and shop facades. The design of the Victoria shopping centre opposite the train station in Harrogate town centre was determined through a design competition. However, there is currently no formal review or design awards scheme to measure design quality and impact.

4. People, performance and resource management

4.1 Capacity and use of resource

Strengths

- There has been an increase in resources to meet priorities
- There are good levels of PDG secured which are used exclusively for planning
- There are good levels of support for professional staff, e.g. technical support and planning enquiries team

Areas for improvement

- Key risks (e.g. PDG exit) have been identified, but it is unclear how they will be managed
- There is a need to make progress on Electronic Document Management System
- There is a need to base future resourcing on the identified vision and aims for the service

- 86 The planning service at Harrogate is well-resourced. This reflects the commitment to the service from both managerial and political leadership, based on their understanding of how planning can contribute to the delivery of the council's overall aims and objectives, and a recognition that planning is a vital and important service for the borough.
- 87 For example, the high levels of Planning Delivery Grant (PDG) received (over £1.3 million to date) have been used solely for the planning service, and helped to fund improvements and meet additional staffing costs. Planning officers are well supported via a Planning Enquiries Team and technical support staff, and planning officers are supported by a range of internal specialists including architecture, conservation, landscape and ecology. Staffing levels in Development Control are now based on a maximum caseload of 150 cases per officer in line with the PAS benchmark.
- 88 This has been driven by an acknowledged need to raise performance against planning performance indicators, particularly those relating to speed of determining planning applications. Now that the council is no longer designated a planning standards authority it needs to consider where the focus now needs to shift to. For example, there is a need to clarify the drivers for resourcing other parts of the service such as enforcement which are currently less clear and need reviewing as the Council considers the further development and future role, aims and objectives of the planning service.
- 89 Resourcing of the service needs to be reviewed in light of the spatial vision for the borough as set out in the LDF, and whether the current configuration and resourcing of the service enables that vision and aims to be achieved. The recent focus has understandably been on performance against the BVPIs, but there is now a need to consider how the service is going to balance that improved efficiency with increased quality, sustainability and customer responsiveness. In essence, the council needs to decide what "kind" of planning service is needed. This should be

articulated in the service plan for 2007/08, which should be developed with the involvement of planning staff and informed by consultation and engagement with service users.

- 90 There is an urgent need to consider the future financial sustainability of the service. The current service budget assumes a substantial PDG income (£300,000) and future service budgets depend on substantial planning fee increases. This appears to be a high risk strategy, and the council should consider the future financial plans for the service as soon as possible, particularly in terms of funding post PDG. The risk has been identified, but it is not clear how it is being managed.
- 91 Future financial planning also impacts on the ability of the service to improve further given that much of the expenditure allocated in the service improvement plan is a combination of efficiency savings (business unit reserves) and PDG funding, without which much of the planned improvement activity would not occur.
- 92 Recruitment and retention is assisted by career grade schemes. Planning administrators are supported to undertake an NVQ. With regard to officer training and development, staff appraisals are carried out annually in line with the corporate requirements, but training needs are not always addressed in a structured and systematic way. There is no service training plan and the training budget is regarded by officers as being insufficient. This should be addressed by developing a comprehensive training and development plan/strategy for planning, covering both officer and councillor development, and linked to the delivery of the service plan.
- 93 Furthermore, there is a need for clarity on whose responsibility personal development is. For example, officers who are members of the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) are required under the code of professional conduct to comply with continuing professional development regulations, including preparing a professional development plan.
- 94 Staff morale generally appears to be good, and there is a genuine enthusiasm and desire from officers to further develop and improve the planning service at Harrogate. However, overcrowded office conditions were cited by some staff as having a negative effect on morale. The council should continue to consider flexible working arrangements, supported by relevant ICT solutions. For example, the introduction of an electronic document management system is currently being planned. This is currently subject to some delay, but it is clearly important that the project remains on track as it potentially helps enable more flexible or remote working.

4.2 Performance Management

Strengths

- There is a performance system in place and a developing performance culture
- Performance is regularly reported to and discussed by officers and members
- There is a service improvement plan in place

Areas for improvement

- There is a need to focus on qualitative as well as quantitative outcomes

- 95 The council has a performance monitoring system in place that helps officers and councillors manage performance. The Development Services Directorate, and in particular the planning service, is recognised as having a developing performance culture, partly demonstrated by the fact the council chose the Directorate to pilot the Convelance performance management system as part of its corporate implementation.
- 96 There is regular reporting of performance to both officers and councillors. Performance against the planning BVPIs is reported to the Performance Panel and Cabinet and exception reports are required if performance is below target. Performance is also reported to the portfolio holder for Planning and Transport, and Overview and Scrutiny also receive a monthly performance report. The performance monitoring regime has helped to ensure performance targets for development control and the development of the LDF are being met.
- 97 The service also uses the Uniform database to help monitor performance and outcomes across planning activity. But it could develop its performance management further and could usefully consider developing local performance indicators – to help measure what is meant by the service objective of achieving a “first class public service” and also to help improve the focus on sustainability and quality of development, and better monitor outcomes of activity to test out ‘real’ impact on users and communities. It also needs to consider what information is required to assess whether the service is providing value for money.
- 98 The planning service has an improvement plan in place even though it isn’t a corporate requirement. It demonstrates that the council takes its responsibilities as a local planning authority and the need to improve seriously. The implementation of the plan is regularly monitored and progress reported quarterly to the Planning and Transport Portfolio Holder, and annually to the Corporate Management Team.

4.3 Learning and supportive culture

Strengths

- The council asked for a peer review as an opportunity to learn
- There are examples of where the council has used external challenge and review to improve, e.g. PAS Terraquest Report
- There are some examples of learning activities, e.g. Wednesday learning sessions

Areas for improvement

- There is an inconsistent approach to training and development
- The council needs to remember to celebrate and communicate success
- There is a need to systematically seek and use best practice to continuously improve the service

99 The council asked for the planning peer review as an opportunity to learn and inform its' best value review. This is a positive step and the Council can use the recommendations in the peer review to further improve the service and the role of planning at Harrogate.

100 There are examples of where the service has previously used external review activity to shape and inform improvement. For example, the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) /Terraquest process mapping exercise undertaken in 2006. Some of the recommendations are being implemented, such as the automated constraint process. The council also received a BVPI 109 Diagnostic report in December 2005 undertaken by PAS assessing the improvement plan for development control. Whilst it has responded to many of the recommendations, there are some areas of risk identified that have not been fully addressed to date. For example, the dependency on PDG and fee based income to fund improvements.

101 The report also suggests that the planning service could greatly benefit from being more outward focussed and engaging in experience exchange where it has much to give as learn. This is still the case, along with a need to become more systematic and regular in terms of customer engagement. The service should look to access external learning and development activities more often. This might include providing externally provided training for councillors and accessing the Planning Summer School and the Planning Leadership Academy.

102 In terms of internal learning the council has introduced a Wednesday "training hour" which provides an excellent opportunity for officers to share their learning and raise awareness and understanding about specialist areas. The planning service could further develop its learning culture so it can innovate and apply good practice more widely. It needs to more systematically learn from the experience and practice of other authorities (e.g. schemes of delegation) and best practice and do more to draw on recognised sources of best practice such as PAS, CABE, the Building Research Establishment or similar best practice organisations.

103 In doing this it will be able to take increased professional and political pride from a highly rated planning service. In moving forward and continuing to improve the planning service, it will be important to ensure that staff are fully engaged in the service planning process and participate in improvement planning and any future self-assessment.

104 The recent progression out of planning standards designation is a huge achievement. The council should celebrate and acknowledge this. This is important, given that the focus on performance indicators can sometimes have a negative effect on morale, particularly amongst development control officers who would welcome a wider role, than one focused on processing. Similarly there are other successes to be celebrated, such as the achievements in e-planning.

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