

Planning Committee Peer Challenge Doncaster Council

16th October and 13-14th November 2018

Feedback Report

1. Key Note Finding

The key element going forward will be for everyone involved with planning at Doncaster to utilise and act upon their clearly expressed desire to further improve.

Most contributors to this peer review were clear that there is significant room for further improvement. In achieving improvement however members and officers will need to take active, and sometimes challenging, steps to do things differently.

Officers will need to be develop their confidence, members will need to play closer heed to professional advice and everyone – members working with members, and members working with officers - will need to work together as a team.

2. Executive Summary

Doncaster Council is based in Doncaster itself, a historical market town, at the southern edge of Yorkshire, Doncaster is renowned for its horse racing, rich railway heritage and its wealth of Georgian and Regency architecture on the Great North Road.

The Council area includes the towns of Mexborough, Conisbrough, Thorne, Bawtry and Tickhill. It has a population of just over 301,000 and covers some 568.0 km² with a mix of urban and rural landscapes.

It has an elected Mayor with a cabinet model of governance and 55 Councillors and a Mayor.

The performance of the planning committee is at risk due this ongoing dysfunction: it is a major distraction and drain of members' and officers' time and effort. It is due to poor member and officer relationships within the operation of the Planning Committee, to the extent of becoming adversarial. Most internal participants reflect that this has been regarded as a serious and deteriorating problem for a long time, and is in need of significant and fundamental improvement.

Whilst there are examples of some good and constructive member-officer engagement in planning, these are few and far between. Members across the political groups do not appear to trust the advice offered by their professional officers and we have heard evidence of rude, dismissive and discourteous behaviour towards officers in both public and private arenas.

This distrust results in defensive behaviour from officers towards members, which also at times can be unprofessional. There is little sense that the planning committee which comprises both the members and officers, in its broadest sense, is working as a team.

A high number of overturns is a marker of this lack of trust, especially where complex planning issues are at the heart of the determination process. Overturns of officer recommendations, at committee, should be seen as unusual and exceptional, not the norm.

At both of the committee meeting we attended, officer's advice was openly questioned and dismissed as being inaccurate or wrong. On one occasion the Chairman was clearly disrespected by a member and, although she handled the situation professionally, it gave a very poor impression of the probity of the process.

In addition, applicants were not treated with due respect when being questioned while objectors, Parish Councillors in particular, were given additional time to raise their objections via the lengthy questioning by members.

This lack of trust also extends to behaviours on the Planning Committee. Councillors largely appear to engage through the lens of specific interests, looking at the 'bigger picture', rather than focusing on material planning grounds relevant to the application in question, making it difficult to see if all decisions are made in accordance with the Local Plan, officer advice or other material planning considerations.

Officers need to look at the quality of some of their outputs and engagement including sharper reports, not repeating the content of the report at the committee presentation, more focus on the issues at balance, being more confident about the advice they are giving, and taking steps, however difficult at times, to challenge when their advice is not being heeded.

Ultimately it is for members to make the decisions about planning applications, either by delegating to officers or making decisions at Planning Committee. However, in doing so they must show they have received and reflected on professional advice, and where this is not followed, being clear about why particular decisions are made.

The council's senior leadership has a clear ambition and determination for a stronger customer focus for the council as a whole, and this also applies to planning. For some people the planning application process is a very significant aspect of how they engage with the council and could be the most important interaction they have with Doncaster Council, so it is important that the process is as accessible and understandable as possible.

The customer experience at the committee is variable at best and consideration is needed to improving how the council engages with the public, visitors, applicants and agents.

The Planning Committee day consumes extensive resources, yet is not as effective as it could be, especially when many of the presentations simply repeat the officer recommendation.

Resources need to be focused to give significant improvements which can be made to the processes in the lead up to the day, so that the customer is put at the forefront of what the council is trying to achieve. This includes developing clearer guidance for attendees at the

Committee, the effectiveness of processes leading up to the meeting including site visits and briefings, how and what information is communicated to applicants and councillors.

There was clear confusion in the minds of the Members about the role of the Technical Briefings. These briefings during the planning application process and made before the date of the Planning Committee, seem to be an anomaly and not a practice carried out in any other authority, to our knowledge. If the applicant and objectors are to have an opportunity to put their case forward, this needs to be carried out in an open session, well before the committee date and, preferably in the pre-application process, so as to ensure no allegation or impression of pre-determination can be sustained.

This applies to all aspects of their engagement including the pre-application stage, engagement with members and officers and the Planning Committee meeting. The layout of the meeting, presentations, discussions and behaviours need an overhaul.

The key element going forward will be for everyone involved with planning at Doncaster to utilise and act upon their clearly expressed desire for the planning function to improve.

Most contributors to this peer review were clear that there is significant room for the planning function to improve. In achieving improvement however members and officers will need to take active, and sometimes challenging, steps to do things differently.

Officers will need to be more confident, members will need to play closer heed to professional advice and everyone – members working with members, and members working with officers - will need to work together as a team.

3. Key recommendations

There are a range of suggestions and observations within the main section of the report that will inform some 'quick wins' and practical actions, in addition to the conversations onsite, many of which provided ideas and examples of practice from other organisations.

Recommendations for how the council can improve its approach to planning are distributed throughout this report. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the Council:

- **Councillor training needs to be provided urgently:**
 - **Training for all members of the Planning Committee on a regular and ongoing basis.** This training should be compulsory and conditional for ongoing membership of the Committee. Non-attendance should be actively managed by senior councillors.
- **The Chairman and Deputy Chairman of the Planning Committee, the Leader of the Council and the Leader of the Opposition need to create a culture of calling out and challenging poor behaviour as and when it happens.** Poor behaviours including rudeness appear to be tolerated and are in danger of becoming normalised; tackling this applies to behaviours between members, and between members and officers.
- **The stages up to the Planning Committee day should be reconsidered:**
 - **Full Planning Committee briefing should be given, Technical Briefing stopped and, other than update briefings, should NOT take place on the Planning Committee day.** An earlier briefing, for example several days or a week before the Committee day, would allow a reasonable amount of time for officers to prepare responses to queries from members.
 - **Steps should also be taken to tackle perceptions that the technical briefing could involve any aspect of pre-determination.** Conducting the meeting on the Friday before the Planning Committee meeting does not aid transparency and the form of this briefing should be changed to make it open and transparent and a 'public' briefing would be more appropriate where the applicant can demonstrate the scheme to a wider audience outside the Committee process.
 - **Site visits need rethinking.** The approach to site visits uses up a great deal of member and officer time and yet does not appear to add much value to the decision making process. The current approach seems to be a 'delaying' tactic by members not happy with the officer reports. Meetings are poorly attended and not recorded. Clearer reasons for site visits and better uses of technology could make this aspect of the process more informative and more efficient. Consideration should be given to not allowing members to vote on applications when they do not attend site visits.

- **Overhaul how the Committee operates including;**
 - **Change the seating arrangements to improve transparency and to improve the public's understanding of the Committee.** Members should be discouraged from sitting on party political lines and could sit in alphabetical order. Consideration should be given to clearer "zones" for seating so that the public can understand the roles of those present, and so that members and officers can be clearly identified. Name plates should be provided so that the public know who is speaking and to aid viewing the meetings on the YouTube Channel.
 - **Officers need to be more confident in presenting their advice to the meeting and members need to take greater heed to the advice being proffered, even if they choose not to follow the advice.** In some instances, it is not clear whether members are following officer advice or not. Where members choose not to follow their advice, it should be clearly articulated and recorded
 - **Review arrangement for members of the public attending the meeting.** This should include improved arrangement for visitor access, egress, understanding of the process on the day and feedback.
 - **Undertake a best proactive review of the structure and layout of reports.** The quality of written material could be better, with more clarity, better structure and a different layout. This will help members and the public to be clearer about the information they are receiving and the basis for decisions. See 'Best Practice' examples at the end of this report.
 - **Take steps to improve the quality of member debate.** Discussion at the meeting needs to focus on material considerations relative and relevant to the applications presented to the Committee and NOT incidental which are not key to the decision process.

3. Summary of the Peer Challenge approach

The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected your requirements and the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and agreed with you. The peers who delivered the peer challenge at Doncaster Council were:

- Cllr Bryony Rudkin, Deputy Leader Ipswich Council
- John Cummins, PAS Planning Consultant

Scope and focus

Doncaster Council (the council) has asked Planning Advisory Service (PAS) to prepare a proposal for a review of the council's planning committee.

The review will look at whether the current structure, scheme of delegation and processes are efficient and effective, fit for purpose and meet the needs (current and future) of the Council and its customers. The review will also look at how decision making might be improved whilst allowing for democratic input into the process, relationships between officers and members, and identifying good practice from elsewhere that may be transferable to Doncaster Council.

Scope:

PAS' normal approach to reviewing committees will reflect on the following broad themes:

- The purpose of the committee
- The format and process
- The 'customer experience'
- Roles & responsibilities
- Quality and improvement

As well as these broad themes, the review will also consider a selection of planning committee reports and reflect on how the information contained in the application files are reflected in the reports and how this supports effective and transparent decision making.

The peer challenge process

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer challenges are improvement focussed and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to

reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

PAS has adapted its traditional peer challenge model to focus specifically on the running of a good planning committee. Like any important council function, planning committee should be periodically reviewed to ensure that it is an excellent 'shop window' for the council.

We believe the best people to challenge a committee are fellow councillors and senior officers/consultants who can provide an external, objective and independent perspective. So, most usually, the committee peer

The peer team prepared for the peer challenge by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the Council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent 3 days onsite in Doncaster, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 30 people including a range of council staff and councillors, unfortunately it was not possible, due to time constraints to talk to other stakeholders such as applicants, agents and Parish Councils as part of the process.
- Gathered information and views from more than 14 meetings, attended to 2 planning committees (October and November 2018) as well as reviewing Planning Committees on-line via the You Tube Channel and additional research and reading
- Collectively spent more than 48 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than a full week in Doncaster.

This report provides a summary of the peer's findings. It builds on the verbal feedback provided by the peers at the end of their on-site visit (14th November 2018).

In presenting feedback to you, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing.

Please note that recommendations are made according to the key issues being considered and, as such, are repeated. However, a summary of all recommendations is give at **5. Summary of all recommendations** page 15.

4. Feedback

4.1. The customer experience of the planning service

The overall profile of customer service is quite low and during our onsite work there was little mention of the customer or their experience. Overall there is a strong sense of uncertainty for customers on outcomes due to the way that applications are debated and 'tested' at Committee.

The pre-application and active application stages appear to work reasonably well. It is suggested that 'Technical Briefing' on applications, should be stopped and changed into an open public meeting where applicants can explain their scheme and other stakeholders can openly question the proposals.

Linkages between the planning service and enforcement could be improved and Members sited the lack of 'movement' on enforcement matters as being a serious concern. The current sense of detachment between the two is exacerbated by fact that reports to the Committee re 'pink papers' not open to the public. This should stop and open reports be presented including appropriate data on the numbers, types and speed of resolution of enforcement issues.

Although parish councils do not have a statutory right to be consulted about planning applications, they do have a statutory right to be informed. At the moment they appear to have an 'unfair' advantage at the committee meetings as questioning by members of the representatives of the Parish Councils, can be supportive and give an unbalanced view.

The customer experience of the Planning Committee could be significantly better by providing support prior, throughout and after the meeting and the staff supporting the public could also use the opportunity to 'promote' the other activities of the Councils and gain valuable feedback on the impression that the working of the Committee makes.

Recommendations

- **Stop Technical Briefings the Friday before Committee and incorporate them into the pre-application or main application process.**
- **Make reporting on Enforcement a main, and NOT a restricted committee item, incorporating data on performance of the service. A good example of this is Ipswich Council and a link to a sample report is given at the end of this report.**
- **Review the layout of the meeting and provide nameplates for all attending.**
- **Make provisions for additional support to visitor to allow them to access and egress the Chamber easily.**
- **Use the support staff for the meeting to promote the services of the Council and gather information on the way the committee process could be enhanced**

4.2. Roles, responsibilities and relationships

Relationships across the council appear to be positive, both between members and between members and officers. Although outside of the remit of this peer challenge, non-planning meetings including the Full Council meeting, were described to us as generally being courteous. However, this is not the case with the Planning Committee, where relationships at all levels are fraught, and we gained little sense of members working together or more widely with officers as a team. The tension at this level is becoming known externally and if not dissipated will have a serious impact on the council's reputation with partners, stakeholders and developers.

Relationships between members on the Planning Committee appear to have been fractious. There is no sense of a general common purpose on planning matters between members across the committee. Behaviours between members on the committee, including voting, suggest that members appear to have lost their sense of public interest and customer service and 'partial' issues appear to dominate with vocal members of the Committee dominating the debate and NOT focusing on the material planning considerations.

Members have a greater and more overt role to play in ensuring that the Planning Committee, like any other decision making or public arena of the council, is conducted in accordance with the highest standards of public life. In particular, there are too many instances of where poor behaviour was ignored and is tolerated, to the extent that it has become normal for the Planning Committee meeting to become confused and difficult to follow, officers are challenged and procedures are not clearly followed.

All members, particularly those in senior positions, need to play a clearer and more overt role in tackling poor behaviour as and when it occurs. Improved behaviours need to extend to all members showing leadership through actively working with the Chair and Deputy Chair to facilitate professional and effective meetings.

Relationships between members and officers are poor on matters relating to planning, although there are a few exceptions to this. Some officers have developed a tendency to be defensive in their interactions with some members, and this has not helped to improve relationships overall.

Members do not appear to trust or want to follow the professional advice given to them by officers about matters relating to planning issues. In some instances, officers are not even invited to comment on matters raised at committee. There appears to be a prevailing culture of disregarding officers' views and advice, reflected in a number of ways:

- The number of overturns at committee is relatively high relative to other councils. The extensive use of overturns seems to be driven by members wanting to go against officer advice for the sake of it, or if there are other

reasons for overturning officer recommendations, it is not clear what these are, and while material planning consideration can be given, they often do not have the weight needed to support a refusal.

- At the committee meetings we observed there were instances of members appearing to ignore officer advice, or being reluctant to hear it
- Numerous examples of criticising officers in public, including discourteous comments, which sometimes descends into rudeness. Members should be reminded that officers do not have a public right of reply in such circumstances, and that poor behaviours do not enable members or the public to gain a better service from the council. Such behaviour reflects very poorly on the members involved.
- Instances where members, despite having had plenty of time to raise issues, use the Planning Committee meeting as the opportunity to try and catch out officers on technical matters
- Officers inevitably become defensive because they are unable to respond, and occasionally feel cornered by the behaviour of members.

Neither are members distinguishing between their ward councillor and committee membership roles sufficiently. It is inevitable and right that members will have a keen interest in what goes on in their wards, but there seems to be less focus on achieving the best for the district as a whole and often it appears that members are defaulting to ward only or partial interests, rather than achieving a greater purpose.

Committee members need to be very clear about the role that they take on any planning application in their own ward: either as decision maker for the authority as a whole or community advocate for the ward. It is advisable that Planning Committee meeting members do not vote on decisions which affect their wards.

Councillors not on the Planning Committee need to have earlier options for engagement than at present. Ward members should be encouraged to have dialogue with the case officer or other members of the planning team in order to get a better understanding of the proposal and relevant issues.

It would be helpful for officers if members flagged at an early stage that they were concerned about an applications merits.

Some of this is reflected in a focus on the minutiae of process without a broader concern about what the public observing and interacting with the committee are witnessing. The October 2018 and November 2018 Planning Committee meetings provide an illustration of both the disregard for officer advice as well as lengthy and unnecessary discussions and distractions about minutes and individual words, none of which will have helped to enhance either decision making or the broader public perception of the committee.

Recommendations

- **Urgent and immediate training is required for all councillors on the role of members and on the member-officer protocols and code of conduct to ensure poor behaviour is challenged.**
- **Team building needs to be encouraged between members and officers and this could be facilitated by joint practical learning sessions on complex planning issues, such as ‘viability’.**
- **Consideration should be given to visiting other Councils and ‘sharing’ experiences both for Members and Officers**
- **More structured engagement with the whole planning committee at briefings needs to be immediately introduced**
- **Senior members need to create a culture of calling out poor behaviour**
- **Improve committee procedures and operation to support the Chairman in running the committee well. The procedures should include provision for officers to respond to comments made by councillors and public speakers**

4.3. The role of the Planning Committee, including public engagement and transparency

Despite the enthusiasm of members in being on the Planning Committee, and the clear importance attached to its function, the overall impression given is of a muddled and messy meeting. It is difficult for non-planning professionals to follow and understand, and even people who attend regularly can find it difficult and sometimes frustrating to follow. It is considered that there is already good practice from the chair of the committee to explain the process that the Planning Committee will follow at the start of each committee, including how the committee will be making decisions on material planning reasons. However, the questioning of speakers, in particular, is poorly controlled and confusing.

Officers also need to ensure that in their verbal presentations on individual agenda items, the commentary directly relates to the material being shown in the room and that the pictures, in particular, show the site as it is at present

The seating arrangements need reviewing because it does not aid understanding or transparency:

- As an outsider, while the Chairman introduces the attendees, it would be of benefit if nameplates were also provided so the public can clearly identify who is speaking and this would be aided by a re-configuration of the layout.
- The layout results in an arena type layout with the officers appearing to be ‘in the dock’
- Applicants and opponents seem to be sat with each other in the room
- Members appear to sit in party groupings. A better arrangement could be for members to sit alphabetically around the table

The use of microphones for speaking is inconsistent and makes the dialogue difficult to follow, as often Members forget to ‘turn on’ the microphones. In addition, some members appear to conduct mini-meetings during the course of the

main meeting, which is a distraction from principal business. This further contributes to an impression of a disjointed and disconnected approach to decision making.

Planning and planning committee decisions can often appear complex to someone that has never engaged with it before. The management of the process by the Committee Chair and respect to the Chair by all involved, especially fellow committee members, is absolutely key to allowing clear decision making to occur.

The experience for all applicants at the meetings needs to become consistent with the procedures set out by the council, and in particular needs to be much more transparent.

The meetings seem to lack focus and these inconsistencies include:

- Lack of debate on material considerations for each application
- Lack of discussion on additional conditions when an application is approved and or, excessive discussions on minor conditions
- Allowing a deferral of an application without offering a clear rationale or purpose
- Reasons for going against officer advice were not challenged or clearly explained

The quality of the debate at recent meetings has been very poor. Some applications do not appear to merit proper debate and often where debate does take place, it is not on planning grounds.

Members appear to be side tracked by process rather than focusing on the substance of applications and overall there is a lack of knowledge and understanding of material considerations, which in turn affects members' ability to appropriately determine applications.

Little reference appears to be made to how applications relate to the objectives set out in the Local Plan, in the Councils own policies or national policy. Members often seem to talk over one another during the meeting, and sometimes members do not appear to be listening to each other nor the officers' presentations.

All members have a responsibility to work more overtly with the Chair of the committee to ensure that it runs well, and that each application is considered in a balanced manner.

It is difficult to conclude that pre-determination is not being actively kept out of Planning Committee decisions. Some members are presenting information as being off the cuff during the meetings, yet the nature of what they are presenting, and despite being challenged by officers, seems to go against this. There is no direct evidence to suggest that some members are being disingenuous about pre-determination, but an unbiased observer may conclude that and that they are not considering the full facts of an application at the committee meeting.

Recommendations

- **Change the seating layout at the committee.**
- **Review officer roles at the committee.**
- **Officers need to be given more opportunity to respond to the public's and members' comments.**
- **Consistently apply the public speaking rules at the meeting.**
- **Have name plates for all individuals involved: Chairman, Deputy Chairman, committee members, Head of Development Management, case officers, legal advisors, democratic service managers, etc. These should be clearly visible to the public.**

4.4. The format and process of the lead up to the Planning Committee day

While the Chairman and Vice Chairman are briefed a few days prior to the Committee, there is no full briefing to Committee members and the agenda papers appear to come as a surprise to Members as they have little or no involvement in the processing of the application.

The 'Technical Briefing' given on some applications, appears at odds with an open and transparent planning process and gives insufficient time to gain detailed information.

Some Members expressed concern that the issuing of papers 10 to 7 days prior to the committee gave insufficient time for them to fully consider the complexities of the applications and this was why they questioned officers and asked for deferrals and site visits.

Site visits appear to take place for every application deferred to the Committee, without a clear rationale for why each application needs a site visit and recording of attended. Many applications deferred for site visits are poorly attended and, in certain instances the Members asking for the site visit did not attend.

Consideration should be ensuring all Committee Members are given a 'heads up' of potential committee items at the earliest opportunity via the Idox back office system as soon as they are allocated that status.

Members and Officers should be encouraged to talk together, as early as possible in the process about potential issues. Members should contact the case officer and Case Officers should flag up potential issues at an early date.

Having a full committee briefing one week before the committee date, so that the Members can ask appropriate questions and sufficient time is allowed to gather full replies, would be good practice. In addition, this meeting could discuss the need for a 'site visit' and, if felt appropriate, this could be held prior to the committee to ensure no delays in processing applications.

Recommendations Pre-application

- **Technical Briefings should be part of this, or the formal application process, not the Committee Process.**

Member engagement

- **All potential committee items should be notified to members as early as possible in the process and members encouraged to discuss and concerns with the case officer.**

Briefing

- **Change the timing and nature of the briefing**

Site Visits

- **Held by agreement following briefing and all members to attend on a coach.**

4.5. Reports, minutes and updates

There is room to improve the quality of reports sent to committee across a range of issues, particularly to make reports more user friendly for the council's customers and ensure constancy:

- A greater focus on the use of plain English
- Reports should follow a more narrative structure as some of the examples we saw were formulaic
- Consideration could be given to having an executive summary so that the key material planning issues can be clearly identified
- Some reports contain dense paragraphs and are difficult to understand.
- A lack of assessment of the representations received does not improve public confidence in each application being received on its own merits, especially where many objections are based on non-material planning matters which need to be covered and a clear explanation given as to why the cannot be taken into account.

Looking at what other Planning Committees receive will help to bring in new ideas on how reports can be presented, for example in Bury:

<https://councildecisions.bury.gov.uk/ieListMeetings.aspx?CId=134&Year=0>

Plymouth:

<http://web.plymouth.gov.uk/modgov?modgovlink=http%3A%2F%2Fdemocracy.plymouth.gov.uk%2FieListDocuments.aspx%3FCId%3D251%26amp%3BMId%3D6776%26amp%3BVer%3D4>

and Hastings:

<http://hastings.moderngov.co.uk/ieListMeetings.aspx?CId=129&Year=0>

At the meetings we observed there could have been more opportunities for officers to make clearer contributions, both through the quality of the written material they are submitting, but also through the oral presentations they make

Example Report on Planning Enforcement can be found at:

<https://councildecisions.bury.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=134&MId=2249&Ver=4>

Recommendations

- **Officers need to develop more confidence in their decisions and justifications for decisions in terms of the presentations to committee**
- **Members need to show they have received and considered officer advice when making decisions**
- **Carry out a best practice review of the structure and layout of reports**
- **Enforcement Reports should be main agenda items, and not 'Pink Papers'. These report should include a summary of performance in terms of the number of cases, speed of action and outcomes.**

5. Summary of all recommendations

Please note, these are not in any order of importance.

- **Stop Technical Briefings the Friday before Committee and incorporate them into the pre-application or main application process.**
- **Make reporting on Enforcement a main, and NOT a restricted committee item, incorporating data on performance of the service. A good example of this is Ipswich Council and a link to a sample report is given at the end of this report.**
- **Review the layout of the meeting and provide nameplates for all attending.**
- **Make provisions for additional support to visitor to allow them to access and egress the Chamber easily.**
- **Use the support staff for the meeting to promote the services of the Council and gather information on the way the committee process could be enhanced**
- **Urgent and immediate training is required for all councillors on the role of members and on the member-officer protocols and code of conduct to ensure poor behaviour is challenged.**
- **Team building needs to be encouraged between members and officers and this could be facilitated by joint practical learning sessions on complex planning issues, such as 'viability'.**
- **Consideration should be given to visiting other Councils and 'sharing' experiences both for Members and Officers**
- **More structured engagement with the whole planning committee at briefings needs to be immediately introduced**
- **Senior members need to create a culture of calling our poor behaviour**
- **Improve committee procedures and operation to support the Chairman in running the committee well. The procedures should include provision for officers to respond to comments made by councillors and public speakers**

- **Member engagement - All potential committee items should be notified to members as early as possible in the process and members encouraged to discuss and concerns with the case officer.**
- **Briefing - Change the timing and nature of the briefing**
- **Site Visits - Held by agreement following briefing and all members to attend on a coach.**
- **Officers need to develop more confidence in their decisions and justifications for decisions in terms of the presentations to committee**
- **Members need to show they have received and considered officer advice when making decisions**
- **Carry out a best practice review of the structure and layout of reports**

6. Next steps

It is suggested that the ‘Key Note Finding’ should become central to any change agenda adopted by the Council, namely:

‘The key element going forward will be for everyone involved with planning at Doncaster to utilise and act upon their clearly expressed desire to further improve.

Most contributors to this peer review were clear that there is significant room for further improvement. In achieving improvement however members and officers will need to take active, and sometimes challenging, steps to do things differently.

Officers will need to develop their confidence, members will need to play closer heed to professional advice and everyone – members working with members, and members working with officers - will need to work together as a team.’

We appreciate the senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions in order to determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward.

PAS and the LGA where possible will support councils with implementing the recommendations as part of the council’s improvement programme and we would be happy to discuss this further.

In the meantime, we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with the council throughout the peer challenge.

We will endeavour to provide signposting to examples of practice and further information and guidance about the issues we have raised in this report to help inform ongoing consideration. PAS has a range of support available to the council: <https://www.local.gov.uk/pas/pas-support/councillor-development>