



# Planning Peer Review (virtual) Craven District Council

28<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> September 2020

## Feedback Report

## 1. Executive Summary

Craven District Council (CDC) first discussed concerns with its planning service after the Corporate Peer Challenge in 2017. The Planning Team includes Planning Policy and Development Management; this peer challenge focused more on the development management side of the work. The Planning Advisory Service (PAS) has worked with CDC in recent years: to improve the speed of decision making on planning applications and support in the set-up of the council running virtual planning committees. It is clear from MHCLG performance data that processing times have improved in the last 12 months.

There is a talented, enthusiastic and committed group of staff within the Planning Service. But, like many other councils, Craven has found it difficult to attract and maintain good senior planning officers. This is due to a seemingly national shortage of experienced planning officers. The Council generally has a good record of developing its internal talent; for example, several officers are being funded to gain their Masters in planning.

Planning Policy and Development Management (DM) work as two separate teams. DM appears to work largely on its own, is not well-integrated with corporate policies or meetings, and the people we spoke to (externally as well as internally) were clear that it has a different culture and ethos to the rest of Craven District Council. It is generally viewed as a regulatory function rather than a function that is at the heart of delivery of both the Corporate Plan and the Local Plan.

Team members are enthusiastic, keen to develop their skills and knowledge, and are committed to Craven District Council. However, there is no clear political or strategic managerial leadership on Planning as a whole.

The Planning Committee has been meeting virtually and broadcasting on YouTube since July 2020. The suspension of meetings from March to July has contributed to there being a backlog of cases and the committee took the decision to meet fortnightly instead of monthly with three agenda items at each meeting. This is a big ask of staff resources.

CDC is good at investing in its planning staff by funding higher education to ensure that the council has suitably qualified staff. However, there does not seem to be a culture of continuous improvement. The peer team heard that councillors are reluctant or resistant to attend training. The peer team also heard that officers are not always supported to learn on the job; for example, through shadowing other officers. We noticed that when we observed meetings the Planning Manager presented all the reports to Committee, rather than the Planning Case Officers. We understand this was a short-term measure in the early days of the virtual Committees, and would encourage CDC to move to an arrangement where Case Officers present their own reports, with support where needed to build up political skills.

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Mistakes have happened in officers' reports, which means that the quality assurance or sign-off process is not working well enough. This has happened on more than one occasion and is more likely with increased pressure on staff preparing for more frequent committee meetings. There is clear need to review or revisit the sign-off process.

There was no evidence of councillors or officers learning from other councils' experiences of a Planning Service. There was also only limited evidence of working with (and learning from) colleagues at CDC such as the Communications or Legal Teams, despite management roles existing to further those links. Formal professional qualification support is excellent but needs to be alongside a learning culture.

The change of Chair has improved the way that the Planning Committee is working, but the new Chair needs support to be stronger and more confident in her knowledge of how to run a committee. Meetings are very long, and yet cover only three planning applications per agenda. The peer team heard that there is a belief amongst councillors that a longer meeting is better value for money. However, value for money needs to be measured in terms of effectiveness. We would suggest that CDC's Planning Committee is taking about 3 times longer and so getting through only a third of the cases a committee in a typical Council are getting through. The difference is not explained by items being any more complicated or controversial.

Currently, too much time is spent in Committee meetings sorting out problems (or deferring decisions to address problems) that should have been raised much earlier in the planning process. This includes engaging with ward councillors, committee members, and relevant stakeholders (such as parish councils). Planning Officers should be problem solvers, identifying potential issues ahead of time and doing what they can to investigate and address any problems. Members of the committee should not be waiting until Committee to raise concerns as officers may not be able to address them immediately. As a result, a significant number of decisions get deferred to address those problems.

Communication, between officers and councillors, to some extent between officers, and between the CDC Planning Service and stakeholders, is widely acknowledged to be poor.

Behaviours in Planning Committee by councillors towards officers, between councillors, and sometimes tensions between officers demonstrate a disjointed and adversarial culture. Senior officers recognise there are challenges and issues, but no-one appears to own them or take actions to address them.

The problems at Craven are not simply an issue about resources, but also about culture and efficiency. The peer team believe that the overall planning service could be more efficient if processes and delegated powers were streamlined, staff skills and knowledge were used more effectively, and stakeholder engagement was improved.

Councillors and officers all demonstrated a desire to sort things out. They need to work together to address problems and deliver good outcomes for communities as set out in the Local Plan. The peer team recommends that CDC builds on this peer challenge as a basis for continuous improvement.

## 2. 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. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the Council:

1. **Reposition and restate the management of planning in the context and at the heart of the Corporate Plan and the Local Plan.** This gives the strategic direction for the planning service.
2. **Establish a Strategic Lead Member (or similar) role to take overall leadership on planning matters.** The team recommend that this role covers all aspects of planning and development. This would give the clear political leadership that the team is currently lacking.
3. **Establish a strategic lead officer to be the catalyst for change.** There is a real need for transformational leadership within the planning service to be the catalyst for change. Without strategic officer as well as member leadership, continuous improvement won't get started and be maintained.
4. **Adopt a single team approach to planning.** Planning Policy and Development Management could work together to improve the service. The team could have shared priorities which address the corporate priorities of the council. For example, could staff in Planning Policy be utilised in DM? This would offer some resource in DM as well as a learning opportunity for those officers. It will also help link planning policy better with development management, play to everyone's strengths and help address problems with capacity.
5. **Members and officers should work together to sort out the problems that exist.** It is important to get working relationships right, between members, and between members and officers, so that CDC can deliver the best outcomes for the district.
6. **Establish a clear, transparent, customer focus.** Improve self-service options and communications and ensure that the planning portal is always up to date. This will improve service delivery and help to manage expectations. Face to face engagement may be difficult while Covid-19 infection rates rise and fall, but good use of virtual engagement tools and phone calls can be very accessible.
7. **Establish and communicate clear processes.** This includes identifying and addressing potential problems early in the planning process and embracing virtual opportunities for engagement
8. **Improve the effectiveness of Planning Committee as the decision-making forum.** This could be helped by appropriate workshops and mentoring to improve both the strength of the Chair and Councillors' understanding of their role in the

process. But there is also a clear need to ensure better member behaviours and standards in committees. Accurate and clear officer reports, effective chair's briefings and a revision of the call-in process will all help.

9. **Communication with Parish Councils.** As a result of complaints by some parish councils (including some that had escalated to the Planning Inspectorate) CDC invited all parish and town councils to identify concerns and planned to hold a session with an independent Planning Lawyer to go through the specific issues. This meeting is being arranged. Parish Councils that did not respond to the original invitation could be reminded and their views taken on board.
10. **Embrace and welcome collaborative learning and working.** Work with other council teams, such as Communications officers, Democratic Services and the Legal Team to help deliver and underpin changes as a result of this peer challenge. Maximise networking opportunities with other councils' planning teams. Observe and learn from other councils' online planning committee meetings. All of this should help effectively work through planning items more quickly during the current online arrangements, but will help with future in-room meetings.

### 3. Summary of the Peer Challenge approach

#### 3.1 The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the Council's requirements and the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and agreed with the Council. The peers who delivered the peer challenge at Craven District Council (CDC) were:

- Councillor Neil Clarke, Rushcliffe Borough Council (former Leader and former Chair of Planning)
- Phil Courtier, Director of Place, South Norfolk and Broadland District Councils
- Nicola Stinson, Senior Manager: Strategic Development, Council of The Isles of Scilly
- Nicola Sworowski, Principal Consultant, Planning Advisory Service
- Becca Singh, Peer Review Manager, LGA

#### 3.2 Scope and focus

The peer review was intended to highlight key issues that CDC could work on. It was not intended to investigate individual applications or complaints but provide recommendations, including practical quick wins.

The peer team considered the following focus and themes which were agreed in advance with CDC:

##### Focus:

Ensuring appropriate processes are established and consistently used and enabling any necessary culture change. This should lead to improved community perception of the service as effective, consistent and fair.

##### Themes:

**1. Culture:** is there a golden thread from policy down through all practice, is there consistency of behaviours? Are staff and managers appropriately trained, supported, empowered and experienced? How well do officers work with Members? How is performance recorded and managed? How does the team manage succession planning, and maintaining levels of knowledge experience, and resilience? What is the impact of Covid-19 on member-officer relationships and respective roles? What has been the learning for the council's governance arrangements (e.g. constitution, decision making processes)?

**2. Processes and resources:** Are officers' reports robust? Do they offer a balanced view based on the evidence available to them? How is an application processed, from receipt, validation through to committee decision, including pre-application advice? What are the processes for adopting legislative changes? How effective is

enforcement? Is the ICT system fully integrated and how familiar are staff? Is the current level of planning application fees and charges adequate? How are processes managed and monitored for performance? Call-in and delegation process (who decide what goes to committee)?

**3. Engagement:** How are communities and parish councils involved in decision-making? How are contacts established and maintained? Who decides who to involve? When is that involvement? How does the council ensure communities understand the limitations of the planning process? How are complaints dealt with? How effective and transparent is the consultation and relationship between the various stakeholders and consultees? How good is the availability of both general and application-specific information? What do customers think of the planning department?

**4. Committee meetings and decision-making:** How are Planning Committee meetings chaired and conducted? Do Councillors follow the agenda? Are considerations and contributions balanced? Are meetings timely and efficient? How many Councillors are there on the committee? Do Councillors regularly go against Officer recommendations? Do Councillors fully understand their roles, responsibilities and the purpose of the committee? Are Councillors appropriately trained, updated and supported? How are Member site visits conducted and reported? How are applications debated and voted on (including role of the casting vote)? What is the scheme of delegation and the process for call-ins?

### **3.3 The peer challenge process**

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 and are not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of specific 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.

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 two days working virtually at Craven District Council, during which they:

- Spoke to around 30 people including a range of council staff together with Councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from 15 meetings, observations of online committee meetings and additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent nearly 200 hours to determine their findings; the equivalent of one person spending almost six weeks in Craven District Council.



This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their virtual on-site visit (29<sup>th</sup> September 2020). In presenting feedback to the Council, they have done so as fellow local government officers and Councillors, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. The peer team appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things the Council is already addressing and progressing.

## 4. Feedback

### 4.1 Culture

CDC's Corporate Plan clearly shows that the Planning Service is crucial in shaping and protecting the future of Craven. This requires planning officers, encouraged and supported by management and the Chief Executive, to be better engaged at a corporate level. There is support available within the Council to enable this, for example through Democratic Services, Legal and the Communications Teams. The roles are there, including two officers on the corporate leadership team, but the service is not well integrated. The Planning Service would benefit from being repositioned more corporately and its work better aligned to the Council's corporate plan and its strategic priorities.

Currently, the Council's planning processes are not clear to customers, and are not delivering an effective and efficient service partly because of the reactive position they have found themselves in. The peer team did not get the sense that staff are acting proactively or linking planning policy to development management and the wider needs of the communities in Craven. Planning is a public-facing service and is probably the most visible of all CDC's services. Developing a more positive, customer-focused outlook will improve the reputation of the service and the council.

Councillors and officers are not coming across as a cohesive team that is working together to deliver an effective and efficient planning service. Trust and relationships need to be restored and strengthened. The peer team recommend that CDC takes up the opportunities for learning together, for example establishing a common understanding of the Local Plan and the future planning reforms. This should help to break down the atmosphere of 'them' and 'us'. Members and officers are two parts of a council and should work together to deliver the best service for its customers, residents and partners.

Planning needs strategic oversight to ensure that it is fulfilling its objectives. The Development Management team appears to act as a regulatory team only, rather than one that can contribute positively to the district through the Corporate and Local Plans. No one from the people the peer team met was able to tell who the strategic councillor or senior officer lead for Planning is in the Council. Establishing a Lead Member for Planning would demonstrate the importance of Planning in delivering the Council's strategic goals. This role should be a strategic one covering planning policy as well as development management and should champion the whole planning service. This could be mirrored within officers.

The Planning Committee, and the Planning team should take up opportunities to learn from other councils, for example on how they run committee meetings, how their pre-application processes work, and how stakeholders are informed and involved in planning applications. Most importantly, officers and members learn how other councils address potential problems before coming to their planning committee for a decision.

The LGA, through the Planning Advisory Service and its pool of peers, can help with this.

Working from home/remotely is the current norm and could last for some time. The planning team should ensure that meetings still take place, albeit virtually, for example: regular team meetings, meetings with councillors, meetings between Development Management and Policy, training, supervision, and informal conversations between officers and councillors.

The peer team would suggest the following to help build a more collaborative and collegiate organisational culture:

- Encourage councillor-officer dialogue around how the planning service as a whole should work.
- Position Planning more corporately, with a strategic officer as a catalyst for change. This could be a time-limited post to drive through changes as a result of the peer challenge.
- Ensure Planning is a customer-focused service, designing processes to help improve the customer experience of CDC's planning service.
- Improve relationships between officers and councillors by working together, having informal meetings and long-term visioning exercises. Consider joint training, for example on key legislative changes.
- Support junior officers to develop through expanding their experience while they work.
- Encourage learning from other councils; consider shared appointments with a neighbouring council if necessary.

#### **4.2 Processes and resources**

There is a group of talented, enthusiastic and committed staff within the Planning Service. What they now need is some long-term expertise and succession planning, particularly within Development Management. This has recently occurred in Planning Policy with someone internal taking the Team Leader/Manager post following the retirement of the previous post holder. However, this will call for stronger management and leadership of the service.

Officers are keen to expand their knowledge and experience but need to be adequately supported to do so. For example, because they have just started to take reports to virtual planning committee meetings, they have not had the experience and support they need to learn as much as they could. The meetings we observed had the Planning Manager doing all the presenting of cases. We understand this was a short term arrangement in the early days of Zoom meetings and should revert to Case Officers doing this soon. The peer team found them to be an enthusiastic team that is open to change, but also that it is a noticeably demoralised team.

Team members acknowledge that mistakes are made in officer's reports. Officers need appropriate support to ensure that this does not continue to happen. There needs to be

a robust quality assurance and/or sign-off process put in place to ensure that any mistakes are corrected swiftly before reports are made public and are not repeated. Although team performance against KPIs have improved considerably in the last 12 months, the service would now benefit from a clear process for managing individual performance within the team.

In terms of planning applications, it was not possible for the peer team to identify a clear, standard approach to an application. There was no clarity on pre-application processes, nor at what stages committee members, ward members and others were informed and involved. The peer team recommends that a clearly laid out planning application process is established and widely communicated as a matter of urgency. This could include recognising the important role that the ward member and parish council can play in resolving issues locally at an early stage in the process.

With a clearer one-team approach to the overall Planning Service and priorities, CDC could use its resources more effectively by working to people's strengths to help clear the backlog of applications. For example, there are officers in planning policy who have experience of development management and the team could work together as a priority. Processes should also be improved as officers are currently unnecessarily required to use the same level of detail in reports for householder applications as major developments which adds considerable time to their workload and reduces overall capacity.

Officers and Councillors need to have a common understanding of legislative and other strategic changes. The peer team suggest that having combined officer-councillor workshop-based training will help to ensure this common understanding and could also help to improve relationships between Officers and Councillors.

Better and more comprehensive use needs to be made of available ICT systems to make the service more efficient. For example, the peer team heard of instances where applicants did not receive an acknowledgement email, even though this can be fully automated. Improved online self-serve facilities would ease the pressure on planning officers as customers would be able to do more themselves, for example, tracking where an application is in the process.

The scheme of delegation and call-ins are currently adding to the pressure on the Planning Committee. The seven-day call-in process in effect means that applications are going before committee that you wouldn't ordinarily expect a committee to be dealing with. It is the first time that the peer team has come across this type of call-in process and it is overly onerous for officers and generates a low delegation rate. This undermines an expedient and efficient decision-making environment. In contrast it is common practice throughout the country for councillors to have the right to call-in an application during the initial consultation period or during a follow up consultation if and when an amended scheme is received.

Despite asking several staff and members at different levels of the organisation, the peer team was unable to find out what percentage of applications go to committee though it was suggested that the delegation rate for applications was as low as 80%. The unverified estimate of delegated decisions is very low compared to other councils. In a council the size of Craven, the team would expect at least 95% of decisions to be delegated.

Some people felt that there was also an issue with the level of deferrals from planning committee which causes further delay and exacerbates the number of applications being referred to committee which in turn increases the backlog. Obviously officers have to retain the ability to procure/allow a deferral if it is needed, but this should be used sparingly.

The peer team did not have time to consider the effectiveness of enforcement or the scheme of fees and charges.

The peer team would suggest the following to improve processes and to make better use of resources:

- Re-align the Planning Team with the corporate centre of the Council, so that it can act as a key player in the delivery of the Corporate and Local Plans.
- Make better use of available ICT systems and improve self-service and information on the Council's website. For example, customers could be directed to the Planning Portal's 'Interactive House'.
- Include 'Frequently Asked Questions' or similar on the planning part of the website so that customers can find answers online to basic planning questions. Maximise the use of the planning portal.
- Establish and publish, with appropriate timescales, the process for planning applications so that customers know what to expect and when. Ensure that these timescales are adhered to or communicated if not.
- Ensure that all applications are acknowledged and validated in a timely manner.
- Proactively identify potential challenges or problems on an application and how they may be overcome or addressed.
- Review and estimate the cost of the 7-day call in process, recognising the impact it has on the workload of officers and the Planning Committee.
- Identify the proportion of applications that are going to committee and establish whether this is an appropriate level; compare with other neighbouring district councils as appropriate.
- Establish informal meetings, and potentially joint training and workshops, with officers and councillors.
- Ensure that complaints are used as a learning exercise so that mistakes are not repeated.
- Conduct a thorough review of processes and systems. External input from peers would be useful to identify more efficient ways of working.

### 4.3 Engagement

Craven District Council's engagement processes were difficult to identify. At present it is not clear who identifies key contacts and stakeholders and engagement does not seem to happen early enough. In addition, CDC shared with the peer team several examples of complaints being escalated. Complaints about the planning service from the public demonstrate some lack of understanding of the limitations of the planning process, and which parts the Council is responsible for. It was also not clear how complaints were evaluated, shared or dealt with. There needs to be better customer-focus ethos in the Planning Service so that any complaints received are dealt with in a timely and practical manner. The Service should also learn from complaints to prevent the same problems being repeated by officers or councillors.

There needs to be an effective mechanism during the planning process to ensure that people are heard at the appropriate stage of the process. The peer team suggest early engagement with Parish Councils, Ward Councillors and Committee members, with appropriate site visits. This should be guided by clear protocols which are published and made available on the Council's website. Work could also be done with Parish councils to help manage what the planning service, and what parish councils, can and cannot do. Some parish councils clearly feel very frustrated. In some other council areas regular forums have been established with Parish Councils to discuss general principles/scope of the planning/decision making function.

Through discussions and paperwork with the peer team, some frustration could be alleviated through better and more timely communication. Some, however, was due to misunderstanding the differing roles of district and county councils, and on what grounds planning services can or cannot act. The meeting with an independent Planning Lawyer is being arranged.

Furthermore, there needs to be a consistent approach to communication, for example with parish councils and the general public. The peer team was provided with numerous examples where councillors and parishes were unable to reach a planning officer. Examples go back to before the Covid-19 lockdown, although all have agreed that at the start of the lockdown, ICT equipment made this harder. There needs to be a clear, realistic and publicised communication plan, so that all stakeholders understand what information should be available where and when.

During the two days the peer team was unable to meet with many external stakeholders, so it was not possible to talk to many parish councils, agents or developers as a lack of communication meant that they were not invited until very late in the process. It is important to protect the Council's external reputation and the peer team would recommend that virtual meetings with stakeholders are set up as soon as possible.

The peer team recommend that CDC develops and embraces the opportunities to engage in a virtual world. Online webinars, meetings and forums can be more accessible than meetings that take place in the council building as people do not have to travel to attend them. For example, the forum for Agents was stopped with the lockdown but could now be held virtually. Sessions on the new Local Plan were delayed which is essential for all members but especially those on the planning committee who are making decisions now on a fortnightly cycle based on the Local Plan.

Councillors may need more support in using different online platforms, but all councils are coming to terms with this way of working, recognising that there is a cost saving as well as a time saving. It is worth talking to other councils about the online restrictions that they have and the platforms that they use so that CDC can find the best mechanism for its specific engagement. More people can be reached through online platforms than can be reached by a socially distanced physical meeting. Embracing the virtual world will help to make the council more customer-focused.

The peer team would suggest the following to improve engagement with stakeholders:

- Establish clear engagement protocols for the planning process; and work with Communications to refine these
- Improve self-service online so that basic queries can be dealt with by the customer
- Establish and communicate how and when customer queries should be dealt with. A simple automatically generated email can set this out.
- Ensure that planning officers are supported to be proactive about engagement early in the process

#### **4.4 Committee Meetings and decision-making**

Craven District Council's Planning Committee has been meeting online since July 2020. Between them the peer team was able to 'sit-in' on all the planning meetings that took place online since then.

The Planning Committee is where decisions are made and it is not the whole planning process. The planning process should address any problems and issues by planning officers working proactively to solve problems before any application reaches committee. Not doing this can increase the tension between officers and members.

Committee meetings are currently inefficient and can sometimes come across as unprofessional, giving a very poor public image of CDC. Meetings are long and yet have short agendas, currently with a maximum of three planning applications to be considered. Councillor behaviours do sometimes come across as bullying in nature and this needs to be dealt with. The senior political leadership of the Council together with the Monitoring Officer should take responsibility to address this in order to protect people and the Council's reputation. Potential investors will be viewing the planning committees and would currently be uncertain as to the reaction they may receive. One

of the external stakeholders indicated that they know that in neighbouring authorities the planning process will be more transparent and efficient than in CDC. This would indicate the potential for stakeholders choosing to invest elsewhere. This will inevitably affect the delivery of the Corporate and Local Plans.

Incomplete evidence and inaccurate reports add to the high rate of deferral of planning decisions, which in turn increases the pressure on the planning team. The Committee recently took the decision to meet fortnightly to try to clear the backlog of applications, which adds significant pressure on officers as they spend increased time preparing for committee meetings rather than getting up to date on other aspects of the planning process. At the time of the Review, the workload was ever increasing rather than decreasing. But the Council needs to get to a more-efficient and productive monthly cycle.

Although the committee is aware of the backlog, no-one was able to tell the peer team the extent of it. The team heard that the lack of the planning committees at the start of Covid-19 and the number of items that are seen by the committee has brought about the backlog. A change in the scheme of delegation even if only temporarily would have helped resolve this to some degree.

Neither the committee nor the DM Team have looked at how they should operate to improve efficiency. The peer team heard from members of the committee that there is a common false belief that longer meetings are a sign of good value for money. The peer team would suggest that fully interactive workshop sessions on committee behaviours and conduct should be made mandatory for all planning committee members, as well as the technical issues around planning. The peer team also recommend that the planning team reviews its processes and structure, including looking at how other district councils' planning services operate and set out a clear set of protocols and guidelines that are publicly available.

Not all Planning Committee members have adapted well to the virtual setting. It is important that this is addressed as a matter of urgency, as it adds to the poor public image of the council. One frustrated councillor explained that councillors expect staff to be fully IT competent and that a councillor well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century should also be expected to be IT competent. Some councils have been paper-free for several years and could give advice on how to give appropriate support to councillors to be more comfortable with the virtual environment. Covid-19 has changed the way councils have to work, like many other organisations, and it is important that CDC is seen to be progressive and flexible to meet customer needs.

The peer team would suggest the following to improve committee meetings and decision-making:

- Ensure that Planning Committee members come online at least 15 minutes before the start of the meeting so that all technological problems can be addressed before the meeting starts.



- Improve the visual appearance of the committee online. For example, having standard backgrounds (which could be different for officers and councillors), identifying who people are (currently not enough space to read full names on bottom of screen)
- Set up mandatory interactive workshop with all committee members on behaviours and conduct and on making committees effective; work with Democratic Services to put this in place
- Set up mandatory interactive training for members and officers on technical planning matters, as well as interpreting the Local Plan, and roles and responsibilities within planning; work with Legal Services to put this in place.
- Set up mandatory interactive training for members and officers on proactive engagement; work with Communications to put this in place.
- Establish a stakeholder engagement element early in the planning process so that the Planning Committee can focus on making decisions
- Ensure that reports to committee are accurate, and that supporting evidence is complete, and that if possible, no document is tabled on the day of the meeting. To facilitate this, consider moving committee meeting to a different day of the week.
- The political leadership of the Council to address poor member behaviour at committee meetings
- Establish a briefing session to discuss how the meeting will work prior to every meeting. Use this to address practicalities and be sure that the Chair is clear on procedures.
- Enhance the Chair's briefing to ensure it aids the practicalities of working through the agenda. This would include the order of speakers, monitoring the length of time for each speaker, rather than looking at the details of each application. The Legal and Democratic Services teams should be able to help with this.

## 5. Signposting to further support

- Councillor support and improvement – LGA '[Highlighting Political Leadership](#)' lists several areas of councillor support, including Member/Officer relations, chairing skills, and effective decision-making.
- Online learning modules for councillors available [here](#)
- Chairing Committees – LGA has a series of webinars specifically aimed at supporting councillors, which includes chairing committees all available [here](#)
- Peer to Peer support – Planning Chair to Planning Chair can be provided by the Planning Advisory Service
- Examples of online Planning Committees – Maidstone, West Suffolk. Please note that all councils are learning about online meetings, and all need some improvement.
- Cornwall protocols and the role of councils in planning  
<https://www.cornwall.gov.uk/environment-and-planning/planning/local-councils/>

## 6. Next steps

### 6.1 Immediate next steps

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

To support you in your improvement journey the Peer Team have identified a number of key recommendations, some of which you may already have in hand. We welcome your response to these recommendations within the next three months through the development of an action plan.

Your Principal Adviser, Mark Edgell ([mark.edgell@local.gov.uk](mailto:mark.edgell@local.gov.uk)) will be in contact to assist the council going forward and to provide additional support, advice and guidance on any areas for development and improvement and he will be happy to discuss this.

In the meantime, we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with the Council throughout the peer challenge. In addition to signposting in the report, we will endeavour to continue providing examples of practice and further information and guidance about the issues we have raised in this report to help inform ongoing consideration.

### 6.2 Follow up visit

The LGA and Craven District Council discussed a follow-up visit, when Covid-19 allows. It might be appropriate to consider further online support in the meantime.