



Growth, Infrastructure & Housing Select Committee – Member Engagement in Planning Rapid Review

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Introduction

I am Chris Poll, Buckinghamshire Councillor for Ivinghoe and Vice-Chairman of the Growth, Infrastructure and Housing Select Committee. In October 2021, the Select Committee invited me to lead a rapid review group to investigate Member Engagement in Planning and I was joined in this by four other colleagues, Cllrs Andrea Baughan, Michael Bracken, Peter Brazier and Nic Brown. Whilst this review is very internally focussed, looking primarily at the working relationships and practices between planning officers and elected members, I very much hope that by promoting a culture of collaboration and trust between officer and members within the Council, our residents and other partners, such as town and parish councils, will also feel the benefit of the recommendations we are making.

I would like to extend my thanks to my colleagues on the review group, the planning staff who we spoke to and all members and officers who completed our online survey, as well as to the Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration, Gareth Williams for his contribution. I would also like to thank Stephen Reed, Development Manager at Durham County Council, for taking the time to speak to members and giving us some insight into how the planning process works in another large unitary authority.

Cllr Chris Poll, February 2022



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Aim of the Inquiry

As part of a service improvement programme, the Planning and Environment service had identified a need to ensure that members are well-supported to deal with enquiries from residents in connection with planning matters. For members who sit on one of the 5 Area Planning Committees (APCs) or on the Strategic Sites Committee (SSC), statutory training must be undertaken before the committees can make any decisions. In addition, Induction training was also provided for all members following the May 2021 elections, to raise their awareness of planning issues.

Buckinghamshire Council has 147 elected members and the Planning service are dealing with circa 13,000 planning applications and 1,650 enforcement enquiries per annum. This generates a significant amount of queries/liaison between planning officers and members, therefore it is important that member engagement is meaningful and can resolve issues at an early stage. With this in mind, the Planning and Environment service were keen to work with the members of the rapid review group to identify what changes could be made that might improve engagement between members and planning officers.

Methodology

In order to gather evidence, the review group held a number of meetings and conducted an online survey of both planning staff and elected members.

4th November 2021 – Initial meeting with Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration, Head of Planning and Development and other senior planning staff

17th-26th November 2021 – Online survey of elected members and planning staff.

59/147 Members responded which is 40% response rate. There were 89 responses from planning staff. Anonymised comments from the surveys feature in blue text in this report to illustrate certain points.

21st December 2021 – MS Teams meeting with Stephen Reed, Planning Development Manager, Durham County Council

21st January 2022 - Review Group meeting to consider evidence and findings



Context

Buckinghamshire Council launched in April 2020, a new Unitary Council replacing five legacy councils and one of the key priorities was to create one effective Planning service. This was always going to be a complicated task – whilst the National Planning Policy Framework applies across the country, Local Planning Policy varies across each of the former legacy Council areas, working practices and customs were significantly different and a number of different planning software systems were being used. In addition, legacy teams were not fully staffed, which meant that the new authority inherited a backlog of planning applications waiting to be determined.

At the end of March 2020, all Council staff had been asked to work from home where possible as the country went into lockdown due to the Covid 19 pandemic. This meant that planning staff who were going through a staffing restructure following unitarisation now had to work remotely and it was impossible to physically meet up with colleagues. Some senior planning managers were also redeployed to deal with the Council's Covid 19 response at this time. During the pandemic, there was a significant increase in the number of planning applications submitted, both nationally and locally – as people were unable to travel and many people were working from home, their attention turned to making changes and improvements to their home.

In 2021 planning application submissions rose in every English region; February 2021 saw a 25% increase across the country compared to the previous year. In March 2021 Buckinghamshire had the biggest spike in applications since 2017. This was followed by a prolonged period of demand, thankfully dropping away towards the latter part of the year. The Development Management team responded by increasing rates of determination. The number of applications being determined was around 28% higher when comparing April-June 2020 with the same period in 2021. Since August 2021 the planning service has sustained this effort and is determining more applications than received.

In May 2021, local elections which had been postponed in 2020 were held and Buckinghamshire Council's first intake of 147 councillors, including 55 brand new councillors were welcomed. All members appointed to one of the five Area Planning Committees (North, Central, East, South and West) or the Strategic Sites Committee, which considers applications for larger developments, received training to enable them to make informed decisions. In addition, planning training for all members was also available. These training sessions were well-attended and delivered virtually via MS Teams.

Due to the ongoing Covid 19 restrictions, by Autumn 2021 when this review began, it is fair to say that very few elected members had physically met with planning officers and even contact over the telephone had been limited due to the high caseloads that planning staff had been faced with. Some members were frustrated that they could not get updates on resident's planning applications in a timely manner and officers were perhaps more reticent in picking up the phone to discuss a case with a member, who they had never met or spoken to previously and because they knew that they may also be delivering 'bad news'. On the other hand, some members who felt acutely aware of the pressures that planning staff were under, were reluctant to disturb them and relied heavily on email communication when perhaps a short phone call could have resolved a number of queries in a short space of time.

In summary, in the first two years of Buckinghamshire Council, the Planning service has found itself in a 'perfect storm' of staff shortages, an existing backlog of planning applications (and enforcement issues), introduction of new management and team structures and a significant increase in demand during the Covid 19 pandemic. These difficulties were then compounded by the challenges of remote working without access to one consistent planning software system and a lack of 'tried and tested' methods of liaising with a large elected member body of 147 councillors, working in 3 member wards.

Key Findings & Recommendations

After carefully considering the evidence we collected through interviews, alongside the survey responses from both members and planning staff, the review group wish to report the following observations and key findings:

- Members of the review group and also those members surveyed had found staff in the planning teams to be very professional and helpful, although it was noted that it had sometimes been more difficult to contact them during the lockdown period and some queries had required a degree of chasing. It was understood that members of the public sometimes felt that they were being ‘fobbed off’ when their planning application remained undetermined and members wanted to ensure that they were working together with planning staff to help the process run as smoothly as possible.
- Members could be important advocates for the planning team out in the community as well as being useful sources of very local information.
- It was noted that the backlog of work combined with the significant increase in planning applications during the lockdown period had led to high workloads and pressure for staff and increased emails and phone calls from members also added to that. It was therefore important that members should be encouraged to ‘self-serve’ where possible – if they could access information for themselves and felt confident in dealing with basic planning queries from their residents, then this could help to relieve pressure on staff.
- With this in mind, the review group propose that a Member Planning Handbook should be produced to provide members with practical information that will assist them in dealing with local planning casework. This should be online, but in a format that would allow elements of it to be printed off if members wish to do so. It should focus very much on practical advice to support members in dealing with local planning casework, for example, a clear explanation of how a member of the public can get involved in the planning process and how they should go about it, lists of useful contacts and what specialist teams need to be involved when and an Acronym Busting guide. Planning staff will probably have a very good idea of frequently asked questions which could help to inform the content of a handbook and members of the review group would be willing to work with officers to refine it further.

Recommendation 1 - A Member Planning Handbook should be produced to provide members with practical information that will assist them in dealing with local planning casework.

- Following on from this recommendation and the idea of members being able to ‘self-serve’ the review group discussed the benefits of being able to access a GIS map which contains a lot of information pertinent to planning discussions such as flood plains and conservation areas, as well as historical planning application data. An example can be seen at this link - <https://www.aylesburyvaldc.gov.uk/quick-map-search>.
- It was noted that access to GIS had been available to members at some of the legacy councils but not all of them and members were uncertain as to the current availability. The review group believe this would be a useful tool for members, alongside the Member Planning Handbook.

“I have just learned about the GIS map and its many layers. Access to this could save everyone a lot of time and repeat questions”

Recommendation 2 - All members should be able to access and receive training on how to use a GIS map to enable them to look up planning application details and other useful information such as flood plains, conservation areas etc to help them respond to planning queries from residents.

- The Cabinet Member was keen to emphasise that part of the planning service improvement plan was looking at quick wins to help staff to assess applications more quickly, which was key to addressing the backlog. Householder templates had been simplified and a risk-based approach was being encouraged to streamline the process. In addition, a checklist for agents was being introduced to enable their applications to be reviewed more efficiently.
- It was hoped that slight changes to working practices would help to boost morale of staff, as well as making the service more responsive to customers. It was also clear that a culture of collaboration between members and officers was key. We heard from Stephen Reed, Development Manager at Durham, that it was important that members and planning staff work together and this approach had been encouraged at Durham from the very beginning of their unitary journey. It had been essential in delivering the Council's ambitious regeneration plans and the planning staff worked hard to build relationships with members through regular training sessions and dealing with members' queries in a timely manner. It was noted that Durham had been fortunate to have a fully staffed team from the outset.
- From the survey results and discussions with senior planning staff, it was also clear that whilst remote working had some advantages, it had led to a disconnect between colleagues and between members and planning officers. As the planning service was trying to establish itself in a new configuration, as well as recruiting a number of new staff when the pandemic hit, it was obviously quite challenging for everyone to adapt. However, as already mentioned, the number of planning applications processed between April and June 2021 was 28% higher than in the corresponding months of 2020 which is all credit to the hard work of staff and the revised working practices that were introduced.
- We heard of some incidences where members had been rude to junior members of staff and some survey responses indicated that there had been occasions where members had not treated officers as equals. This could knock the confidence of more inexperienced staff and led to senior managers wanting to protect their team members. The review group were clear that this behaviour was unacceptable and that all staff should be treated with courtesy and respect. All officers should be able to interact with members, as restricting this to the realm of senior managers would only make the situation more difficult in the long term.
- The review group would like to make a number of recommendations (3-5) to promote a more collaborative approach between members and officers, as follows:

Recommendation 3 - A short guidance note should be provided for officers and members explaining the benefits of working in partnership, to enable public participation in planning and promote a wider understanding of the process. This should set out reasonable expectations in terms of how queries will be managed, including timescales.

- In connection with recommendation 3 above, whilst the review group acknowledge that the Planning Protocol referred to in the Council's constitution does cover expected behaviours between officers and members and advice around planning decision making, it was felt that a brief, more informal guidance note might be useful in helping to set expectations for members and officers.

Recommendation 4 - A series of 'informal' Meet the Planners events should be held to enable members and officers to meet and chat in a relaxed atmosphere, to help to cultivate trust and collaboration.

- Whilst recommendation 4 could appear to be a relatively trivial suggestion, it was noted from survey responses that some staff had not had a single interaction with an elected member since 2020 and some members were finding it difficult to know who to go to when they had a planning query.
- With 147 members and over 200 staff working in planning, this will not be a situation that can be remedied overnight, but when people are able to put a face to a name and remember meeting someone, then it is much easier to pick up the phone and have a useful discussion. Some members of the review

group described meeting a new senior planner as a 'breath of fresh air', as after a short face to face meeting they had been able to answer a number of planning queries and reassure the members that they wanted to assist them in dealing with concerns raised by their parish council and residents.

"Since vesting day (and lockdown) I've had little interaction with members, and most of my teams have had no engagement at all. It is very difficult for members to trust us to do our jobs and deliver their agendas if they've not met us (and vice-versa) This needs to change."

Recommendation 5 - Political Awareness training should be offered to planning staff to support them in working effectively with Members. This could be facilitated by the Democratic Services team, who would work with the Head of Planning and Development to agree content and delivery timescales.

- As noted above, the review group were concerned to see evidence of a disconnect between members and officers following the service restructure and the remote working that had been necessary during the pandemic. In addition, it was acknowledged that a negative experience with a member might lead to officers being reticent to proactively communicate with members going forward.
- We heard from the Cabinet Member that he wanted to encourage officers to pick up the phone for a discussion rather than relying on sending lengthy technical emails, which might lead to more questions than answers. We also noted that Stephen Reed, Development Manager in Durham reported that building strong working relationships with members was a key skill for anyone wanting to build a long career in planning.
- With this in mind, the review group believe it would be helpful to offer some political awareness training to staff, particularly relatively new planning officers who may not have had a lot of experience in working in local government before. This could be facilitated by our in-house Democratic Services team who have delivered training on working with members for officers across the Council in the past.

"I haven't really ever had any interaction with the members. There seems to be little scope for interaction unless you are a manager or above."

- During our review, the Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration advised the review group that he was hoping to introduce a new system of Member Planning Surgeries from January 2022. These would be pre-bookable slots for members to meet with a planning officer, either in person (Covid 19 permitting) or via MS Teams. Members would be able to outline what they wished to discuss e.g. progress of specific planning applications or enforcement issues to ensure that the correct member of staff could attend and would have time to collate relevant information.
- These surgeries have now gone live, with members being able to book a 20-minute slot and agendas and action notes are circulated by a Planning Member Liaison Officer.
- As part of our online surveys, we asked both members and officers for their thoughts on the suggestion of Member Planning Surgeries. 80% of members were either positive or very positive about the proposal, with many holding up the Local Area Technician Surgeries as an example of how this could work well. Officers were more neutral in their response to the proposal, with some questioning whether it would add to an already heavy workload.
- Whilst members welcome the introduction of this new initiative, they would not want the Member Planning Surgeries to limit day to day interaction between members and officers around a quick planning query. A short chat on the phone is a simple way to save a lot of time and ease concerns.
- The review group would like to revisit how the new Member Planning Surgeries are working once they have had sufficient time to become established. It seems sensible to review progress after 6 months. This would then allow for any proposed changes to be considered over the Summer and be in place for September 2022.

Recommendation 6 - There should be a review of the new Member Surgeries in June 2022 to consider the level of participation and feedback from both members and officers regarding their effectiveness.

APPENDIX

Rapid Review Scope

| | |
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| Title | Member Engagement in Planning |
| Signed-off by | Cllr David Carroll, Chairman, Growth, Infrastructure and Housing Select Committee |
| Author | Kelly Sutherland, Scrutiny Manager |
| Date | 14 th October 2021 |
| Rapid Review Group Membership | Cllrs Chris Poll, Andrea Baughan, Michael Bracken, Peter Brazier, Nic Brown |
| Scrutiny Team Resource | Kelly Sutherland, Scrutiny Manager will manage this rapid review. |
| Lead Cabinet Member | Cllr Gareth Williams, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration |
| Lead Service Officer | Christine Urry, Head of Planning and Development |
| What is the problem that is trying to be solved? | <p>As part of a service improvement programme, the Planning and Environment service has identified a need to ensure that members are well-supported to deal with enquiries from residents in connection with planning matters. For members who sit on one of the 5 Area Planning Committees (APCs) or on the Strategic Sites Committee (SSC), statutory training must be undertaken before the committees can make any decisions. Induction training is also provided for all members to raise their awareness of planning.</p> <p>Buckinghamshire Council has 147 elected members and the Planning service are dealing with circa 13,000 planning applications and 1,650 enforcement enquiries per annum. This generates a significant amount of queries/liaison between planning officers and members, therefore it is important that member engagement is meaningful and can resolve issues at an early stage.</p> |
| What might the Rapid Review achieve? | <p>Key lines of enquiry:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify key concerns of members and officers in the service (an open & frank exchange of views and ideas) Define what 'member engagement' means? Identify what is already offered by the service and assess its effectiveness– what works? What could work better? Speak to other comparable local authorities to gain insight into their approach and identify best practice ideas that BC might wish to consider adopting. (via MS Teams) <p>By investigating the above, outcomes will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased trust between members and officers Members will feel more confident to engage in planning queries with residents and to advocate for the planning service Reduction in number of emails to the Cabinet Member and specific complaints about a lack of communication <p>This is an ideal opportunity for Select Committee members to influence the evolving culture and work practices of the Planning and Environment service.</p> |
| Is the issue of significance to Buckinghamshire as a whole and is the topic within the remit of the Select Committee? | Yes |

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| What work is underway already on this issue? | This project was identified by the Planning Improvement Board and it has been suggested that the Select Committee investigates as this will enable the voice of members to be amplified and recommendations to be made to Cabinet. |
| Are there any key changes that might impact on this issue? | Buckinghamshire Local Plan Planning White Paper Both of the above are in early stages and therefore unlikely to impact on this rapid review. |
| What are the key timing considerations? | This will be a focussed rapid review to enable the Planning and Environment service to respond to any recommendations for improvement as soon as possible. Post-election and post-service redesign presents an ideal opportunity to propose new ideas to continue to improve/refine the service. |
| Who are the key stakeholders & decision-makers? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elected Members • Planning & Environment Officers • CM for Planning & Regeneration • Service Director – Planning & Environment • Head of Planning and Development |
| What is out of scope? | Liaison with Parish and Town Councils |
| What media/communications support do you want? | |

Evidence-gathering Methodology

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| What types of methods of evidence-gathering will you use? |
| List them here: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desktop research • Meetings • Discussions with other local authorities • Possible member survey/call for evidence |
| How will you involve service-users and the public? |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Main focus of the rapid review is internal communications and engagement between elected members and planning officers. |

Outline Project Plan

| Stage | Key Activity | Dates |
|--------------------|---|--------------------------|
| Scoping | Inquiry Scope Agreed by Select Committee | 14 th October |
| Evidence-gathering | Evidence-gathering phase – anticipate 3-4 meetings | November/December |
| Reporting | Final Inquiry Group report with recommendations completed (signed-off by SC Chairman) | |
| | Report published for Select Committee | |
| | Select Committee agrees report to go forward to decision-makers | |
| | Cabinet/Partner considers recommendations | |

Definition of a Rapid Review

A Rapid Review is a focussed investigation with fairly narrow parameters, that can be conducted in a relatively short time scale. For example, you may hold three or four meetings as a review group – one to establish and understand what the key issues are, one or two to gather evidence from service users or other authorities to gain insight into best practice and a final meeting to discuss what members have heard and identify any useful recommendations. A rapid review format will be useful when considering less complex issues and may be helpful in delivering ‘quick wins’ for the Council’s service users and residents.