

Planning Transformation Programme

March 2023

PAS Report



Planning Advisory Service

The Planning Advisory Service (PAS) provides consultancy and peer support, learning events and online resources to help local authorities understand and respond to planning reform.

- Funded by the Local Government Association
- Act as critical friend to Local Planning Authorities

Peer Challenge and DM Process Review

- PAS Invited by the Council – as ‘critical friends’
- Not an inspection or audit

PAS worked with the Planning Service based on self-assessment, wider document review, on-site interviews, and focus groups

- Committee Member training:
 - Defendable Decision Making
 - 5 Year Housing Land Supply

PAS Looked at...

- Development management performance.
- Efficiencies and effectiveness of Planning Committee
- Enforcement
- Relationship with customers and management of complaints
- Planning staff structures

These were examined across five broad themes covering:

1. Vision and leadership
2. Service Performance & Management
3. Community engagement
4. Partner engagement
5. Achieving outcomes

Over- arching messages

- *There is a significant breakdown in communication and trust between Officers, Members and the public HOWEVER you have a great opportunity to reset and rebuild that trust and strengthen leadership*
- *The Planning Dept is under resourced and if you continue as you are the service will break and everyone will suffer as a consequence. Planning is a major income source but it must be sufficiently resourced to generate income*
- *Whilst many of your practices and procedures are very good, others are causing you to work inefficiently and these must be changed in parallel with a review of resources*
- *There is a clear willingness from officers and Members to learn from elsewhere and from each other – embrace this*

Vision & Leadership

Strengths

- The Planning service has some excellent practices and clearly has experienced, knowledgeable and dedicated staff
- Chair of Planning is keen to learn from best practice and there is a willingness by Members to learn from other authorities.
- Both officers and members want to change Planning Committee to have shorter/more productive meetings
- SPD2 will be withdrawn and opportunity for officers and members to work together to rebuild trust and be confident of making sound decisions
- Member training is valued and there is a commitment to ongoing training
- Manifestos in the Local Election recognised the need for change. There is an opportunity to de-politicise Planning with the right Leadership approach

Vision & Leadership

Areas for Improvement

- The service is currently firefighting and losing. Take a strategic view on efficiencies and best use of available resources.
- There is a need to re-build trust and relationships: Members Officers - Residents
- Planning sub committee not clearly understood and felt to be unnecessary
- A need to invest in staff – Training and Mentoring
- Officers and Members are the subject of personal attack

Vision & Leadership

Recommendations

- The Planning transformation is part of a Corporate transformation. Consequences to under resourcing and recognition of the income generation
- Improve engagement with residents, partners and developers. Consider additional Comms resource and a strategy to counter the negative narrative that has become the norm including 'Inside Croydon'
- Learn from best practice elsewhere - PAS as an option for member training
- Invest in staff to ensure retention and consider mentoring for key staff
- Utilise the willingness on all sides to re-set relationships and trust between officers and members. This should result in shorter more productive Planning meetings

Service Performance & Management

Strengths

- High quality of officers – professional and dedicated
- Very high quality and clear officer reports
- Some good experiences from developers on the pre app process
- Some sound processes and procedures in place
- Current staffing structure (rather than actual staff numbers) meets the Planning requirements of Croydon.

Service Performance & Management

Areas for improvement

- Rethink Validation process
- IT set up is not fit for purpose and wastes resources
- Too much management time taken up with complaints and issues with vexatious complainants
- Responses to enforcement enquiries are not meeting resident's and Member expectations
- Poor communication on CIL and S106 spend leads to mistrust within the community
- Lack of internal consultee support impacting on performance and sound decision making e.g. Legal advice is harming delivery and risking reputation

Service Performance & Management

Recommendations

- Review approach to validation - performance versus customer service.
- Focus on IT investment as part of a wider transformation programme for the Council to speed up processes and avoid wasteful use of officer time
- Review management capacity in Enforcement to meet Member and residents' expectations
- Carry out an enforcement 'blitz' to reduce number of cases and refocus cases in accordance with the priorities set out in the enforcement policy

Community engagement

Strengths

- Some good relationships built with individual officers
- Members and Officers want to rebuild trust with the community
- Residents and agents forums are held
- Engaged and active residents associations

Community engagement

Areas for improvement

- A complete breakdown in relationships. Need to do the basics right on communication and engagement e.g. answer the phone, emails etc
- Lack of communication has created suspicion and lack of transparency that has created a breakdown in trust
- Personal attacks has undermined confidence, impacted wellbeing and affected ability to recruit

Community engagement

Recommendations

- Develop a strategy for effective engagement and communication to rebuild trust
- Undertake targeted enforcement initiatives that demonstrated delivery to the public and Members
- Carry out some quick wins with the community e.g. Website improvements and customer response times
- Provide transparency on how the Council implements the 'Chinese wall' and other conflicts of interest.
- Embrace residents' desire to get involved and work with Planning so that it is a positive relationship

Partnership engagement

Strengths

- Good relationships between individual officers and consultees
- Consultees / stakeholders think well of individual planning officers
- Pre-app and PPAs considered well by agents for Major developments

Partnership engagement

Areas for improvement

- Regular meetings to discuss issues, use this as training for more junior staff
- Lack of confidence from junior officers to make decisions
- There is the opportunity to upskill all officers, learn from each other
- Build workflows/processes, set timescales, stick to them
- Work more closely internally, Why recharges?
- PPA funding is not being maximised and an important income source is potentially being lost

Partnership engagement

Recommendations

- Time management – standard responses, standing advice, standard conditions, basic training and upskilling
- Refocus pre app and PPAs procedures to provide better service to customer and maximise income
- Continue Major/Strategic apps meeting. Training tool for junior officers,
- Re-instate regular liaison / catch ups with internal and external consultees
- Flow chart – engage with internal consultees, so they know what advice you expect from them
- Assess consultations – Can officers upskill to do minors. Review who you consult and why

Achieving outcomes

Strengths

- Sound scheme of delegation
- The process of the Local Plan Review is an example of good plan making
- The willingness of Members to engage in the review of the strategy and the benefits of the local approach to the London Plan intensification policy.
- Members are keen to undertake training and learn from elsewhere on all areas of Planning
- Dedicated and knowledgeable Planning officers to deliver the Council's objectives

DM Planning Transformation Action Plan

The recommendations of the PAS reviews have been grouped in the following areas:

- Resource and Performance Management
- Technological Improvements
- Officer Training, Development, Morale, and Retention
- Internal Process Review
- Communication and Engagement
- Planning Policy, Procedure Development
- Planning Committee

Planning Transformation Programme

Planning Transformation Programme

- Responds to successive budget savings
- Responds to the Mayor's Business Plan
- Responds to National Planning Policy changes
- Responds to Corporate Governance Reviews
- Appointment of a Planning Improvement Manager to provide capacity and resource and drive delivery

Mayors Business Plan

Outcome 2: Croydon is a place of opportunity for business, earning and learning

Outcome 4: Croydon is a cleaner, safer and healthier place, a borough we're proud

1. Priority: Support the regeneration of Croydon's town and district centres, seeking inward investment and grants

The Council will work with businesses and residents to develop a new, sustainable plan to regenerate Croydon town centre that responds to changes in the retail and leisure industry. Together we will develop collaborative strategies, seek inward investment and apply for grants to revive our high streets and district hubs, and unleash Croydon's economic potential.

With our partners we will:

- Develop and deliver a clear shared vision with businesses, developers and residents to steer our town centre and high street recovery.
- Launch an exciting inward investment campaign for Croydon to attract new businesses and jobs in growth sectors.

4. Priority: Ensure new homes are safe, well-designed and in keeping with the local area

New development will be design-led, not density-led. While we must continue to plan for new homes, schemes must respect the views of local people, enhance the character of our places, and recognise the need for amenity space.

We will:

- Review Croydon's Local Plan to remove intensification zones, support sustainable development and emphasise design and character over density.
- Revoke the SPD2 Suburban Design Guide.
- Review conservation areas to ensure the borough's special places are protected for generations to come.
- Review the planning and enforcement service to identify the resources needed to improve the service for customers.
- Enforce policies to tackle the cumulative impact of houses in multiple occupation.

Governance and initial scope of programme

