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Dear Tracy

Warwick District Council – Planning Peer Challenge – 16-18 January 2013

On behalf of the peer team, I would like to say what a pleasure it was to be invited into Warwick District Council (WDC) to deliver a peer challenge of your planning service. The team felt privileged to be allowed to conduct its work with the support of you and your colleagues. The team appreciates the welcome and hospitality provided by Warwick District Council and would like to thank everybody that they met during the process for their time and contributions.

This letter is a summary of the findings of the planning peer challenge organised by the Local Government Association in cooperation with the Planning Advisory Service. It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer challenges are improvement focused and tailored to meet individual Councils' needs. The peers used their experience and knowledge to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The five guiding questions for the planning peer challenge focus on:

- **Vision and leadership** - Is there a clear and locally distinctive planning vision for the area together with a strategy that sets out how the council will address planning needs for sustainable communities, housing and the local economy?
- **Community engagement** - How will the Council enable citizens and communities to shape their localities in a way that meets their needs and aspirations?
- **Effectiveness of the development management function** - Does the Council provide a good service to users and stakeholders?
- **Partnership engagement** - How will the Council work with other councils, agencies and communities to coordinate where necessary and work productively?
- **Achieving outcomes** - How well is your planning service supporting local priority outcomes?

In particular, the Council wanted the challenge team to focus on two areas of your work:

- **Planning Committee** - Observe and engage with members of the planning committee and to provide an external viewpoint on its working, in particular given the Council's vision and issues around its Local Plan. Feeding into your current review led by the Chief Executive, you wanted the peer challenge team to focus on its purpose, workload and attitudes and behaviours in particular
- **Local Plan** – you identified five specific areas for us to focus on:
 - **Infrastructure:** Is Warwick DC doing enough to ensure infrastructure is planned in a coordinated way – especially across different land ownerships that are in close proximity. Are you working effectively with infrastructure providers (both internal and external)
 - **Allocation of sites in villages:** How effective is your approach to deciding where village sites should be working? Are you engaging effectively with stakeholders in this process?
 - **Timetable:** Is your timetable for Local Plan and CIL realistic and achievable?
 - **Process and stakeholder involvement:** Are you involving members in an effective way? Are you working with strategic partners effectively? Is the Local Plan integrating with other WDC strategic and priorities?
 - **5 Year supply of housing land:** you don't have one – what risks does this expose you to and how can you proactively address this issue?

Peers were:

- Councillor Roger Phillips, Cabinet Member and former Leader of Herefordshire Council
- Paul Seddon, Development Service Manager, City of Lincoln Council
- Alan Gomm, Local Development Framework Planning Manager, Borough Council of King's Lynn and West-Norfolk
- Gilian Macinnes, Principal Consultant, Planning Advisory Service
- Anne Brinkhoff, Programme Manager, Local Government Association

This letter provides a summary of the feedback that was presented at the end of our onsite visit. In presenting this feedback the peer challenge team have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants. We hope this will help provide recognition of the progress WDC has made over the last year while also stimulating debate and thinking about future challenges.

1. Vision and Leadership

Strengths

Councillors and senior officers have articulated a strong and passionate vision for the District. *'Making Warwick District a great place to live, work and visit'* was articulated with partners and approved by Council in December 2011. While this vision is centred on employment and growth, it recognises the quality built environment of the District as its key asset and commits to a strong development management framework requiring the development of low carbon environmental sustainability, care for the heritage, high quality design and community and transport infrastructure and the regeneration of areas in need of social and economic improvement.

This vision has been guiding the Council's emerging and integrated strategy and framework across the economy, housing and the Local Plan. Examples are the Jobs, Skills and Employment Strategy and the prospective on Garden Towns, Villages and Suburbs, setting out ideas for proposed Garden Towns and Suburbs as a future planning approach for Warwick. This emerging strategy framework is complex but well integrated and Executive Members and officers are purposeful in pursuing opportunities of sub-regional projects and partnership, for example the Local Enterprise Partnership and the City Deal application which focuses on 're-engineering engineering'. The vision is well understood by Heads of Services.

The Local Plan provides the *'spatial expression of this vision'* and is seen by Executive members and officers as the crucial document to deliver the vision for the Council. The peer challenge team was struck by the high degree of knowledge, understanding and leadership of the Local Plan at member and chief officer level. It is firmly at the 'top table' with regular formal and informal means of communication at Corporate Management Team, meetings of the Executive and regular meetings with the Group Leaders. Given the complexity and importance of the Local Plan this focus and inclusive approach is key to ensure that the plan will deliver the council's vision over the long-term.

Leadership of the Planning Service is strong. The council recognises that a modern, holistic and effective development management service will be the key to bringing forward the future development and regeneration for the District. Until recently, the service was regarded as poor performing with a backlog of over 400 applications as a result of poor performance in determining planning applications in line with targets. The temporary appointment of a Head of Service which is shared with Coventry has brought considerable focus and determination in clearing the backlog, determining applications faster and introducing other service improvements such as electronic notifications as well as a greater deal of consistency in decision making. The peer challenge team heard many positive comments about the Head of Service being a 'breath of fresh air' and doing a 'phenomenal job'.

The council is investing to deliver its vision. Recognising the resource requirements, the Local Plan team are been exempt from savings targets for 12/13. Working to the Deputy Chief Executive but located within the Economic Development team, the Council has contracted two senior project co-ordinators to deliver key sites or major regeneration schemes, for example the Gateway site, Clarendon Arcade and the regeneration around

Leamington Spa station. Both officers bring a set of specific technical skills as well as experience seconding which will benefit not only the schemes they are working on but also the teams they are working with. At times of significant financial challenges for councils this investment highlights not only effective management but also the council's real focus on realising its vision.

The Council's leadership have a big, brave and compelling plan to use Gateway site to release employment land and reduce housing developments in the green belt. Although Council made commitment to the Gateway site back in December 2011, the peer challenge team sensed a considerable level of ambiguity about this scheme and how it relates to the Council's bigger vision. The absence of a documented vision drawing together existing Council objectives and strategies and the Local Plan creates a gap, particularly for planning officers and Planning Committee who require clarity when considering 'other material considerations'. The peer challenge would urge the Council to fill this gap, as soon as possible until the Local Plan has been approved, with a clear document that states the Council's vision that can be publicised and used for decision making purposes.

The Leader and Deputy Leader are committed to the vision and the Local Plan process. Their understanding and commitment was evident from the conversations we had. However, on the whole political leadership could be more visible to ensure that the Local Plan process is and is understood, owned and led by members.

Areas for consideration

The complexity of the vision as well as the absence of an overarching strategic document outlining its key components makes it difficult to achieve engagement and accommodation among all who are integral in delivering it. At this point, the peer challenge team is unsure whether the vision is understood and owned by all who are central to delivering it, in particular the Planning Committee. We are unsure whether this stems from fundamental disagreement with the vision itself or a lack of information and hence understanding. The council has engaged well with internal and external stakeholders in developing the Local Plan and once the overall vision has been approved it will require political leadership to ensure that all councillors understand their 'corporate role' in working to deliver the council's vision. This applies in particular to the development management staff and the planning committee. In the short term the council could engage more and tailor its communication better to the audience. For example we sense a lack of understanding of the whole picture at team leader and officer level within Development Management which needs to be addressed. Similarly, there is a need to brief all members and members of the planning committee about the vision, timescale and their roles in delivering this. As with all planning matters, there will be 'winners and losers' and a big task for the council's political and managerial leadership is to ensure that each councillor understands his or her corporate role versus that of a ward councillor.

While the peer challenge team was impressed with the dynamic and strong leadership in the Development Services, we wondered whether the service has made sufficient progress to introduce a more distributed leadership style. The current dynamic and direct leadership style has been welcome by senior managers as well as staff and Executive members but this is not sustainable in the long-term. With a single Team Leader in Development Services

and a restructure in Economic Development there is a good basis for the Head of Service to set clear performance expectations and provide active support where needed but bring on new people and, over time, delegate more responsibility. Over time this will enable staff at all levels to perform better, increase staff motivation and create additional capacity.

Members and stakeholders form a close community and have the interest of the District at heart. The recent secondments from Coventry have not only brought new skills into the council and a stable effective workforce resource but enabled a degree of challenge of Warwick's practice. The peer challenge team picked up some responses of 'they are not one of us'. While not all that is done in Coventry is applicable to practices in Warwick, we would urge members, officers and stakeholders to regard these secondments as an opportunity to expand horizons and provide opportunities for the professional development of staff. The danger of a close community moving to a closedd community lies in it becoming inward looking and stagnant.

2. Community Engagement

Strengths

Parish and Town Councils (PTC) have good relationships with all District councillors. There was a feeling among PTCs that ward councillors are approachable and are committed to playing an active role at Parish level. This is a strong foundation to achieve good strategic and operational planning outcomes for local communities.

Similarly, PTCs value the engagement, support and training they receive from Development Management specifically and Development Services as a whole. In particular they valued planning officers attending meetings to respond to specific questions or explaining changes in services (for example the introduction of electronic consultations) as well as the engagement and consultation on the Local Plan. On the whole, they feel informed and, importantly, able to have a constructive dialogue with Development Services. This is for example in cases where PTCs can report issues in seeking to protect the quality of places and communities. PTCs felt that they had good access to planning information via the website as well as social media (e.g. twitter) and welcome the prompt notifications of decisions and distribution of decision notices, as well as practical flexibility around dates and notices of applications. Decisions of Planning Committee are e-mailed to parish and town clerks by 9am the next morning which ensures that they can pre-empt and deal with any reactions from their local communities. These comments confirm effective partnership working and highlight the positive impact of the council's decision to invest resources in building relationships between PTCs and the Development management service.

The council are investing in Town Centre Management and have dedicated officer capacity for each of its three market towns. Town Centre Development officers are developing links with Development Management and the planning policy teams and the peer challenge team heard evidence of officers engaging with Town Councils to support the public consultation process on the preferred options in the Local Plan. Town Council officers also form a vital conduit with the neighbourhood planning process.

Through the Conservation Officer, the Council supports a well-respected and active Conservation Forum which meets every three weeks to consider planning and listed buildings applications. The Forum consists of lay professionals and interested parties and provides a knowledgeable and committed external resource for consultation input and pre-application advice. While the peer challenge team heard about effective links in general, we also heard that this resource could be used more effectively and pro-actively at times. We sensed a good degree of awareness and understanding of the broader vision and the importance of local growth. This awareness is crucial in order for the Forum to operate within a wider strategic context and to help realise the Council's strong development framework that includes care for its heritage.

Areas for consideration

Supported by a national grant, the council has some resource available to support the neighbourhood planning process. However, PTCs felt that it was not clear who can access this resource and for how much. Clarification of this is important to avoid competition between PTCs. There is also a need to consider how this resource can be used to identify and disseminate learning so that it reaches a wider audience.

There is a perception among parts of the Community that the Council takes a low level of enforcement action. This was articulated by a range of sources including agents and PTCs. While the peer challenge team was unable to form an independent view about levels of enforcement the council needs to be mindful of this perception. Effective communication of enforcement activity, as well as establishing enforcement protocols and priorities for enforcement action, are the key to ensure an effective service that addresses these views and perceptions. It might be appropriate to devote web-space on this issue or to include it in regular communication with PTCs.

While PTCs understand about opportunities to engage in the Local Plan process, we found that in the main they are concerned about the proposed level of growth and the implications on their local patch. This is understandable given the role and purpose of Parishes and the perspective Parish councillors will adopt. However, Parishes form part of a larger government system and their and their constituents' viability and well-being depends on the socio-economic development of the District (and to some degree sub-region) as a whole. Helping PTCs to recognise the inter-dependencies will be vital to gain their full engagement. Hence the peer challenge team urges the council to engage more and better with PTCs as well as the community at large, shifting the focus from 'convincing the public and PTC' to making the overall aims of the Plan as clear as possible. The peer challenge team acknowledge that you have had extensive consultation but we recommend that you shift the focus from purely focusing on the preferred option to painting the larger vision and the broader requirements for it; including the National Planning Policy Framework's presumption in favour of sustainable growth and how the concept of Localism fits within this assumption.

Not uncommonly, the peer challenge team heard criticism from PTCs that '*our views are largely ignored*'. Drawing on our own experiences, the peer challenge team feels that a misinterpretation of the role of PTCs in the planning process often lies at the heart of this comment. While PTCs are statutory consultees in the process, their comments are

considered within the statutory policy framework for planning. This means that members on the planning committee will consider their comments but have to balance them against a range of other policies and material considerations. Therefore engagement with, and training for, the PTCs to explain the wider context and the decision making framework may be valuable for all involved.

3. Development Management function

Staff within Development Management are motivated and enjoy working for the service. They have a clear sense of purpose and direction and good working relationships within the team and the wider service. Staff appreciate the flexi system and consider that it works well. The re-organisation and introduction of a single team leader as opposed to two area teams is seen as positive in that it has enabled more streamlined management. Examples are more consistent decision making (addressing one of the key issues in recent customer surveys and also our workshop with agents) and implementation of procedural changes, for example the administrative systems, assessment and overall workflow of planning applications. This is a good foundation for a high performing and customer focused service.

More broadly, the restructure within Development Services with team leaders in Development Management, Planning Policy, Economic Development and Regeneration and Building Control provides opportunities for better liaison between the individual teams. Team Leaders meet regularly with the Head of Service to discuss performance and service wide issues and developments. However, more is required for this information and joint discussions to permeate to officer level. The arrangements of a shared Head of Service have brought much needed external challenge, focus and rigor but mean that the Head of Service has less time to engage with individual officers and 'be' in the services. This requires more delegation to Team Leaders and for Team Leaders to step up, use their initiative and act more corporately.

Since the arrival of the new Head of Service in April 2012, the service has achieved very impressive improvements. The backlog in applications has reduced from 400 to around 200 outstanding applications. Decision making time has improved significantly. A review of the performance reports over the last 3 months shows that the percentage of applications decided within 8 weeks is high, ranging between 70% and 100% in the fortnightly reports since mid-October. Similarly, the average number of days taken to make decisions is falling continuously. The focus on achieving the key customer measures has paid dividends. The peer challenge team heard about other service improvements such as introducing electronic consultations.

Front line staff are becoming empowered and supported to use their professional skills. For example there is effective use of conditioning matters, for example in Open Space and Affordable Housing that were previously dealt with by dedicated S106 officers. Another example is that officers are now dealing with discharge of conditions which were previously signed off by team leaders. This will support staff to develop skills and increase motivation.

Pre-application advice is highly valued by agents and internal consultees. The peer challenge team heard many positive comments on the quality, informality, accessibility and the fact that the council is not charging for this service. The council is generating significant income from planning fees and sees free pre-application advice as an effective measure to encourage applicants to provide 'clean applications' which can be determined quickly. This is a good investment in generating a fast and efficient process.

Service improvements are recognised by customers. Between July 2012 and December 2012 the service has recorded 23 compliments. This compares to 8 complaints between April 2012 and to date. The peer challenge team felt that this was frankly 'stunning' and will be the envy of many Councils!

Areas for consideration

While we acknowledge the need to maintain the service improvements, it brings with it a danger that officers and customers are required to focus on the urgent rather than the important with implications for quality but also internal learning and development. The peer challenge team heard a consistent message that the focus on speed was too strong now and that this creates pressures for officers in the 'eights' week and for applicants who feel pushed to withdraw the application and resubmit. The challenge team feel that the 'tanker has turned' with better systems, processes and a changed mindset among planning officers and we would encourage you to consider the next phase for a quality service, for example by putting a stronger focus on working with applicants and developers to ensure that they submit quality information early in the application process.

Given the current and likely future focus on development within the District there is a need to ensure that measures are in place to protect the resilience of the service as a whole. In other words that the current progress is not dependent on individuals that might leave but that it is embedded across the service. More specifically this means that there is a need for clearly understood protocols and processes, for example by:

- Developing a procedures manual that covers not only the administration of applications but also the approaches to the whole of the development management workload.
- Ensuring clear lines of responsibility, delegation and support systems for officers to allow them to take responsibility.

Achieving greater resilience and continuous improvement requires staff to be further developed and delegation improved. This will require officers to develop skills and confidence to make decisions, and to develop a higher profile with members, PTCs and stakeholders as well as at Planning Committee. While planning officers must naturally be supported in continuous professional development, the peer challenge team saw other training needs around developing greater political skills and competencies and appreciating the broader corporate context for the planning service. Some of these competencies will need to be developed through 'softer' means, such as regular informal and formal networking, quality supervisions on 'difficult planning decisions with

Team Leader or Head of Service' and progressively taking on a greater role on planning committee and meetings with PTCs.

Service improvements are required in Enforcement. At present the Council's enforcement policy is out of date and enforcement priorities have not been published, but we understand that this is now a priority. The Council has no dedicated budget for direct action which means that they are unable to resolve enforcement issues, by removing or remedying the breach themselves. This can be an important tool in the enforcement services tool box that improves public confidence in the system.

The peer challenge team was concerned about service capacity among the tree, conservation and environmental health officers. They are unable to respond to all written consultations and there is a danger that they are considered as 'blockages' within the system. The council may want to consider the need for additional capacity or to revise current processes. For example, with some additional training elements of advice could be delivered by case officers with the experts focusing on more technical issues.

4. Partnership engagement

Strengths

The Council's overall growth strategy and the new Duty to Co-operate make partnership working increasingly important. The peer challenge team saw and heard of trusted relationships with Coventry and neighbouring District Councils. For example, the Council has a number of officer secondments in addition to the shared Head of Service. This buys in expertise at short notice and is a cost effective way of managing demand without relying on agency staff. In addition, it provides officers at both Coventry and Warwick with opportunities to develop and grow.

Similarly partnerships in planning policy and development management are strong and mutually beneficial. The peer challenge team heard of good relationships between at planning policy level and effective links with the LEP and City Deal. For example the Deputy Chief Executive is seconded for part of his time to the City Deal project. This not only ensures that Warwick will be at the heart of its development but demonstrates that capacity and skills transfer through secondments can be a two way process.

There is good partnership working on specific joint development schemes. An example is the Gateway scheme where stakeholders and key consultees such as the highway authority spoke positively about the efforts of partners to work together in order to bring the application to Committee in a timely manner. This is a major achievement and bears well for the future.

The peer challenge team considered the shared Head of Service as a real strength and a high profile commitment to partnership working. She has brought about service improvement and introduced new skills. The shared appointment has also triggered a better understanding among both Councils of each other's policies, processes and cultures which is crucial in the context of a range of cross-boundary development schemes. In

addition, the post has played an important role in helping the service to look beyond its boundary and learn from (while not necessarily adopting everything) for a Council with a more urban and regeneration focus. The mutual understanding of specific processes in particular is beneficial in the context of joint development schemes.

The council engages with internal consultees in a timely manner. Discussions with environmental health drainage and contract services (Green Space) highlight that discussions are effective and timely, although there is room to further improve for these discussions to happen pro-actively. A continued and improved understanding and communication of the council's broader vision for economic development and regeneration through team leaders and managers will be crucial in reducing any existing silo-mentalities.

Areas for consideration

Within the Council's growth strategy, the expanding role of the LEP and the City Deal initiative, Partnership working is becoming ever more important. This means that there is more pressing need for a genuine and widest understanding, awareness and buy-into these new arrangements by officers and members. Failing to achieve this will create uncertainties and may jeopardise the longer-term plans for the District.

Given the council's focus on economic development we heard for a desire for more senior level engagement with the business community to inform and enthuse businesses about the longer-term vision for the District. This engagement will support the delivery of the economic development and regeneration activities.

While partners are working together well to ensure that large applications can be considered in a timely manner, in the context of more sub-regional work the District needs to be aware of how its actions impact on the actions of partners, be it Districts or Coventry Council, to avoid a scenario of 'who shouts loudest'. This will require thinking about long-term requirements together with partners, such as the highway authority. This does not mean that the Council should lower its expectations about timely and quality input from partners, for example the CC Highways department.

Listening to members and officers, the challenge team is not sure whether there is a sufficiently consistent appreciation of the District's role in the sub-regional economy and what this means in terms of the Duty to Co-operate. Warwick DC is in the enviable situation of high performing sub-regional economy centred on engineering and manufacturing. As a major retail town, the viability of Leamington Spa depends on this, but this has implications for housing, transport and employment sites which need to be identified and delivered for the sub-region as a whole.

5. Achieving outcomes

Strengths

The peer challenge team found a good track record of delivering high quality development and improving places and communities. During a short site visit, we saw a mix of sites,

including some major strategic sites with quality housing, student accommodation, well designed public spaces and community facilities, including the Taylor Wimpey scheme and the former Ford foundry.

Significant infrastructure has been delivered through strategic sites. For example the Taylor Wimpey development has delivered traffic schemes and a school expansion. The council is now achieving up to 40% affordable housing on its major sites as well as community infrastructure. The council maintains the Allthorp Enterprise Hub near the station in Leamington Spa which is fully let and is seeking to develop the area around Leamington Spa station into a cultural hub.

The Proposed Development Review Forum is effective in engaging members in the critical formative stages of key development schemes. It is highly rated and appreciated by agents and developers. This provides a useful early engagement mechanism to ensure that key sites reflect local needs and demands from the outset which is cost-effective in the long-run.

The Council has achieved some flexibility in policy interpretation to allow good development. For example the Stone Leigh Park development allowed high quality development in the Greenbelt on the basis of a site wide approach rather than incremental developments.

Areas for Consideration

There is a pressing need for enhanced involvement of all elected members in the growth-led strategy. The peer challenge team felt that engagement and understanding was patchy among members who are not on the Executive or Group Leaders. Given the controversy about housing development and economic growth that is not unique to Districts like Warwick, elected members have a very important and difficult job to act in the interest of their local communities as well as advocating the best outcomes for the District as a whole. In order to fulfil these roles well they require a wider understanding of major developments and the growth strategy for Warwick district. They require officers to understand and empathise with their pressures in balancing these interests and support them mapping out the wider vision as well as providing specific information on implications at their ward levels.

The legacy of the housing moratorium over the past years has naturally taken its toll on officers, members as well as the Planning Committee. The absence of major developments during that time has inevitably led to officers and members not using skills and experiences of dealing with major sites. This situation is now reversed with a number of major schemes coming forward and will require the development of skills and expertise. The peer challenge team would recommend there to be a skills audit for officers and members to inform a programme of training and support. Officers and members may find it beneficial to observe a Planning Committee at a Council with a similar pro-growth strategy outside the sub-region.

Practically, the authority should consider the benefits of adopting planning performance agreements (PPA's) for the larger applications where the 13 or 16 week time limit is too restrictive to ensuring a quality assessment and negotiation of the proposal.

Given the pro-growth development strategy and the emerging Local Plan, the peer challenge team believes that it is crucially important that Planning Committee is not solely focused on the existing Local Plan policies, but gives regard to the new emerging policies. Over the next months, flexibility will be essential to managing development ahead of the Local Plan process to help achieve the best outcomes for the District. Once you have published your draft Local Plan, including site allocations and your five year housing supply it is very likely that you will receive applications before the Local Plan is formally adopted. Hence there is a need to be 'Fleet of Foot' to achieve the outcomes you want for the District but staying in charge of decision making. Officers will need to assist the Planning Committee to best understand the wider context and relevant material considerations. The peer challenge team invites you to consider the following questions:

- Are you aware, alert and in charge of the process where applications are likely to be submitted ahead of the Local Plan being finalised?
- What more do you need by way of skills and/or capacity to determine these applications? How can you source these flexibly?
- Are you prepared to use the policies in the emerging Local Plan?
- Are you clear about the wider material considerations that Planning Committee need to consider?

6. Planning Committee

The Planning Committee demonstrates an effective understanding of planning matters. Our observation showed that members of the committee were at ease in their role; they had a good understanding and application of their planning policies and conducted a high quality debate. However, the nature and length of debates should be reviewed to balance the airing of the issues with timely decision making. The Chairman of Planning Committee is experienced and committed to the task and has an in-depth knowledge of planning policies and the old Local Plan. He chaired the meeting in a confident and open manner.

Public speaking is effective with an open and generous process for speaker and clear visual displays. The large screen in the Council Chamber makes it easy for the Public to see presentations and the Committee were presented with plans and photographs to illustrate the sites they were discussing. Public speakers were put at ease before their presentations and the Chairman used his discretion to allow speakers to finish their key representations. This will provide supporters and opponents with a feeling of being listened to which is crucial at a committee which for many people is the only contact they will have with the Council.

Individual members of the Committee and the Committee as a whole are aware of their over-riding duty to the whole community and not to people in their wards and the need to make decisions impartially and on clear planning grounds. Members have a clear understanding and appreciation of the role of Planning Committee as a quasi-judicial

Committee, the public facing nature of Planning Committee in particular and the reputational and financial risks this brings for the council has a whole. This is an essential basis for the effective functioning of this high profile committee.

Members of the Planning Committee regard planning officers as competent and are keen to develop relationships further. During our workshop with members of the planning committee we heard many positive comments about officers being knowledgeable, having a good track record on planning and being forthcoming with information, guidance and advice. Members felt comfortable asking what they called 'silly questions' which is a good indication of trusted and reliable relationships. However, there was a general view that there is not sufficient contact with officers and that this was not formalised. Members were aware of workloads and pressures on officers and sometimes felt they did not want to add to this.

Areas for consideration

The lay-out and audibility of the Council Chamber needs re-designing to improve the customer experience. In particular the peer challenge team felt that the room layout could change to accommodate more members of the public into the main council chamber, rather than confining them to the Gallery with poor acoustics and a sense of 'them and us'. Similarly the challenge team questions the purpose for the seating arrangements of planning committee members with a front row for the ruling group and a back row for other members. It not only introduces a sense of party politics where this is not appropriate but also means that people talk to colleagues' backs which makes it difficult to hear and to have a dialogue. Seating arrangements need to support the purpose of the Committee which is for a group of members to determine planning decisions through careful and considered dialogue. In order to achieve this we feel that members need to see each other.

Debates at Planning Committee are lengthy and do not necessarily relate to the complexity of the proposal. In observing the Planning Committee, the peer challenge team felt that at times the committee seemed to cherish the intellectual exercise of debate for its own sake. Debate for debates sake is not the purpose of the planning committee and has financial and time implications for applicants and stakeholders who may have to spend a whole evening at the committee and not be heard, and then return on another occasion.

Reports by officers follow a clear structure and format. However, the challenge team felt that they would benefit from the inclusion of plans as well as a description of the wider material considerations. This is particularly important for larger developments where we strongly felt that reports need to include references to the Council's growth strategy and emerging policies of the Local Plan which can be used as material evidence by the committee. This is a crucial point which follows from some of our challenge above. For example in the Gateway report there were mixed messages about whether the gateway was part of the vision for the district that was supported by the Council. The report lacked clarity in terms of the vision and its importance as another material consideration.

As referred to earlier in this letter, the Council's position with regard to its draft Local Plan and in particular the absence of a five year land supply and with this the likelihood of applications for major sites will require regular briefings for all elected members of the

Council on planning, as well as additional training for members and substitutes of Planning Committee. These briefings and training are crucial for the Council to be 'Fleet of foot' and for it to be in charge of the application process as much as possible.

While experience of Planning Committee in dealing with major applications has been relatively low over the last years, its exposure to major applications has recently increased, for example the Gateway and Clarendon Arcade schemes. None withstanding the outcome of the decision making process, both applications provide a good opportunity for the Planning Committee to review whether it has the right expertise, skill and confidence in determining such significant applications and identifying any gaps in skills or expertise it might need to fill, and the content and format of advice and support it requires from Planning officers. The peer challenge team felt that, in particular it needs to consider deliverability and implementation.

Planning officers will benefit from more exposure to elected Members in order to understand their perspectives, motivations and constraints. The peer challenge team felt that there is a need for officers to develop a better political skills set to appreciate the role of elected members (whether on planning committee or not) in planning. Likewise, it is important for elected members to understand the constraints and pressures of planning officers. A better appreciation of 'each other's perspectives' is key to building a trusted relationship.

The Council and its Planning Committee must improve their relationship and develop trust. The peer challenge team concludes that this is a significant issue that needs resolving for the benefit of the local community. We heard from Planning Committee that there is too much interference among the Executive and CMT, while CMT and the Executive feel that Planning Committee do not understand the wider considerations and strategies that guide the development of the District. While the statutory role of Planning Committee is independent it also needs to act on behalf of the community as a whole and needs to consider wider strategic evidence in making decisions. This is and will be a balancing act but the wider and more concerning issue is the lack of trust. Trust is a function of two aspects: Competence (do I have the skills, capabilities and track record do a job well?) and Character (do I have integrity and the right intent?). While the peer challenge team experienced general trust in the capability and skills of the Planning Committee, it is the intent (are we promoting or restricting growth at any cost?) which appears to be the key issue. The challenge team consider that this issue needs informal discussion and debate to achieve accommodation and consensus which will be crucial in going forward.

While the peer challenge team were left in no doubt about the genuine trust of planning committee members in officers' skills and competence, we observed and were told of incidents where the tone and communication between officers and members at Planning Committee was less professional than it might be required. We would recommend the introduction of more formality (i.e. the use of surnames) as this acts as a reminder to both officers and members that they are enacting key roles as advisors and decision makers on this committee. More formality will also help to reduce the use of personal observations or emotions that can make their way into Committees because of the highly controversial and sometimes emotive matters the Committee has to deal with.

7. Local Plan

Strengths:

The peer challenge team saw much strength in your work on the Local Plan. There is a deep understanding among the political and managerial leadership of the importance of the Local Plan as the '*spatial manifestation of the Sustainable Community Strategy*'. It is a key corporate priority and, as such has Executives' and Chief Officers' interest, understanding and leadership. This is not common across all councils and the main ingredient to make a plan sound and relevant.

The planning policy team is experienced, well-resourced and professional. Discussions with officers highlight a good skills mix and knowledge base and enthusiasm for the job. The council recognises the need to invest in the plan making function and has provided additional funding to commission studies in preparation for the evidence base, as well as exempting the Local Plan team from immediate savings targets.

Overall, the Planning Policy team have a good understanding that their key task is about delivering the Local Plan. The team have a clear and tight timescale and are fully aware that the delivery of the Local Plan as soon as possible is crucially important, particularly in light of the lack of a five year housing supply.

Project management is effective. The planning policy team have a good understanding of the outstanding tasks and have developed effective project management systems and a rigorous timetable. The peer challenge team saw a good understanding of the risks involved. This ensures that the team can anticipate and plan for significant risks. However, the extremely tight timescales is unlikely to accommodate the realisation of these risks and certainly alternative plans need to be put into place.

Engagement with members in the plan making process has been effective and is welcomed by members. The policy team have delivered policy briefings for all members as well as a bus tour to show the key sites in the Local Plan. Visual engagement is crucial so that members and other stakeholders can conceptualise where development is planned.

Parishes recognise and value the degree of engagement with the planning policy team. Planning policy officers have attended PTC meetings to explain the emerging policies and site allocations. PTCs have valued the openness and engagement of planning policy officers. While many object to the impact of the council's growth strategy on their patch, they understand that the District Council has to deliver a spatial planning policy that supports the economic and social viability of the District as a whole and that these decisions may conflict with views of some PTCs.

There is a high recognition among the Council of the importance of having a five year land supply to avoid speculative applications on Greenfield sites. The local plan is seen as an important part of this solution.

The website is clear and easy to use and contains good and easy to use links to the plan making process. This is a real strength in that it helps customers and residents to find the documentation they want at a time and place convenient to them.

Areas for consideration

The real pressure of delivering the Local Plan as quickly as possible requires the planning policy team to consistently consider how to ensure an 'adequate' level of evidence rather than extensive research. The peer challenge team felt that in a situation where policies for growth are hard fought in parts of the District the need for appropriate evidence is compelling. A thorough understanding of the vulnerabilities of key or newly emerging policy directions in relation to the adequacy of the evidence base must be gained by senior officers.

While the Council has identified a number of sites during the local plan process, there is a need to have a clearer understanding about deliverability. An example is the infrastructure practicalities and interdependencies of edge of town housing sites.

The timetable for the preparation of the Local Plan is very challenging and the peer challenge team felt that there is a danger that its soundness may be compromised. In particular the Peer challenge team felt that the process for the choice of Gypsy & Traveller sites is a significant threat for the timescale. This is a very emotive subject and requires some degree of engagement and consultation in order to find sites that are deliverable. The peer challenge team would recommend for the Council to consider constructing a timetable which builds in time for reflection and briefings for informal discussions with elected members and internal consultees confirming strategic directions and relationships to detailed proposals.

While the engagement process with internal and external stakeholders has been extensive it is crucial that the Council itself has confidence that all stakeholders have had sufficient opportunities to engage and comment so that they are able to accept the resultant Local Plan, even if it does not accommodate all representations and is – as it inevitably will be – a best compromise. The peer challenge team recognise that this is very difficult to achieve given the emotive nature of physical development. The team would identify the following areas where we think more engagement will be beneficial to achieve as much accommodation as possible:

- A need to establish a consistent view by the Councils Executive, Corporate Management team and the Planning Committee in its quasi judiciary function. These are three crucial groups in leading the Council and it is essential that members of these groups communicate the corporate view and understanding of the emerging Local Plan
- Involving interested members in this critical phase, perhaps through a member-officer group. The group needs to have a clear remit and terms of reference, with its purpose being to guide the plan preparation and all members on this group must act in a corporate capacity
- Ensuring that internal consultees have more opportunity to articulate the requirements of the Local Plan. For example engineers and environmental health

officers could provide useful operational inputs to assess the implementation of new housing areas, rather than simply consultees to planning applications

8. Moving forward: key recommendations and next steps

In order to support the Council in moving forward, we have made the following recommendations:

1. As a matter of priority, articulate and document your overall vision for the District in a way that it is understandable and usable by planning committee and planning officers
2. Review the room layout and acoustics for planning committee from a 'form follows function' perspective, and bearing in mind the importance of Planning Committee for the reputation of the Council
3. Seek dialogue between the Executive, CMT and members of the Planning Committee to identify and resolve areas of disagreement in order to establish trust.
4. Re-examine the structure and content of planning committee reports and members' need for information, advice and support in view of an increased number of major developments
5. Given the significant success in improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the Development management function, introduce a more distributed leadership style
6. Further improve the Development Management function by:
 - Making sure all officers are aware of the corporate priorities and vision of the authority and how that affects their role and workload.
 - Continue to integrate economic development and town centre management into development services, and particularly development management, to benefit from the available synergies. Make sure they understand each other's roles and objective and how they may be able to contribute.
 - Create an procedures manual (online to allow updating- version control essential) to ensure that all approaches and procedures are consistent and do not rely on individuals
 - Ensure adequate coaching and support of officers (mechanisms required) to improve the confidence of officers to take delegation, give views and form recommendations
 - Develop all officers' political awareness and skills including delegation of committee to the team leader and case officers.

- Now that the service has been turned around in terms of backlog, move it forward in terms of overall service quality with a focus on development management (focus on the whole process and overall time and resource implications) rather than just speed of throughput of applications.
- Consider introducing planning performance agreements for large and strategic applications to project manage delivery without compromising speed targets

7. Keep the project plan and risks for the Local Plan under close review

You will undoubtedly wish to reflect on these findings and suggestions made with your senior managerial and political leadership before determining how the council wishes to take things forward. As part of the peer challenge process, there is an offer of continued activity to support this. We made some suggestions about how this might be utilised. I look forward to finalising the detail of that activity as soon as possible.

In the meantime we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with you and colleagues through the peer challenge to date. Howard Davis, Principal Adviser (West Midlands and the South West) is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Howard can be contacted at howard.davies@local.gov.uk (or tel. 07920 061197) and can provide access to our resources and any further support. The Planning Advisory Service

In the meantime, all of us connected with the peer challenge would like to wish you every success going forward. Once again, many thanks to you and your colleagues for inviting the peer challenge and to everyone involved for their participation.

Yours sincerely

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On behalf of the peer challenge team

Appendix 1 – Feedback slides

Appendix 2 – Comments on specific Local Plan issues requested

Appendix2: Comments on specific Local Plan issues requested

Infrastructure

- Need to ensure that the infrastructure constraints and requirements are articulated adequately in the plan document.
- Having only recently confirmed the sites there are significant elements still to explore / design.
- There is a potential effect on deliverability if issues arise at this late stage.
- There is a good understanding of the more significant infrastructure e.g. education and transport / access, but there is a need to co-ordinate across fragmented land ownerships.

Allocation of sites in villages

- Parishes see the consultation process as well done. There is a willingness of officers to explain / discuss and this is appreciated. (Clearly this is not the same as agreeing to the point).
- Parishes expressed disappointment that the original potential scale of development in villages was noted as likely to be Low / Medium when in practice has turned out to be Medium or probably High level.
- There is clearly significant scrutiny of the Council's proposals which will benefit from dialogue if not ultimately agreement.

Timetable – Local Plan and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)

- The Council has consistently pushed forward with the preparation of the Local Plan and wishes to move to the draft Local Plan stage in May. This seems a very challenging timetable given the elements of the document which still remain to be finalised including; the sustainability appraisal report; gypsy and traveller site allocation choices; development management policies; and final details of the strategic allocations.
- Whilst the Team is well resourced and experienced there is a concern that this important stage which will be tested at Examination needs to be thoroughly evidenced. The evidence base prepared so far is comprehensive.
- In understanding the need for robust evidence the Policy Team see diminishing time available to establish the evidence to an acceptable standard. Given likely local opposition can an 'evidence lite' approach be tenable, or is there time to develop a deeper evidence base?
- If elements are still emerging (as noted above) the justification for policy choices needs to be robust. Recent High Court challenges on for example sustainability appraisal issues to a joint core strategy in Norfolk were costly and delayed adoption.
- The duty to co-operate needs careful consideration. Whilst neighbours seem to consider there is co-operation, the sub regional context and scales of growth need to be fully explained. Are there actual outcomes?
- Risk assessment is robust, but with so many high risk items if only one or two come to fruition this could be significant. The Gateway site is still under consideration, and has a lot resting on it from a policy perspective. Are there fall back positions?
- It has not proved possible to contact the Council's CIL consultant. However his company produces competent documents and assessments, but the Policy Team also experience difficulties in communication which can lead to disjointed work streams.

Process and stakeholder involvement

- (See comments about working with parishes elsewhere)
- There has previously been a Councillor working group for policy issues, would it be helpful to re-establish this to enable:
 - A method of more consistently capturing Member views

- Giving a structured but informal forum for officers to discuss policy scenarios
- A similar Officer working group could more formally capture internal consultee areas of concern. Many internal consultees expressed a willingness to be more joined in, and a specific group could be useful.
- There is a clear understanding that the Local Plan will manifest the spatial elements of the Sustainable Community Strategy, but is the SCS and its relationship to strategic policies sufficiently articulated to all Members of the Council. If not the next stage of the Local Plan is an opportunity to reinforce this in one place.
- Comments are made elsewhere about the wider Warwick DC policies and the context for decisions of Planning Committee. The Local Plan could draw together some of this context.

Five year land supply

- The Council seems fully cogniscent of the importance of achieving a full 5 year housing land supply.
- The calculation is an honest answer to the NPPF requirement which confirms that you have no 5 year land supply
- The Council must move to have allocated sites as soon as possible to avoid ad hoc appeals being successful.
- However evidence elsewhere suggests that sites being brought forward need to demonstrate they are genuinely available and deliverable in a 5 year period. Assessment through SHLAA is important here.
- The potential re-use of employment sites where users have relocated elsewhere has many plus points, but unless those users demonstrate more than a broad agreement to a concept there is clear concern that any housing numbers released are too uncertain or too long term (i.e. beyond 5 years).
- The Council should consider where there are vulnerable sites and whether there is true harm from the unplanned release of some sites at appeal.