

COUNCILLOR QUESTIONS TO CABINET – 3 June 2021

Question 1

Councillor Nigel Shaw, Bromyard Bringsty Ward

To: cabinet member, finance, corporate services and planning

The Herefordshire Council Planning Peer Review Final Report followed visits in late November and early December 2020. Now that nearly six months have passed will the cabinet member responsible provide an update on the short term priority (within six months) recommendations, identifying any achievements, and confirm the status of the seven longer term recommendations?

Response

The Planning Advisory Service (PAS) peer review report was received in January 2021. Since this time the managers have been holding workshops with the teams and I know that Cllr Harrington has been working with the managers to ensure that as many of the recommendations as possible can be implemented.

In relation to the five short term recommendations I can confirm that:

- Recommendation 1 was completed in March, as the team developed a Local Plan review timetable by the end of February. Work has also commenced on visioning workshops with the cabinet members and a number of evidence based reports required for the review are being or have been commissioned already in accordance with the Local Plan timetable.
- Recommendation 2 has been partially addressed in that the Forward and Neighbourhood Planning Teams have now been colocated with the Development Management Teams. This has allowed the Planning Service to refocus on its joint mission statement and combine its resources more effectively, to set out a clearer vision for what we want the Planning Service to achieve. This will be developed further in line with the review of the service.
- Recommendation 3 concerning member training will be undertaken as part of the training refreshment programme approved at full council last week.
- Recommendation 4 has also been addressed as the task of monitoring the Five year Housing Land Supply has been reassigned to two technical officers which has speeded the data collection and collation process. This year the council passed the Housing Delivery Test the first time since its inception in 2017/18 and therefore there is no Housing delivery Action Plan to monitor.
- Recommendation 5 concerning an Enforcement Action Plan has been delayed by the recent increase in planning application workloads but will be produced by the Autumn

I can also update on the seven medium term recommendations which have also been considered.

- Recommendation 6 has been met as the Forward Planning & Neighbourhood Planning Teams have now been colocated with the Development Management Teams, and are being managed under one Assistant Director.
- Recommendation 7 concerns the overall planning work programme, resources and budget of the Planning Service. The options to do things differently in this area are still being considered. However, I can report that the resources in the Neighbourhood Planning Team have been utilised to assist with the development of two new Supplementary Planning Documents.

- Recommendation 8 concerns the review of procedures to help manage demands on resources and budgets, which is still in progress alongside Recommendation 6. However, I am aware that progress has been made on discretionary charges which will help address some of the income shortfall to the budget.
- Recommendations 9 to 12 are still being considered and will be completed by the Autumn and following discussions with the new Planning Committee Chairman.

I also share your desire for there to be a robust action plan in place to implement the recommendations made by PAS and I have set up a meeting with Cllr Harrington and officers so that I can be updated on the detail of PAS implementation. I do recognise that the planning service has been managing a heavy workload recently and I am determined to ensure that the changes underway result in a better service experience for members of the public and an improved work experience for our staff. Neither of which can happen too quickly, in my opinion.

Supplementary question

I thank the Cabinet member for Finance, Corporate Services and Planning for her reply and I take this opportunity to wish her well on her on assuming additional responsibilities for planning.

I appreciate the comprehensive reply and now recognise that the PPR was only delivered in January. I congratulate the planning team on the actions taken to date. I would direct the cabinet member to Recommendation 5 and share concern that the current resource is considerably hard pressed and, I understand, only able to progress a minimal number of priority issues as determined by the head of planning. If the member shares my concern might she promise to review resourcing in this area as a matter of her own priority? I appreciate that budgets may be being managed by a recruitment freeze but there are consequences to the environment and the public's perception of the Authority as a result of inaction.

Response

I would like to thank Councillor Shaw for his supplementary question and assure him that I share his concerns about ensuring that the planning service has the resources that it needs to fulfil its responsibilities, and also assure him that I will be paying the closest attention to the resourcing of the area and will be making it a high priority to understand exactly what the position is now and the work that's already underway to progress the recommendations of the past review and I welcome any questions on progress against that at a future meeting.