



Planning Peer Review

Lessons for organisational changes in
planning services

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Background and scope of this report

This report provides a summary of findings and lessons from a series of planning peer reviews¹ of councils that have undergone significant organisational change. The reviews were between 2022-24 which for some councils was very soon after or during organisational change and for others was several years afterwards.

The findings in this report and the checklist in Appendix 1 may be useful to those considering: local government reorganisation including new unitary councils and / or the introduction of combined authorities; shared leadership and management arrangements across separate sovereign councils. We are grateful to those councils we worked with in the reviews and in particular the two councils who agreed to be case studies for us.

Delivering successful organisational change is difficult, and for planning services it is no different. We think we've found eight critical success factors which we explore further in this report:

- Make it a new organisation for everyone
- Get planning on the radar as a corporate tool
- Change planning committees and geography
- Enjoy the benefit of a bigger scale for the planning service
- Plan, prioritise and be realistic about the changes required
- Put the resources in and get everyone involved
- Keep an eye on performance throughout the changes
- Engage and continue to engage with stakeholders

¹ Peer reviews are delivered by the sector for the sector. You can find out more about them here: [Planning peer reviews](#)

Lessons learnt

This is a new organisation for everyone

We found that being clear about what the new organisation stands for and “How we do things around here” is key to the success of the new planning function. It is helpful to get buy in from across the service as well as from customers and stakeholders to this new vision. The planning functions from the predecessor councils will all have their own strengths and weaknesses. Acknowledging these and agreeing what things to start, stop and continue based on some kind of dispassionate analysis is a good place to start.

We found that those organisations that quickly adopted a new team identity transitioned more easily. As well as being clear about how the new service will be, it is equally important to ensure that this is purposely different from predecessor councils and has a new and different identity. It takes time to get buy in, particularly from colleagues and councillors to new cultures, behaviours, and working practices. But this is a particularly important part of the process and being clear that it will be different for everyone makes this feel easier and fairer to accept. The alternative is to have an unhelpful perception of “winners and losers” as one organisation becomes dominant over the others– either in people and/or processes.

Those organisations that develop a clear vision setting out what the service is aiming to achieve and how it wants to do that including cultural and behavioural expectations, allow colleagues and stakeholders to know what to expect. In the most successful new organisations, leaders and managers of the new planning service build a keen sense of shared purpose and develop good people management practices; customer focus; and behaviours and culture. Conversely, where managers and leaders are reticent to move in a positive way into the new organisation, much time and resource can be lost on duplication, not gaining economies of scale, and trying to continue with predecessor organisation practices and cultures.

It is more important for the vision and supporting structure to be visible quickly than perfect.

Get planning on the radar

The early stages of the new organisation provides a key opportunity to demonstrate how planning can help deliver the council's priorities and help shape the new organisation. New big organisations such as a unitary council, combined authority, or shared management structure for several districts will have a wide range of service and corporate objectives. Strong planning leadership teams ensure the planning role is understood in the wider aspirations of the council including economic development, regeneration, asset management; spatial policy to meet the needs of adults and children's services (in a unitary council); and place shaping. Scaling up provides opportunities to be more innovative and to work in wider networks— its important from the outset that senior planning managers communicate the value that planning can bring to the new organisation.

Bringing several planning services together is a significant task with many layers of decisions. Key strategic decisions are needed to align plans and policies and communicate the policy decision making framework in the interim period. A lot of work is needed to harmonise systems, processes, and procedures. The way decisions are made needs to be aligned including work to review committee structures and to engage, train and develop councillors in the new ways of working. All this work is best managed using a programme management approach. Clear and visible senior political and officer level leadership for achieving planning improvement priorities is critical. Setting up an implementation board with senior officers and councillors to oversee the changes has proved successful. The best ones are those that have representation from across the council, including other departments. Not only does this bring fresh ideas, it helps ensure that planning is seen as a key service in the new organisation and the links are made across other service areas about how planning can help them to deliver their priorities.

Change the political geography

One of the things that it is important to do differently is planning committees. Committees in the new organisation should be different to the ones in the predecessor councils (except in shared management structures where sovereign councils remain). Economies of scale², optimising use of political oversight and working practices should mean that fewer planning committees will be needed. Many planning decisions are relatively straight forward and non-contentious and can be determined by planning officers. Committees only need to consider the more complex applications where planning matters are finely balanced.

The best way to determine the geographical boundaries is to look at volumes of significant applications that need to be considered by planning committees and work out what makes sense based on that data. It is likely that there will be a range of differences in the new organisation such as the scheme of delegation, how committees operate etc. This will be easier to embed if the committees feel new and are not simply based on previous geographies.

It is important to start the new organisation with a scheme of delegation that is fit for purpose for the new organisation. It should include:

- committee structure that has a proportionate spread of applications based on known existing volumes.
- appropriate levels of delegation – ensure that householder and minor applications only go to committee in exceptional circumstances.
- appropriate call-in procedures
- measures to ensure smooth, efficient committees including proportionate public speaking arrangements and arrangements to limit debate if not needed e.g. ‘call over’ process.
- A shared understanding of planning committee performance and quality indicators

² Historic benchmarking work by PAS suggests that a planning application going to a committee costs 10x more to service than one dealt with under delegated powers.

A great place to work with lots of opportunities

Nationally many councils are having serious and increasing difficulties recruiting planners. Developing a workforce development plan to include succession planning, training and development can help to address this. One of the things that we have heard from new unitary councils is that there are great opportunities for developing people. The scale of the new organisations has meant that there is greater resilience – with teams of specialists, rather than “one-man-bands” who can work well together and innovate resulting in better planning outcomes and better service for customers. There are also more opportunities for people to experience a wide range of planning work and for the councils to “grow their own” resilient workforce, managers, and leaders. The successful ones are actively developing their workforce, enabling planning professionals to get a wide range of experience in diverse types of planning functions and applications.

Bringing several planning services together provides an opportunity to benefit from economies of scale and build in a level of resilience to the service that may not have been possible for smaller, predecessor organisations. It is likely that the convergence may include services of varying sizes and geographies. A comprehensive analysis of service, performance, and volume data from predecessor councils is key to

- inform team and committee structures
- inform the transformation plan
- understand strengths that the new organisation will want to ensure continue
- understand any potential issues that the new organisation will inherit (and plans to deal with them) e.g. backlogs; issues in managing developer contributions etc.

Plan, prioritise and be realistic

Converging and transforming planning services needs to be approached with a sense of urgency but it takes time. Putting a clear plan in place early setting out the priorities, timelines and critical path is important. As well as being key to getting the work done, it is an important communication tool for councillors, colleagues, and stakeholders to understand what change is expected and when. One of the early priorities should be implementing changes to staffing structures and to committee structures. Clarity and empathy for people is important to help to continue to deliver good planning services alongside implementing changes to those services.

Significant changes to organisational structures provide an opportunity to analyse and evaluate current service provision and think about radical transformation that will result in improvements for customers and potentially deliver efficiencies. Sometimes there may be constraints that mean that it is not possible to deliver all this transformation alongside the organisational change. But whatever the scale of change proposed, it is vital to produce a clear transformation plan with timelines and resources.

Converging the planning policy functions of several predecessor planning authorities needs a clear approach and timeline for a new local plan including:

- a clear approach to five-year land supply in the short-term
- capitalising on opportunities of the bigger organisation to involving and engaging internal and external stakeholders in plan development
- establishing realistic project management arrangements for progressing the new plan

Some new councils have attempted to perform a “light touch” approach to a local plan, and tried to Sellotape the constituent plans together into a strategic plan for the new geography. This does not usually work out well.

It is also helpful to recognise that not all the benefits of the new organisation can be achieved immediately. Usually there will be some initial dip in performance and some people will find change and uncertainty difficult. We have found that there can be some very real and immediate benefits in new unitary councils (such as bringing teams together and increasing resilience) but some of the benefits take longer to deliver – depending, for example on how quickly systems and training can be aligned.

Put the resource in and get people involved

Transformation works best when additional, temporary resources are allocated to carry out some of the work needed and to implement some systematic programme management. This ensures that momentum is maintained and is vital to ensure that leaders, colleagues, and stakeholders are kept informed about what they need to do, progress being made and any potential issues and barriers that need addressing. It is also important because the planning service needs to continue to run before during and after any organisational changes and the natural tendency can be to focus on the daily pressures and demands of a transaction processing service and put off the necessary changes that will, in themselves, make the service a better one for users and more efficient for those providing it.

People involved in delivering the planning service are key to helping to shape and deliver the transformation plan. Whilst additional resources are key to ensuring transformation happens alongside day-to-day service delivery, it is important to involve colleagues and councillors in developing and delivering the actions in the transformation plan. Doing transformation “to” rather than “with” staff and councillors makes it harder to deliver and the outcomes less certain.

As well as building in some short-term additional management resource to oversee the initial transformation work, it is also useful to consider how to resource initial transformation phases with the potential use of some other fixed term resources to provide the necessary pace for change. This may be additional change management resource and / or additional temporary planners to free some time up from the permanent workforce to get involved in delivering change.

It is also important to make sure that people with the right expertise are involved throughout the process. For example, IT and procurement expertise are important early on to implement fit for purpose application processing software. Human resources professional input will be needed to harmonise employee terms and conditions; and legal and committee services input will be needed to develop approaches to committees, planning policy frameworks and the scheme of delegation.

Similarly involving people from across all the predecessor organisations will be critical to ensure buy in, and some external input may also be helpful to help facilitate discussions about what is and is not best practice. In ideal circumstances some of this can be done in “shadow” mode before the new organisation even exists. Early work on harmonisation of committee structures, officer structures, systems, policies processes, scheme of delegation, procedures, templates etc. pays dividends once the new organisation comes into being.

Keep an eye on performance

A clear, transparent performance management system is needed for managers and officers to manage development management caseloads. This is particularly important in a new large organisation perhaps operating out of several locations where work should be seen to be allocated in an open, fair, and transparent manner. Managers and officers will need a performance management system to prioritise work, understand the necessary support and development that officers may need during the period of change and manage any performance issues that remain after appropriate support and development has been provided.

The volumes of planning applications in the new organisation will be significantly larger than any of the predecessor councils. It will be helpful to reconsider routine approaches to help process this volume such as triage and checklists for simple, non-controversial applications. It also provides the opportunity to empower colleagues – service managers will not be able to be as involved in the detail of planning applications as they were previously. This means that other colleagues will have the opportunity to develop responsibility for a number of applications, taking on additional responsibilities for quality review, mentoring and sign off.

Given the advantages of scale, it should be easier to identify officers responsible for designing and delivering high quality services. Use of GIS and ICT is also key to maintaining and improving performance.

Engage and involve all stakeholders

Large scale change to services resulting from local government reorganisation will, inevitably, impact on service performance in the short term and it will be important to communicate this with key stakeholders to manage expectations and to ask them to help with the changes. Developing an engagement plan to involve and communicate with key stakeholders is helpful. These stakeholders include town and parish councils; agents and developers; internal and external planning consultees; councillors and planning colleagues.

The changes also provide an opportunity to make sure that the services are designed for customers, rather than for the people delivering them. The change provides an important opportunity to engage with and consult key stakeholders before, during and after council reorganisation to get their input into what things they would like to see in the new service. Some stakeholders (for example agents, developers, and external consultees) will be used to working with the predecessor organisations and will be able to provide valuable customer insights into their strengths and weaknesses.

Town and parish councils are important stakeholders in the planning process. In a new unitary council or shared management structure arrangement, there may be lots of them and their experiences from the predecessor or sovereign councils will be variable. Predecessor councils may have had differing approaches and relationships may have been good in some and less good in others. Developing and implementing a training and development plan for town and parish councils might be helpful to provide information about how they will be able to engage with the planning function in the new organisation / arrangements, as this will probably differ in some ways from their experiences up until then. Joint training for councillors and town and parish councils including regular planning updates, lessons learnt, site visits and webinars can help to raise awareness of the “art of the possible” in terms of planning decisions and to keep everyone informed of transformation plans.

Developers are key to place shaping, delivering housing, economic development, and regeneration. Developing and implementing an appropriate engagement forum for this group of stakeholders is important to ensure that the area is seen as “open for business”. One approach is to consider creating a developer forum with relevant cabinet member(s) for economy and development to support delivery of strategic sites and articulate the vision for place. If five-year land supply is an issue, consider proactive, targeted approach to granting permission for key sites and facilitating delivery of housing sites with permission. Predecessor councils may have had a variety of approaches to engaging with developers ranging from ad hoc to comprehensive. Part of being open for business is ensuring a comprehensive approach to engaging with developers.

Developing a team approach with internal and external planning consultees can also be beneficial for the council and for the consultees. It can help to discuss appropriate approaches for key strategic sites and be an effective and efficient way of dealing with the, sometimes conflicting, wishes of this key group of stakeholders. This is also a good forum to work up an effective approach to using planning performance agreements to facilitate early engagement with key internal and external stakeholders to smooth delivery of key sites and cover the costs of officer time to do so. Similarly, implementing a consistent development team approach means that developers will be happy to pay for good pre-application advice.

Case study - Cornwall Council

Cornwall Council is a unitary authority created on 1st April 2009. It merged Cornwall County Council with the six Borough and District Councils of Cornwall - Caradon, Carrick, Kerrier, North Cornwall, Restormel, and Penwith.

A clear plan was in place leading up to the formation of the new council and this was well understood by the teams. Work took place early on to align the IT systems and to develop and implement generic role profiles for officers. With hindsight, there is a view that more could have been done to engage colleagues in the plans using more workshops and co-production.

There has been a consistent and stable level of officer leadership through the transition and a strong focus on “growing our own.” Being a peninsula, Cornwall has long recognised the need to do this and was one of the first places nationally to experience the challenges of recruiting planners. A proactive approach to responding to this challenge has paid off. Supporting people to develop and grow has led to growing expertise within the council across all levels – management and a range of frontline colleagues. One of the benefits of the new unitary council is that the scale provides greater opportunities for people to grow and develop. And there is more opportunity for people to move between the diverse types of planning roles if they wish.

The scale of the new council has enabled it to deliver efficiencies over time. It has become a leaner authority than it was to begin with – recognising the need for additional resource to get through the initial changes. As time has gone on, there have been reductions in both back office and frontline teams. The change has been iterative and continues.

From the outset, Cornwall deliberately introduced area team working that was not coterminous with the predecessor council areas. Planning committees were also not coterminous from day one. The scene was set immediately for the new council and new ways of working with a new culture. Whilst this took time to become embedded across the service, everyone was clear that this was a new organisation.

At the outset, there were not up to date local plans covering the entire area and this led to a lot of speculative planning applications. The Council built a strong strategy team to develop a local plan and focused efforts on processing the large volume of applications. Initially there was a cross council householder team designed to process straight forward applications quickly. Although successful in dealing with high volumes, there was some loss of quality and a disconnect with the community, so this reverted to an area-based approach.

Even now, with an adopted local plan, the Council receives many smaller applications and has put in place structures, approaches, and processes to respond to them. Examples include training validation colleagues to process simple applications and taking a proportionate, risk based, approach to simple householder applications, including not always needing to carry out a site visit, and peer sign off for some applications.

There have been several different organisational structures since the unitary council came into existence, recognising that circumstances change, and so teams need to change. For example, early on the council set up a team to straddle decision making and policy – the team was responsible for policy development and for determining strategic planning applications – this did not work at the time and so changes were made to the officer structure again. One of the lessons that the council describes is about the pace of change – there is a balance between gaining and maintaining momentum in the change and transformation process but also recognising that not everything can happen at once.

In line with the scheme of delegation, large numbers of applications are determined by officers. Householder applications only go to committee in exceptional circumstances. Councillors have the

power to call in applications and if a parish council disagrees with a proposed recommendation, the local councillor can decide whether the application goes to committee. Officers are encouraged to build strong relationships with councillors and engage early in conversations about potential committee referrals and this works well. One of the benefits of the larger organisation is that capacity exists to deliver regular, monthly training for councillors.

Another benefit of the scale of the organisation is that there is a good-sized policy team with the capacity to deliver a strong policy framework – in smaller organisations, this is not always possible. The planning service also sustains specialist teams such as a team dedicated to managing appeals – this frees up other case officers and ensures that there are roles and teams that play to different individuals' strengths and preferences, helping with staff retention and satisfaction too. The scale of the organisation also means that there is resource to deliver some added value outcomes including working on unlocking sites; delivering affordable housing and garden villages. The size and scale of the organisation enables it to be visionary, ambitious, and innovative.

Getting the planning “voice” heard and not being seen as the planning “island” in the organisation remains challenging. The planning service is key to delivering a wide range of Cornwall Council’s priorities and they know that they need to continue to be proactive in getting that message across to colleagues across the council.

Case study - Buckinghamshire Council

Buckinghamshire Council is a unitary authority created on 1st April 2020. It merged Buckinghamshire County Council with the three district councils of Aylesbury Vale, Chiltern & South Bucks and Wycombe.

A Planning Improvement Board has overseen the transition from the predecessor councils to the new unitary. The Board initially had senior officers from across the council, including the chief executive and senior officers from specialist services to support the changes required, such as IT, Customer Improvement and HR. The planning portfolio holder also sat on the Board to provide political direction and oversight. The Board allowed access to the skills and resources needed to rebuild the new planning service. Following on from the initial changes, the Board will now be turning its attention to what the service needs to look like in the next three to four years. There is a recognition that change is constant, and things do not stand still. Buckinghamshire has also worked closely with others in councils that have gone through local government reorganisation to learn from their experiences too.

The constant change and the scale of the new council means that managers and leaders have needed to learn to “let go” of some of the detail. This has also empowered others in the service to step up. Decisions are delegated to appropriate levels and harmonising of job roles and expectations has meant that some have had to step into levels of responsibility that they may not have had to do previously within their job roles. Whilst this will undoubtedly be uncomfortable for some people, it also provides opportunities for individuals to gain experience and further their personal and professional development. The Council has an active approach to “growing our own” and people benefit from the opportunities that exist in a much larger organisation. For example, more junior planners can shadow senior colleagues working on a range of different, complex applications that they may not have had the opportunity to experience in a smaller organisation.

The scale of the new council has had several benefits. The majority of consultees for planning applications are now in one team and work closely together on major applications. This is better for customers and fosters innovation across professional specialisms. The bringing together of these specialists from predecessor councils has also increased resilience and means that there are now teams of, for example, urban designers, landscape specialists etc. This means that there can be greater specialist input and exchange of ideas, helping to foster that innovation. And linked to this, the council has a much more streamlined approach to planning performance agreements with everyone working to an agreed timeline. Effective use of these agreements has meant that the council has access to the resources that it needs to determine large complex applications, which in turn, means that applicants get a better service.

One downside of the scale of the new council is that some people find the processes and procedures that they need to use to interface with corporate services to be cumbersome compared to the previous, more flexible and ad-hoc approaches in smaller organisations.

One of the turning points for Buckinghamshire was the introduction of a new cultural framework for the new service, led by the Council’s Principal Educational Psychologist. This work was done with people rather than to people and this has created a genuine shared sense of purpose and identity. Bringing people together to create the new identity really helped with this. At the time of local government reorganisation, there were quite a lot of vacancies, and this has enabled the council to recruit people who are keen to work in the new council and who buy into the newly created culture. This has helped embed the new culture in the planning service.

The biggest challenge to the planning service from the new unitary council has been the amalgamation of systems and data. This has been far more complex and taken much longer than

hoped. With hindsight, officers would have like to have started work much sooner on this as it is key to really joining the predecessor teams up effectively and gaining the efficiencies that the new unitary council can offer. The Council has found using PowerBI to extract data and manage performance from the range of back-office systems has been extremely useful.

Becoming a unitary council during a global pandemic also presented significant challenges and delayed the transformation by about a year. Much of the “pain” of the unitary process is felt early in the process but the full range of benefits and efficiencies can take several years to materialise. At the outset there was a dip in performance which was compounded by the pandemic. Leading through this change took a lot of energy and prioritisation was important, recognising that you cannot do everything at once. Recognising that it will be difficult at the start, but the long-term benefits will be worth it was key for planning in Buckinghamshire, which achieved planning authority of the year last year at the Planning Resource Awards.

At the outset, there was a strong political drive to keep decisions local. This meant that there has not been a reduction in the number of planning committees. But the call-in process is effective, and many committees have very few items on them. In the fullness of time, the current committee structure may therefore change.

Appendix one – checklist of key things to consider

<p>Is there a clear transformation plan in place with timelines and resources allocated to workstreams covering:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Committee structures • Officer structures • Local plan production and plans to deal with five –year land supply • Systems, policies, and processes • Scheme of delegation • Procedures and templates • Councillor, colleague, and stakeholder engagement and involvement
<p>Is there a programme management approach in place to manage the transformation plan before, during and after the new organisation comes into place</p>
<p>Is there an implementation board in place with senior leaders (officers and councillors) to oversee the transformation programme</p>
<p>Has additional temporary management and officer resource been allocated to oversee the initial transformation along with appropriate additional, technical and specialist support needed</p>
<p>Is there a clear vision in place for the new planning service and are people clear about the role that planning has in delivering the wider aspirations for the council.</p>
<p>Are there plans to involve staff, councillors, customers, and stakeholders in developing and delivering the transformation plan</p>
<p>What organisational development work is planned to work towards a new “one team” approach with defined culture and behaviours, good customer focus, and good people management practices</p>
<p>What workforce development plans are in place to “grow your own” and provide personal and professional development opportunities for planners, support staff, specialists, managers, and leaders</p>
<p>Are plans in place to carry out an analysis of service, performance, and volume data to inform team structures and planning committees</p>
<p>How will a new scheme of delegation be produced and how will the council get buy in to new committee structures</p>
<p>Are there plans in place to deliver a fit for purpose planning application processing system and a performance management system to enable managers and officers to manage and prioritise workload</p>
<p>How will the council manage the high levels of planning applications – consider new approaches to streamline low risk applications</p>
<p>Is there a comprehensive engagement plan in place for councillors, colleagues, town and parish councils, developers, consultees and other stakeholders.</p>