

# Spatial Planning **peer review**

Bromsgrove District Council  
October 2009

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## Executive summary and key recommendations

### Summary

Bromsgrove District Council has gone through a difficult period since Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) judgement of 'poor' in 2004.

The recent CPA inspection acknowledged that the council's vision and priorities had been "refined and now better reflect customer, stakeholder and staff ambitions." Spatial planning has a key role to deliver the council vision and priorities, which includes the Longbridge site, affordable housing, town centre regeneration and development of the town's railway station. If these represent opportunities then the challenges for planning future development are formidable with ninety-one per cent of the district being green belt.

Having made strong progress in recent years the council is moving into a new phase of improvement. This will require addressing a number of spatial planning issues. These include:

- o How to manage the green belt to accommodate future growth?
- o The council has developed a strong local vision for Bromsgrove. However, what is less clear is the council's role in the region and sub-region.
- o Joint working with Redditch is moving towards shared management teams and services. This is still at an early stage but in due course it will be important to consider the Bromsgrove-Redditch axis as a sub-regional entity and what this will mean in how it is presented to the wider region.
- o This Bromsgrove-Redditch axis provides clear opportunities for spatial planning to consider pooling resources, developing joint policy documentation and working more closely to produce council Core Strategies.
- o How will the council want to establish relationships with its regional partners, for example the Government Office West Midlands, the Regional Development Agency and the Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership? What will the council want from these relationships and who will lead on these?
- o Partnership working should ensure that planning is not to be viewed as a solution by itself. Complex issues such as economic development, the needs of elderly persons, affordable housing have a number of principal partners able to contribute resources and expertise to understanding the issues and developing solutions. The council and planning should be at the centre of promoting such discussions.
- o Members are central to 'place shaping' for Bromsgrove. How will the council ensure that councilors are supported to assume this role with understanding and confidence?

- o Training and development for officers and members is vital for moving the authority forward during the next phase of improvement. This could include developing a regional vision, developing officer and member champions for specific subjects, for example Longbridge and the town centre, and giving consideration to moving towards development management approach for the planning service.
- o Some of the issues confronting the council are challenging. Addressing these internally might be difficult because of internal tensions and/or a lack of resource, for example making a policy breakthrough on ADRs. External facilitation could be an option for negotiating areas of difficulty.
- o There has been a recent history of tension at Bromsgrove of tension between officers and members. The next phase of improvement for the council is concerned should seek to address this. Staff development to develop a more positive culture should be considered. Peer mentoring for officers and members – providing support and challenge on issues and working arrangements – could also help the council move through this phase.

## **Key recommendations**

The recommendations of the peer review team are set out under the headings of the benchmark of the 'ideal' authority. The peer review team recommends that the council:

### **Achieving outcomes**

- i. Considers this report with a view to making the planning service one which is overtly supportive of and key to delivery of the council's objectives
- ii. Formally lifts the housing moratorium based on the RSS Phase Two Revision figures and the recent experience of successful planning appeals and Ombudsman report findings against the council
- iii. Develops a policy position for the development of larger sites on the edge of Bromsgrove Areas of Development Restraint (ADR), which would permit a mix of housing including affordable housing and other uses located in the most sustainable locations [The Advisory Team for Large Applications (ATLAS) has been engaged by the council, since the peer review, to assist on strategic site allocations.]
- iv. Produces a masterplan for designated ADR sites to encourage quality design and development on more sustainable sites
- v. Develops Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs) for planning obligations and affordable housing that clearly states council intentions for these areas
- vi. Undertakes an assessment, with Redditch, of the resources needed for both councils to work together to develop their Core Strategies for simultaneous submission

### **Integration and collaboration**

- vii. Ensures the emerging Core Strategy incorporates a vision describing Bromsgrove and its role within the region
- viii. Considers engagement with Birmingham City Council and Worcestershire County Council at strategic director level given the importance of the Longbridge and Bromsgrove town centre/railway station development for the council [Such engagement has commenced since the peer review.]

### **Leading and engaging the community**

- ix. Monitors the usage of the website and survey users to obtain feedback on the website 'useability' to inform future development
- x. Continues to monitor the Customer First priority. A good start has been made but for the planning service it is at an early stage. This should be regularly monitored and reviewed by the Head of Planning and Regeneration and the Executive Director.
- xi. Reviews the current member / officer working arrangements so that members are able to discharge their community leadership role, informed by professional officer advice

### **Management**

- xii. Produces a project plan (that is a revised Local Development Scheme – LDS) for the work needed to complete the Core Strategy by June/July 2010.
- xiii. Develops planning resource capacity. These could include: moving to development management\* and encouraging the resource flow from development control to policy planning and vice versa; and combining resources with Redditch, from secondments to joint investment in specialist resources e.g. urban design, planning obligation (S106) negotiations, joint planning arrangements and joint policies.  
  
[\*Development management (DM) constitutes the assessing and determining of applications more strategically and moves away from a 'plan-led system'. DM is a change in planning culture – away from reactive control of development to a more positive and proactive role for planning.]
- xiv. Addresses the practice within the council of attaching blame to the planning service. This practice needs to be carefully opened up by senior managers, with HR and possibly with external support, to fully understand the issues, how they came about and the actions needed to address these.

### **Innovation, learning and excellence**

- xv. Should ensure maximum gain from S106 negotiations from developers in the future development of ADRs. This could be assisted by considering the appointment of a specialist negotiating officer (perhaps shared with Redditch) or of buying in this expertise when required.
- xvi. The chief executive, executive director and Leader of council actively encourage members to attend the one hour time slot provided before Planning Committee for members to discuss planning issues with officers

## Shared knowledge and evidence

- xvii. Considers and develops opportunities for sharing the cost of joint studies with other local government partners in the region
- xviii. Develop better ways to capture and transfer learning. This is so the council is able to identify good practice elsewhere, to understand how this is achieved and considers application in other service areas.

## Background

The visit to Bromsgrove District Council planning service was part of a programme of reviews undertaken by the Improvement and Development Agency for local government (IDeA) and the Planning Advisory Service (PAS). A peer review is designed to help the service assess its current achievements and its capacity to change, and continue to improve.

The peer review is not an inspection; rather it offers a supportive approach, undertaken by friends – albeit ‘critical friends’ – and aims to help a council identify its current strengths as much as what it needs to improve. The planning service produced a Self Assessment using the benchmark, in advance of the review; this provided key areas for the team to focus their research.

The basis for this review is the benchmark of the ‘ideal’ authority. The benchmark is divided up into the following sections:

- Achieving outcomes
- Integration and collaboration
- Leading and engaging the community
- Management
- Innovation, learning and excellence
- Shared knowledge and evidence

The members of the peer review team were:

- David Evans, Director of Planning and Environment, West Dorset District Council
- Councillor Claire Denman, Portfolio Holder, Planning and Economic Development, Crawley Borough Council
- Richard Probyn, Planning Policy and Implementation Manager, Huntingdonshire District Council
- Deborah Hogan, Consultant, the Planning Advisory Service

- Andrew Winfield, IDeA Review Manager

The team was on site 12-14 October 2009. The programme for the onsite phase was organised in advance and included a variety of activities designed to enable us to meet and talk to a range of internal and external stakeholders. Our activities included:

- interviews and discussions with councillors, officers, service users and partners
- focus groups with middle managers and frontline staff
- a tour of the district
- reading documents provided by the authority, including the self-assessment.

We appreciated the warm welcome and hospitality provided by the council and would like to thank everybody we met for their time and contributions. The supportive way our needs were taken care of while on site deserves particular mention.

The feedback we gave the council on the last day of the review provided an overview of the key messages structured around the benchmark of the 'ideal' authority. This report builds on the initial findings and gives a detailed account of the review.

## **Context**

### **BACKGROUND**

Bromsgrove District covers a large area of nearly 84 square miles in north Worcestershire. The district is 14 miles from the centre of Birmingham.

Ninety-one percent of the district is greenbelt, which presents issues for regeneration and housing. Four radial routes pass through the district, each served by railway lines and major roads, including the M5 running north and south, the M42 running east and west, with further links to the M40 and M6.

The district's principal settlements are: Bromsgrove, Hagley, Rubery, and Wythall. It is estimated that 16,643 people travel into the district for work, with 26,112 of the population travelling out, a net commute out of 9,469. The district has no wards in the top 20 per cent most deprived in England.

### **THE COUNCIL**

The council had been viewed as a 'poor' council for some time. This was recognised by the council and in 2004 it was given a comprehensive performance

assessment (CPA) rating of 'poor' and entered into voluntary engagement with CLG. This was followed by changes in senior management and political leadership.

In 2006 the council requested a further assessment to judge improvement progress. The CPA 2007 rated the council as 'Poor' but acknowledged that considerable progress had been made. The current chief executive took up post in April 2007.

The council underwent a further CPA in 2009 and was judged as 'Fair'. The council's Annual Audit and Inspection letter (March 2009) stated that, "Since the last CPA, the Council has made significant progress in addressing the weakness previously identified. Much of the work has focused on putting the processes and 'building blocks' in place that were absent in early 2007 and these are now starting to make an impact."

A new Leader was appointed in October 2005 and the council has a majority Conservative administration, with 26 Conservatives, 6 Labour, 4 Independents, 2 Wythall Residents' Coalition and 1 unaffiliated.

The council operates a Leader/Cabinet model; supported by three non-executive boards - audit board, scrutiny steering board and performance management board - as well as standards and licensing committees. There is an officer corporate management team (CMT).

Since August 2008 the chief executive has been acting joint chief executive of Bromsgrove District Council and Redditch Borough Council. The purpose of this initially year-long project was to explore opportunities for joint working and the provision of shared services. A review led to extending the Joint Chief executive arrangement (September 2009). This is a 3 ½ year fixed term contract with a specific brief to oversee the recruitment of a single management team, to serve both authorities, and the potential sharing of all services (excluding the Housing Revenue Account).

The overarching vision for the district is 'Working together to build a district where people are proud to live and work, through community leadership and excellent services.'

The council has a good strategic framework for delivering priorities. Strategic priorities are set out in a three year Council Plan, which drives the service planning process and the annual improvement plan. Improvement Plan progress is monitored monthly through exception reporting to senior officers and elected members.

The Council Plan is the key overarching document listing council vision, values, objectives and priorities, the measures of success, together with a Strategic Action Plan and a Performance Management Framework. The Council Plan is updated in April each year and for 2009-2012 sets out four objectives:

- Regeneration



- Improvement
- Sense of community and well being
- Environment.

The council and its partners on the LSP agreed to give particular focus between 2007 and 2010 to three priorities: Bromsgrove town centre redevelopment; Longbridge regeneration; and affordable housing.

The council has a net revenue budget of £11.984 million (2009/10). The Council employs 368 staff.

## **REGENERATION AND HOUSING**

The economic picture of the district is generally positive despite the current economic downturn. Unemployment levels increased to 3.7 per cent at June 2009.

The mean household income is £38,690 is the highest in the county (the county average is £35,656\*).

There are three major areas of economic regeneration within the district: the Longbridge site, Bromsgrove town centre and Bromsgrove railway station.

The population of the district is 92,300 and the Office for National Statistics project that this will increase by 20.5 per cent to 111,200 by 2031. The over 65 population totals 17,000 and is predicted to expand significantly as a proportion of the overall population with the over 80s population estimated to increase by 132 per cent by 2031.

There are 37,492 households in the district. The current iteration of the Regional Spatial Strategy is likely to require 3,000 - 7,000 households to be built in the district over the next 25 years and it is proposed that Bromsgrove district will be required to take some of Redditch Borough Council's housing allocation.

A big issue facing the district is affordable housing. The average house price is £240,867\* and 83.4 per cent of households are owner occupied, the 11<sup>th</sup> highest figure in England and Wales.

The council is operating [at the time of the peer review] a planning moratorium with only affordable housing developments being built. The Housing Strategy has a target of 80 units of affordable housing a year for the next three years.

\*These statistics were from before the economic downturn.

# Achieving Outcomes

## Strengths

- ✓ Completion of the Core strategy held up by RSS but the council made a persuasive case for increased housing allocation
- ✓ Completed work on Longbridge AAP, progress with town centre AAP
- ✓ Research studies completed and underway (SHLAA, employment, green infrastructure etc.)

## Areas for consideration

- Spatial planning needs to be at the heart of the authority
  - Core Strategy would benefit from stronger links to the SCS and Council Plan
  - Development can be promoted now that there is increasing certainty over RSS allocations
  - SPD on affordable housing and planning obligations needed to deliver council vision
  - Develop strong and ambitious programme to deliver the Core Strategy and other related policy documents
  - Take the opportunity to channel members' aspirations into planned new housing opportunities (ADRs)
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1. The council has worked on developing a draft Core Strategy since 2005. This provides a spatial vision and objectives that cross reference with the Sustainable Community Strategy and the Council Plan.
  2. The development of the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) has been delayed and this has impacted on the council in preparing a draft Core Strategy, particularly on the future housing numbers for the district.
  3. Despite the RSS delay progress has been made. The earlier RSS iterations did not allow the housing growth, in particular affordable housing, the council believed was needed. The RSS Examination in Public (EIP) was held in Spring 2009 and the Panel's report published in September 2009. The council was successful in arguing for housing numbers to be increased to 4,000. The council input led to recent Panel recommendations which now provide clarity for the Core Strategy to be progressed quickly as a key priority (RSS Panel Report, September 2009 Chapter 8 paras. 8.85 - 8.87).
  4. The centrality of spatial planning for delivering council priorities is clear in the council's Council Plan which includes the Longbridge site and town centre redevelopment as council priorities.

5. In April 2005, parts of Phoenix Venture Holdings (PVH), most significantly MG Rover and PowerTrain entered administration, resulting in the closure of the Longbridge car plant. These elements employed around 5,850 people in the West Midlands and an estimated £410m was spent with supply chain firms in the region. Regeneration is progressing with a Longbridge Area Action Plan (LAAP) developed in association with Birmingham City Council and Worcestershire County Council.
6. The LAAP was examined by the Government Inspector and found to be 'sound' subject to minor amendments in February 2009. The LAAP was adopted by the council as a Development Plan Document (DPD) in April 2009 and will guide site redevelopment over the coming 15-20 years. The LAAP includes an infrastructure tariff to fund a range of physical and community infrastructure projects, for example new park and ride stations and supporting bus services to serve south Birmingham.
7. Longbridge is important as a large site of 468 acres of which 1/3 lies within Bromsgrove district. It is proposed that up to 750 homes will be built on the Bromsgrove area and this will go some way to address housing and affordable housing needs in the district.
8. Similarly the town centre is a high priority project for the council. Bromsgrove town centre needs a major overhaul to encourage local shopping and to be able to compete with neighbouring shopping centres. The Bromsgrove Area Action Plan (AAP) was published in July 2008 following a thorough consultation programme. Taking forward the AAP will be through a Development Plan Document (DPD).

The council's Annual Audit and Inspection letter (March 2009) states that:

"The regeneration of the town centre is at an early stage and it remains a difficult and challenging project. An area action plan has been developed, and an issues and option paper completed. A joint County and District Council Project Board has been established for the town centre and a town centre project manager appointed. Negotiations to relocate the various emergency services to a new site thus freeing up sites in the town centre are underway although progress has been hampered by the listing of Parkside School."

9. Bromsgrove railway station is associated with the town centre development. The current station facilities are considered inadequate and a feasibility study is being carried out on the possible redesign of the station so that it can take bigger trains, more passengers and increased car parking spaces. This would help 'future proof' the station against any changes to transport charges that may affect Birmingham city centre. Negotiations between Network Rail and other partners are currently taking place to put together the funding package for these works. It is envisaged that this will have significant effect on Bromsgrove due to the planned Cross City Line electrification being extended to the town and will bring it closer to the economic orbit of Birmingham.
10. Research studies have been completed or are underway. These will be important for informing the final Core Strategy document and associated policy development. A green infrastructure study is being undertaken. A

joint Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) has been completed with Redditch. An employment land study and a retail study have been undertaken. A transport study is being considered for options appraisal.

11. Despite this the peer review team do not feel that planning was yet at the heart of the council. This could be explained by a number of factors:

- the moratorium on housing since 2003 [the council intends to formally end this moratorium]
- the delay in progressing the RSS
- there is often not a senior officer presence at Planning Committee and the elected members may miss this visible service lead
- the Strategy Manager is the council lead on planning policy and has led for the council at meetings on Longbridge and on the RSS. The review team consider that given the importance of these matters to the council a director lead might offer greater strategic authority and demonstrate that planning matters are led from the most senior officers of the council
- the LDF Working Group has not met since March this year. A view was expressed by some members that the LDF was not clearly prioritised within the council as a key programme to deliver council priorities.

Whatever the reasons it is essential that spatial planning moves to the centre of the council's working arrangements as it is planning that will be required to deliver many of the council's priorities, for example the Longbridge site and town centre redevelopment. The Core Strategy will provide the planning land use levers for future housing and economic development to deliver the objectives of the SCS, the Local Area Agreement (LAA) as well as the council's own priorities.

12. With the increasing certainty over the likely housing numbers for Bromsgrove set out in the RSS Phase Two revision there is a clear opportunity for planning officers and the council to plan ahead. However, with the revised figures the council no longer has a five year supply of land that is suitable, available and achievable i.e. deliverable and could end up with planning by appeal, as highlighted in a recent precedent. In that appeal for five two-storey dwellings (37 Western Road, Hagley) the Planning Inspector stated that, "...the Council's approach to the question of housing land supply is unnecessarily cautious in...continuing to base its requirements solely on the adopted RSS" (September 2009). [Appeal decision reference APP/P1805/A/09/2101976.] Development should now be promoted by lifting the housing moratorium and taking the opportunity of producing a masterplan for designated ADRs to encourage quality design and development on more sustainable sites.

13. The policy as currently applied in the Local Plan encourages the development of exception housing, particularly with the moratorium on development of other types of housing. Developing larger sites on the

edge of Bromsgrove (ADR) would be preferable to building in rural areas in the green belt and lead to less friction and criticism from residents. Sites in ADRs would permit a mix of housing, including affordable housing. This could be 'pepper potted' throughout a site, instead of in one large tranche on the edge of a village, and be located in the most sustainable locations. This would go some way to satisfy member aspirations to build affordable housing and avoid the criticism, highlighted in the recent Ombudsman (Complaint number 07B13868, June 2009) and appeal cases (see paragraph 12 above). The current ADR allocations were developed in the late 1990s so may need to be reviewed for soundness as part of the development of the Core Strategy.

14. Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs) on planning obligations are needed to ensure that social infrastructure (schools, open space and community facilities) and affordable housing are provided on masterplanned sites. This is important to avoid negotiating planning obligations where affordable housing is not provided on site as part of mixed development. Some money from previous planning obligations was commuted for off site provision of affordable housing that would have produced less affordable housing than if provided on site. The value of land without affordable housing on site increases considerably and a developer /landowner would profit from this if other obligations were not sought.
15. Planning obligations should also be sought from smaller developments and from developers in the town centre to provide environmental enhancements such as new floorscape and seating.
16. The council recognises that it has not made the best use of planning powers to deliver affordable housing (Housing Strategy 2006-2011, p56) and is committed to developing Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) to introduce, "lower affordable housing thresholds and more demanding levels of affordable housing contribution." [The review team had sight of a draft SPD on Affordable Housing so it should be relatively straightforward to present this to council for speedy adoption.]
17. Now that the RSS detail is emerging the council should move to develop a strong and ambitious programme to deliver the Core Strategy and other related policy documents
18. The Government Office West Midlands (GOWM) was critical of aspects of the draft Core Strategy and the council will have to address this. GOWM has indicated the council cannot ignore the 3,000 homes for Redditch to be provided in the district (allocated by the RSS) nor can Redditch push on their core strategy before further joint work is done to agree where this growth is to be located. Discussions have been held with Redditch to set up a joint board, involving members, to take a strategic overview of cross border developments. Momentum is also being generated by the shared chief executive arrangement, across the two councils, and the push to share management teams and services. Both councils should undertake an assessment of resources needed for both councils to work together to develop their Core Strategies for simultaneous submission and examination

by the same Inspector. This should lead to the development of a joint project plan (LDS) that would identify how the town centre AAP, and the SPDs will be achieved

# Integration & Collaboration

## Strengths

- ✓ Joint working with Redditch, Stratford-on-Avon and Worcestershire CC (and Birmingham) – able to build on
- ✓ Joint Chief executive with Redditch offers opportunity for improved collaboration over future development proposed by RSS on boundary with Redditch
- ✓ Council is trying to bring forward vision of development at Longbridge
- ✓ Good relations at senior level between council and BDHT
- ✓ HMA (with BDHT) to understand housing demand and need for future development

## Areas for consideration

- Not convinced council has a clear view of its role in the region
- Council appears not to be effectively engaged – and less able to influence - with key regional partners (AWM, GOWM etc.)
- Bromsgrove had difficulty engaging with Birmingham due to different size and scale – importance given to the Longbridge development
- Danger that Redditch Core Strategy moves forward out of sync with Bromsgrove Core Strategy and ‘potentially unsound’
- External partners not always clear on planners’ professional position on affordable housing – need to develop understanding/relationships

19. The joint working with neighbouring councils on the RSS, Longbridge and the town centre development provides a firm foundation for developing the identity of Bromsgrove within the region. This will be enhanced by the proposals for the northern arc of three councils (Bromsgrove, Redditch and Wyre Forest) in Worcestershire to work together on economic development and develop a North Worcestershire Economic Strategy. The council has established good working arrangements with Birmingham City Council on the Longbridge AAP and also with Worcestershire County Council on this and the LAA. This record of partnership working with neighbouring councils provides a firm platform for developing future partnership initiatives, regional working arrangements and shared services/resources. This is also recognised in the CPA report (March 2009) with the council, “...playing a more positive role in local and regional partnerships from which it was previously absent.”

20. The joint chief executive arrangement with Redditch offers both councils an opportunity for improved collaboration on developing Core Strategies and the future development proposed by the RSS on the boundary with Redditch. The latter will be important to resolve for both councils.

21. The council is working to bring forward a vision of development at Longbridge. This is important as Longbridge is one of the council's priorities. An Area Action Plan (AAP) has been developed in association with Birmingham City Council and Worcestershire County Council. (See paragraphs 5 and 6 above.)
22. The council's housing stock was transferred to Bromsgrove District Housing Trust (BDHT) in 2004. BDHT are the largest social landlord in the district managing over 3,000 dwellings. The team were told that relations between the council and BDHT had been strained but, as a result of council efforts and senior meetings between the two organisations, these have greatly improved. This was confirmed by BDHT and the council. These are supported by ongoing quarterly meetings held between the chief executive, Leader and BDHT.
23. There is a RSL Liaison Group that meets every month, which includes BDHT, West Mercia RSL, Worcestershire County Council, strategic housing and planning officers and members. This group considers strategic housing needs and opportunities for land use with support from the Homes and Communities Agency for rural development.
24. The council developed a Housing Market Assessment (HMA) with BDHT and the South Housing Market Partnership (April 2007), which includes planning and housing authorities. The council also commissioned a HMA for the district which was produced in October 2008. The council acknowledges in its Housing Strategy 2006-2011 that this had been an area of weakness but is now committed to conducting future survey work on a regular basis with partners. The HMA provides the council – and partners – with invaluable information to understand housing demand and need to plan for future development. This was put to practical effect to inform an amendment to an existing planning approval at Perryfields Road to provide appropriate scale and type of dwellings the HMA identified as being needed.
25. However, the review team was not convinced the council has a clear view of its role in the region. For example, what should the district's relationship be with Birmingham, what is it that Bromsgrove will offer the region as a 'unique selling point'? Bromsgrove's LDF Vision in the draft Core Strategy (p8 October 2008) clearly set out a district-wide vision for Bromsgrove by 2026. While this is understandable in terms of the LDF it does seem to the review team to miss the opportunity of describing a vision of Bromsgrove within the region. The review team recommend that this be developed for the Core Strategy.
26. The council appeared to the review team not to be effectively engaged at a senior level with key regional partners, for example the Regional Development Agency - Advantage West Midlands (AWM), GOWM etc. In an interview it became apparent that the council was not "knocking on the door of AWM". Similar views became apparent in an interview with GOWM who stated that the council appeared, "reluctant to engage with Government Office – this may be due to issues with members who appear to want to have flexibility about where development goes" and appear reluctant to deal with cross boundary issues adjoining Redditch.



27. The council needs to continue engaging with Birmingham. With the importance of the Longbridge development it is essential that high level strategic engagement is achieved. This is in the interests for both councils, not least in terms of employment and commuting, with Bromsgrove having the largest single direction movement to the city in the county. The Local Transport Plan 2006-2011 (Worcestershire County Council) makes clear the importance of transport links, and the county council commitment to support enhancing Bromsgrove Railway Station and Bromsgrove town centre. The review team recommend that the council consider engagement with Birmingham City Council and Worcestershire County Council on these matters at strategic director level.
28. There is a possibility that the development of the Redditch Core Strategy progresses with Bromsgrove Core Strategy some way behind. It would be clearly preferable for the two authorities to work in tandem to the same timetable with a view to simultaneous submission. This 'joined up working' also is likely to be expected by the Planning Inspectorate. However, Redditch is keen to press ahead and may not wait for Bromsgrove. The council should ensure that both councils work together to ensure their timetables are aligned and that Bromsgrove has the resources to deliver to this.
29. On the site visit it was apparent that some significant affordable housing schemes had been delivered. However, some partners and members expressed the view that the council planners were not supportive of affordable housing. This appeared to be focused on proposed development of affordable housing sites in the green belt that did not meet the "very special circumstances" test in PPG2 (Green Belts). The review team raise this because it is a perception held in some quarters that the council may wish to seek to correct.

# Leading and engaging the community

## Strengths

- ✓ The roles and responsibilities of members have been reinforced through the Code on Conduct, member/officer protocol, training
- ✓ Improved working relationship between members and officers.
- ✓ The council are taking positive steps towards engaging with communities (SCS quantitative analysis, LDF Statement of Community Involvement)
- ✓ Recent introduction of public speaking at Planning Committee is welcomed by the community
- ✓ The website has provided new opportunities for residents to engage with the planning service.

## Areas for consideration

- Planning needs to become an enabling service
- Need to monitor recent customer interface arrangements to ensure that they meet community engagement needs
- The council should review the current member / officer working arrangements so that members are able to discharge their community leadership role with a clear understanding of professional officer advice
- There is a perception that a small minority of councillors are behaving in a “disruptive or confrontational way”

30. The roles and responsibilities of members have been clarified through recent provision of core documentation, for example: a Code of Conduct; a Description of Councillors Roles; and a member: officer protocol. Specifically on planning there is now a ‘Code of Practice – Planning Services’, contained within the council’s constitution. Planning Committee members are now required to undergo specified training. The review team were told by members that they now had a clearer understanding of spatial planning and their role in decision making.

31. Members and officers interviewed believe that there is a good working relationship and that this has improved in recent times. The most recent Audit Commission Annual Audit and Inspection Letter (March 2009) states, “Member capacity continues to improve.” The council has been active in promoting this. In addition to the training described above there are: briefing sessions involving the chair of Planning Committee with officers from Development Control and the legal team. The Head of Service meets regularly with the portfolio holder to discuss service matters. The council’s portfolio holder also encourages members to raise planning issues or potential interests with planning/legal officers.

32. The council are taking positive steps towards engaging with communities, informed by the council’s Community Engagement Strategy 2008-2009

and means the council is better able to ensure priorities meet residents' needs. The quantitative analysis of the district, which informed the development of the Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS) and the LDF Statement of Community Involvement Work, underpins this. The council have used various methods to engage with the community, including: a Quality of Life survey conducted in 2008, building on previous customer panel surveys; working with partners such as the Town Centre Regeneration Steering Group; active engagement with Town and Parish Councils at Partnerships and Communities Together (PACT).

33. The council ran its first children and young people's convention in 2007. It uses a community bidding approach for the equalities and diversity forum, and runs a budget jury, enabling local people to decide how delegated money should be spent. Key issues, to emerge from involving the equalities and diversity forum, are the regeneration of the town centre with suitable disabled access, extended hours of the shop mobility service, the need for a community transport scheme and the redevelopment of the railway station.
34. Community leadership is developing well. The council funded two pilot area committee schemes or local neighbourhood partnerships (LNP) during 2007/08, and allocated £4,000 to each. During 2008/09 this was increased to £15,000 each. A third LNP was proposed for the Hagley and Rural area. [Budget pressures have since led to ending LNP funding for financial year 2010-2011.]
35. The council trialled public speaking at Planning Committee in 2006. This was well received and welcomed by the community and formally adopted in 2007. It was mentioned positively by a service users' focus group, some parish councils, and members.
36. The website has provided new opportunities for residents to engage with the planning service and members commented positively on this. The review team found it easy to navigate and use. . The parish council focus group generally thought this was an improvement. The planning service users' focus group also supported it. The website is complemented by good quality information leaflets and brochures including: contacting Development Control, obtaining planning advice from the Customer Service Centre and a planning guide for householders. It is recommended that the council monitor the usage of the website and survey users to obtain feedback on the website 'useability' to inform future development.
37. However, planning is not currently viewed – rightly or wrongly - as an enabling service. The review team received a number of comments from focus groups and members of staff. A not untypical comment was that, "planning is dragging its feet" in corporate working and delivery. An example was alleged advice from planning suggesting that an AAP for Bromsgrove Town Centre could not be developed in advance of the Core Strategy when subsequent officer and member research resulted in examples of such AAPs. This has contributed to concern on being able to trust and rely on officer advice. A frequent comment made to the review

team was that Planning appeared to be hiding behind their regulatory function. To illustrate this many members want new SPDs to reflect changing community need, for example extensions to nursing homes in the green belt to reflect demographic changes. However planners are seen to be 'hiding' behind the RSS, Planning Policy Statements (PPSs) and LDF requirements. Correct or not, this is a very damaging perception for a planning service and is symptomatic of underlying cultural strains that need to be better understood. More on this is contained in paragraph 48.

38. Customer First is a priority for the council. However, the CPA report stated that, "customer focus is not embedded throughout the council" and that, "specific needs of customers are not being met consistently by all services." Information gathered by the team suggests that this is an area for further work for Planning. More needs to be done to understand the customer service requirements, to monitor customer contact and to ensure the council and service users are in ongoing dialogue. Some of this work is contained in the Planning and Environment Services Business Plan but this tends to set performance response targets and not qualitative measures. None of the Corporate Customer Standards in the business plan are reported in the monthly Performance Report. There may be benefit in the Executive Director and head of service having more involvement in this area and by the service capturing more qualitative information, for example spot surveys of planning users.
39. The review team picked up a deep sense of member frustration at being unable to champion and deliver community priorities and their feeling that planning service was constraining them. This became palpable when members spoke of feeling that the council has been talking about town centre development for more than 5 years and they are still talking about it. Another concern of members picked up during the review was around controlling the growth in numbers of takeaway food outlets. The council should give consideration to this growth, how this is managed elsewhere and whether control in this area is required by a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD). Around the broader issue of political frustration senior officers and elected members are recommended to give consideration to reviewing current working arrangements and the member community leadership role in relation to delivery of council priorities.
40. There is a perception that a small minority of councillors are behaving in a disruptive manner. This was picked up in the Audit Commission's CPA report (March 2009). This was referred to in focus groups and interviews during the peer review. A recent example was the police being called to a council meeting in July to restore order. This is damaging to the council's public image, especially in light of the council's sign up to the LGA's Reputation campaign. Much work has been conducted by the council to improve behavioural issues, in particular by training and development. This is an area of importance for the council and needs to be worked on continuously by the chief executive, the Leader, group leaders and the CMT. This might be usefully supported by the provision of peer mentoring.

# Management

## Strengths

- ✓ Considerable improvement achieved – now moving to the next phase of this journey
- ✓ Clear strategic framework (SCS, Council Plan, the LSP linking to the LAA)
- ✓ The LDF is developing to a point of enabling the council vision
- ✓ Major increase in delegated authority over the last 5 years
- ✓ Successful implementation of Customer Service Centre and Surgery arrangements

## Areas for consideration

- Develop clarity on member : officer roles and responsibilities
- Resources needed to develop Core Strategy and deliver quality new development
- CMT support for spatial planning to assume 'place shaping' role
- Use partnerships to gain understanding, consensus and support delivery

41. The council has made significant improvement. Progress is acknowledged in the recent Audit Commission CPA and Annual Audit and Inspection Letter (both dated March 2009) which refers to the processes and "building blocks" being in place that were previously absent. The council is now moving into a new improvement phase. This is supported by managerial and political leadership that understands the importance of planning for Bromsgrove and has a clear vision for the future.

42. The council was designated a 'Standards Authority' for 2007-2008 due to Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI) underperformance. In response it has worked to an Improvement Plan with progress reported to CMT and Cabinet. Since then service Business Plans have been used to set out national targets for processing planning applications, complemented by local performance indicators.

43. The strategic planning framework and the hierarchy of plans are clear, as are their references across. The SCS 2008 to 2011 was developed by the council, working with partners. Its vision is: 'We will make Bromsgrove District a better place to work, live and visit by driving forward change'. The SCS was updated in October 2008 to ensure a fit to the new LAA. The SCS priorities include Town Centre redevelopment (including transport: railway station redevelopment, housing and Longbridge regeneration. The Bromsgrove Partnership (the LSP) has adopted the six LAA objectives.

44. Progress on RSS has been slow and this has impacted on the council's ability to progress the Core Strategy. In addition there have been some tensions with neighbouring councils (Redditch and Stratford-on-Avon) and

Government Office West Midlands (GOWM). The pace has been a source of frustration for the council; especially it depends on spatial planning to enable the delivery of the council's vision. However, progress is picking up and the RSS is approaching finalisation. This means that the council can now look to the Core Strategy being completed by June/July 2010. The review team recommend that a project plan (that is a revised Local Development Scheme – LDS) is developed for the work needed to complete the Core Strategy to this timetable.

45. The council has successfully managed a major shift in delegated authority over the last 5 years. This is important to balance the respective roles of officers and members and will assist the processing of applications and the resources required for this. Just as important this rebalancing means that the planning service can involve members in more important and controversial applications. The team picked up that some members were not entirely content with this shift. This is understandable as the former role was seen as more actively involved in 'shaping Bromsgrove'. However, the shift in delegated authority is positive and officers should work to support members to understand their new role and the importance of this.
46. Staff spoke positively of the new Customer Service Centre (CSC), which the planning service migrated to on 1 October 2009, and the Planning Surgery. This provides an opportunity to both better manage workloads and give face to face time to applicants. The early signs are that this service is valued by customers. A survey of planning users was used to inform the offer of support provided by the CSC. It will be important to monitor CSC activity and user feedback and to build on this for the future.
47. The council has a very clear vision for Bromsgrove and this is articulated in the SCS, the Council and the LAA. However, this is a more inward looking vision and does not position the council in the wider sub-region/region context. For example, this might describe Bromsgrove in relation to: its relationship to Birmingham, its 'fit' within the wider county council area, the 'use' of the greenbelt (the "lungs" of the West Midlands), the district's view of itself on economic development and regeneration etc.
48. Member and officer roles have changed. This has happened nationally since the implementation of the Local Government Act 2000. These changes need to be understood and supported so that officers and members can adapt to new roles and responsibilities and new ways of working together. The team picked up blame being attached to planning but this was not being opened up for better understanding and resolution. This contributed to an unhealthy atmosphere and internal sniping. This was one of the key features of the review and this is potentially highly damaging to the service, the council and its officers and members. It is essential that this is opened up by senior managers, with HR and possibly with external support, to fully understand and to seek to correct it this.
49. A top council priority should be to finalise the Core Strategy, which will provide the platform for many council objectives to be delivered. There is a clear opportunity to link with Redditch to combine resources (there are already staff secondments taking place), to consider joint investment in

specialist resources e.g. urban design, joint planning arrangements, joint policies. In the future this could lead to a joint Core Strategy across the two councils.

50. If the council decides that the Core Strategy is a priority then it must ensure that resources can deliver this. The head of service's view is that resources are sufficient for Bromsgrove's housing RSS allocation of 4,000 new homes but not enough for this and the Redditch 3,000 allocation in Bromsgrove. An added difficulty is that it appears planning resources have reduced in recent years. For example, the team were told that the housing moratorium led to a turnover of planners leaving to be involved in "real planning work" with other councils. The recent job evaluation had a negative impact and contributed to staff moving to other authorities in the area. The review has recommended a project planning approach via a revised LDS to inform the council on the resources required.
51. Council uncertainties, frustration and attaching of blame needs to be addressed. The team believe that this should come from corporate support for spatial planning to assume a 'place shaping' role. There is an emerging timeline to support such a move. It is intended to establish a shared Bromsgrove/Redditch SMT by 1 April 2010. This could lead to shared heads of service by July-September 2010 with a signed off RSS by June/July 2010. The council should consider establishing a programme to submit a Core Strategy by June 2010 and incorporate within this corporate support for spatial planning to assume a corporate 'place shaping' role. This is an organisation cultural issue that is also picked up in paragraphs 37 and 48.
52. Development management may help move spatial planning to a more prominent 'place shaping' role. Development management (DM) constitutes the assessing and determining of applications more strategically and moves away from a 'plan-led system'. DM is a change in planning culture – away from reactive control of development to a more positive and proactive role for planning. It would necessitate changes in structure and the allocation of resources but would provide a freer interplay between traditional development control and policy teams. With the RSS now entering the final stages and able to inform the Core Strategy, this may be an opportune time for the council to consider a service shift to development management.
53. Members informed the team of concerns for future services, for example care villages. The team felt the approach has tended to prematurely ask the planning service to arrive at planning solutions. Instead a partnership approach may be more appropriate. For example, the council has set up Partnership Board to look at housing for older people involving representatives of the council, BDHT and the county council. This is a useful model to consider. Different organisational perspectives; demographic and geographic data projections; projected care needs etc. will be best understood by involving principal partners, including Primary Care Trust (PCT), Social Care, Age Concern etc. Such partnerships are well placed to arrive at a collective understanding and ownership of the issue and its resolution. It is at this point to then ask planning how it might contribute towards this.

# Innovation, learning and excellence

## Strengths

- ✓ DC staff run regular training sessions for members covering areas such as General Permitted Development and probity
- ✓ Planners have supported the council in achieving level 3 of the Equality Framework for local government
- ✓ The council/service has been exposed to external support through voluntary engagement with CLG, IDeA and other local authorities = support and challenge

## Areas for consideration

- The planning service needs to be supported to assume an more enabling and politically aware role
- S106 work will need skills/expertise to maximise benefits for the council
- Members should take advantage of the 1 hour slot allocated prior to Planning Committee
- Learning from customer engagement e.g. answers to complaint letters are reportedly not always satisfactory and lead to further complaints
- Improved consultation arrangements Parish councils to better in participate in the planning process
- Progress could be made on peripheral, short-term improvement work in the town centre prior to the adoption of the AAP

54. The council's Management Development Strategy (2006) commits management development to, "...deliver service improvement by creating a knowledgeable and highly skilled management team..." This is reinforced by the Modern Manager Framework that sets standards for managerial performance.

55. Training provision seems well developed for officers and members. Members confirmed they are happy with the training received to date and that this is making them more informed on planning matters. Recent training has been run in-house by staff for members. The CAPS Uniform system has recently been introduced and all staff have received training on this. The council has supported staff training at the University of Central England (UCE) and continuing professional development (CPD) via County and Districts Planning Officers Group (CADPOG).

56. Personal development reviews (PDRs) are undertaken every six months for staff and form an integral part of the business system by assessing work loads, performance against targets and identifying training needs. Following PDR interviews a training and development plan is produced. Most of the staff we talked to could identify the 'golden thread' in



understanding how their specific role and objectives contribute to the service plan and up through to the SCS and Council Plan.

57. There is currently no planning enforcement expertise in the council's legal team. The new enforcement officer is in the process of putting together a formal procedure pack with the aim of providing a legal framework. This will help to speed up the enforcement process and provide officers with clarity. A draft Enforcement Policy has been prepared. Members are keen to see enforcement available to the planning service. The council are recommended to establish the above arrangements and monitor their application. In view of member concern on enforcement it may be worth reporting to CMT and cabinet.
58. Equalities represent one of the council's four key values. Planning was commended by internal colleagues as actively supporting equality and diversity. The council has achieved Level 3 of the Equality Framework for local government in April 2009 and is working with other councils in Worcestershire on this. The newly designed, more accessible website content management system (Ameda C) has been implemented which improves website use but also gathers user feedback for continuing design and development. The location of the new Customer Service Centre offers easier customer access to the planning service.
59. The council acknowledges that it used to be inward looking but this has changed and it is receptive to the opportunities of support, learning and challenge from other organisations. When in voluntary engagement the CLG lead was permanently located within the authority. The council invited a team from Walsall to act as a critical friend in 2006. The IDEa has been involved in providing a range of improvement support, including a peer review of customer services. The council has wholeheartedly engaged with partnership working through the LSP and LAA formal arrangements and on areas of importance, for example Longbridge and the town centre development.
60. Planners are perceived in some quarters as not being innovative and being risk averse. This view was expressed by members, officers and one developer. Members have described the system as an "obstacle course" put in the way of development. An example offered was the case of Mouldsley Hall old peoples' home development where applications were repeatedly refused. The perception was that planners were determinedly not allowing development that, through persistence, was eventually approved. This point relates to those made in paragraphs 37, 48 and 51 above and points to cultural issues that need to be addressed. These negative perceptions are being reinforced over time, with planning staff describing a "heads down" bunker outlook.
61. The view was expressed that the council had not been successful in obtaining the most gain from developers in S106 negotiations. This is an area of expertise often missing in councils and with the prospect of housing moratorium coming to an end it may be worth considering the appointment (perhaps shared with Redditch) of a designated Planning Obligations S106 officer with negotiation experience. A view was

expressed to the team that the council had not been good at publishing information about how the S106 monies are spent. It may be worth the council considering a publicly available system to provide information on S106 funded schemes.

62. The council has recently introduced a one hour time slot before Planning Committee for members to discuss planning issues with officers. Unfortunately so far no members have taken up this offer. This is a good opportunity to clear matters before going into a public arena and can be valuable preparation for the smoother running of a planning committee. The peer review team recommend that members be encouraged by the chief executive, executive director and Leader of council to attend these sessions. Further support might come from group leaders, the portfolio holder and the chair of planning committee.
63. Comments were made to the review team that responses to complaint letters are not satisfactory and provoke further complaints. One comment made was that the handling of complaints was managed in a "high handed" manner and that the service should show more customer sensitivity. The review team have no evidence to confirm or deny this but it may be an area for further consideration.
64. The review team were told that there was a lack of formal training given to parish councils on the online planning system. The online consultation process was felt not to be user friendly and parish councillors, who are required to comment on multiple applications and plans, found it frustrating having to re-enter their contact details for each submission. Further discussions with parish councils on training support would go some way to maintaining good relations.
65. Peripheral works for the town centre, such as replacement of paving and street furniture, have been suggested by a number of sources, including Worcestershire County Council, pending the commencement of full scale redevelopment. This would provide a 'quick win' for members and members of the public following the stalling of the town centre development and listing of Parkside School.

## Shared knowledge and evidence

### Strengths

- ✓ Strategic Housing Market Assessment provides comprehensive picture of housing needs in the sub regional context
- ✓ SCS and Council Plan are underpinned by the Bromsgrove profile
- ✓ SHLAA in place, AMR published annually
- ✓ Exploring potential for joint planning documents with Redditch

### Areas for consideration

- Sharing of joint studies with other local government partners
- More systematic way of gathering learning so that it can be shared across the organisation

66. The Strategic Housing Market Assessments are a positive step to providing the council with an understanding of housing need and the location for this. The council is committed to ensuring the HMAs are kept up to date and they will be invaluable for the Core Strategy and the council's Housing Strategy.

67. The council's Sustainable Community Strategy and Council Plan are directly linked to the spatial planning vision set out in the draft Core Strategy. The strength of these key strategies is confirmed by the Audit Commission in the CPA report stating that, "Community ambitions link well with and support county wide ambitions."

68. The Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) has been completed (April 2009) and identifies potential areas for future housing development. [Local authorities are required to identify broad locations and specific sites that will enable continuous delivery of housing for at least 15 years from the date of adoption of the LDF. Authorities are expected to provide this robust information in the form of a SHLAA, which will form a key component of the LDF evidence base. This evidence is needed to help support the delivery of sufficient land for housing to meet district housing requirements, as determined by the RSS. This will be important for ongoing development of the Core Strategy and local discussions with residents, landowners and developers.] The RSS Phase Two Revision (September 2009) may mean the council has to review the SHLAA in view of changing housing numbers.

69. Working relations have already been established with Redditch Borough Council from the LDF preparations and responses to the RSS. This has been consolidated by the shared chief executive arrangements. This provides a platform for further joint service working and developing joint planning documents.

70. There are also important opportunities to share in the cost of joint studies with other local government partners such as the county council, neighbouring district councils, the Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership and the Regional Development Agency (Advantage West Midlands) on matters such as economic development, development economics and the development and assessment of alternative sites for development. This could also include specific subject areas such as the SHLAA (see paragraph 66 above), a Strategic Flood Risk Assessment, and Employment Land Review etc.
71. This report has acknowledged the improvement progress made by the council in a short time. The priorities of improvement suggest to the review team that there has been less work conducted to systematically gather learning so that it can be shared across the organisation. While this is entirely understandable given the priorities of the council it is recommended that for the next phase of improvement that attention is given to this.

## Contact details

For further information concerning the peer review of planning in Bromsgrove District Council please contact Andrew Winfield, the IDeA's peer review manager:

Email: [andrew.winfield@idea.gov.uk](mailto:andrew.winfield@idea.gov.uk)

Telephone: 07786 542754

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