***Note**: This case study is extracted from the Good Development Management report, published in June 2019 on the PAS website.*

Copeland Borough Council – Leadership in planning

Summary	
Wanted to…	• Improve planning performance – corporately, planning was not given a high standing which affected performance • Set performance within the context of potential major schemes in the pipeline which were a corporate priority
Action	• Create new management positions including 'Manager of Development' position with a mandate to drive improvements • Task new managers to focus on weekly monitoring against targets, combined with investment in existing staff
Benefits	• A transformation in how planning is perceived and a raised profile for planning within the authority • Improved performance - applications determined within the target timeframe jumped from 58% to just over 90% • Greater demand on the service has resulted in increased resource (new principal and graduate planner posts)
Learning / risks	• Started with PAS planning peer review • Support from senior management team and Leader of the Council is crucial • Managers have to be "trusted to get on with the job" • A focus on building the capacity of officers to lift their performance helps with morale

Introduction

In 2015 Copeland Borough Council's planning department was under performing against government targets for determining applications. Under-staffing and outmoded processes meant that in some categories of application, only 58% were being determined within the target timeframes.

What they did

The change at Copeland Council started at the top with the election of a Mayor with a strong growth agenda, and recognition of planning's integral role in delivering that. The Chief Executive was given the political remit to invest in the planning department's staff resources, but this was not at the core of the change.

Leaders also recognised that the profile of planning needed raising as a way of facilitating improvement and a

culture change across the department. The Chief Executive, a chartered town planner, set about raising the profile of planning and gave the service a clear brief; Copeland was to be a top performing authority, through meeting government timescale targets and by raising the bar on the quality of development outcomes.

To meet this challenge the service needed qualified professional staff with the right level of expertise and experience. A review of the management structure led to the creation of a specific 'Manager of Development' role, who would report directly to the Chief Executive and also resulted in the creation of managers for the 'Planning Policy' and 'Nuclear' service areas. This recognised the need for management at the right level, and the operational integration of these functions.

The creation of these new posts and the additional resource was undoubtedly a factor in the service improvements that followed. But, at the heart of this change was the empowerment of key staff. The newly appointed Planning Development Manager was briefed by the Chief Executive and then "trusted to get on with the job". There was autonomy and limited interference in operational matters – it was the 'end result' that mattered. This was also combined with support in the form of regular meetings to communicate and share information.

The manager started with an analysis of performance, supported by PAS, which identified scope for improvement. Recommendations to expand the type and number of schemes that could be dealt with under delegated authority and carrying out more active engagement with developers became priorities.

Individual team member performance also became a focus. A series of weekly one-to-one meetings are held to discuss application timescales and targets, reviewing cases, and looking intelligently with officers at applications at risk of going over the target timescale.

Crucially, this focus on individual performance was twinned with a renewed focus on staff development. Officers were switched to career-graded posts allowing progression through different levels of seniority and providing a financial incentive to attain RTPI qualifications and develop as a professional. This focus on building the capacity of officers to lift their performance helped with morale and continues to do so.

The Council's communications team now actively promotes and publicises good development management team performance; for example, showcasing favourable appeal decisions or successful enforcement prosecutions. The morale of the team has been improved by the decision to promote and celebrate planning successes. Officers received thanks and recognition from the Mayor and the Chief Executive as the Council's performance against Government targets increased. Positive publicity in local media has also energised the team.

Results and Learning

The culture change didn't happen overnight. The new planning development manager was an internal promotion of a principal planner who carried a caseload alongside their new management responsibilities while their previous post was filled. This was demanding, stressful and required support, drive and commitment. In this sense it was more important than ever

to focus on the most important things – improving the performance statistics – There are always budgetary constraints and replacing one manager with three had financial implications. However, the structural change was across the whole Council, which meant that savings in some areas enabled investment in others.

The cultural change started at the top by the Chief Executive boosting the profile of planning, its role and its capacity to leverage investment into the authority. This transformed the way it was perceived and raised its 'place' within the authority.

With a renewed sense of purpose and confidence, the planning team worked and with lower priority matters dealt with but within slower timescales. hard to drive up performance to a position whereby the proportion of applications determined within the target timeframe jumped from 58% to just over 90%.

The improved performance and the results of engagement with developers (leading to greater service demand) has in turn led to the team being expanded further with increased resource (new principal and graduate planner posts). The team drove the change and deserves credit for the way it has turned its service around but at the heart of this was a change in culture of the organisation set by strong, focused leadership.