

Planning Peer Challenge Nottingham City Council

28 April to 1 May 2025

Feedback Report 13 June 2025



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1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report presents the findings from a peer challenge of the planning service at Nottingham City Council. Organised at the request of the Council and the commissioners overseeing its improvement, the peer challenge was delivered by the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) in association with the Local Government Association (LGA). The work was undertaken on site in Nottingham between the 28th of April and 1st May 2025.
- 1.2 As an organisation, Nottingham City Council is on a journey of recovery and re-invention following a very challenging period which included the issuing of a Section 114 Notice as the Council was unable to deliver a balanced budget. Overseen by Government appointed commissioners since April 2024, major changes have already taken place and further change with some hard decisions will also be needed over the next year. These are challenging times for the local government sector as a whole and for the planning sector especially, with a Government programme of reform that seeks to rebuild local and strategic planning to help deliver its ambition of growth in terms of new homes, jobs and infrastructure. Such changes also bring opportunities and the Council is now starting to emerge from its most difficult period with a renewed sense of ambition for the city.
- 1.3 Despite working in one of the most difficult of local contexts, the Nottingham planning service has continued to operate consistently well, performing strongly across all the key national indicators usually judged to measure a local planning service as well as working hard to deliver very high-quality development in the city. The staff are dedicated and professional, and the city Council is seen as a strong place leader amongst its strategic partners. In addition, members of the planning committee are proud of the quality of development that has been delivered in the city and value the role they play. Overall, this performance is quite remarkable considering the financial controls and organisational changes made over the last few years; and both staff and council leadership need to be commended for exceptional work in such challenging times.
- 1.4 Looking to the future, there is a strong political commitment to a new vision for the city and a local growth agenda to deliver the Government's ambitions, with a desire to see more new development and opportunities for tall buildings. This vision now needs to be fully articulated through a properly designed and resourced strategic visioning exercise. The planning service has a key role in this and needs to play a leading part, but the visioning exercise also needs to bring together services across the Council as well as key partners from inside and outside the city so that it generates a new and widely shared sense of Nottingham's future role as a driver of growth across the wider sub-region.
- 1.5 The Council starts from a good position in this respect, with an appetite from public and private stakeholders as well as local community leaders to work together on the new political agenda. The proactive approach taken by the planning service to refresh the local plan (and related plans) also puts the Council in a much better position than many others when it comes to growth. The Greater Nottingham Strategic Plan is a good example of positive planning in the face of uncertainty and change, with the city council's planning team taking a leading role in the Greater Nottingham sub-region. As the plan is submitted and goes through examination to adoption, the planning service should establish an officer-member working group to strengthen corporate engagement as well as help elected members to understand how the plan can help to deliver the vision they have.
- 1.6 The development management element of the planning service has also continued to deliver a good quality service in a timely way to applicants, backed by an innovative strategy team whose work on Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and award-winning modelling of the city is able to

produce monitoring and other evidence to support effective decision making. However, there is also a need to modernise some of the processes and procedures of the service so that it can be a strong and enabling function that is able to respond to upcoming reforms that will see limits to the way that extensions of time are used.

- 1.7 Some of this can be done relatively quickly and should add value to the work of the service in the shorter term. For example, the Development Management Workforce Strategy and Action Plan is impressive, and the changes it sets out need to be implemented and the new team structure recruited to. Practical tools, such as a manual for development management staff and closer monitoring of case work through a fully functioning back-office system are also potential improvements that will ensure a more consistent service. Beyond this, though, the development management arm of the planning service can also take a more entrepreneurial approach to its work along the lines that other LPAs are adopting. This would see a more business-like model for pre-application charging and the use of officer time as well as the development of planning performance agreements (PPAs) for applicants who wish to receive an enhanced service across the consenting and post consent stages of a scheme.
- 1.8 This process of modernisation also needs to extend to the way that the planning committee operates and how decision making is presented externally. Working with members of the committee, changes to the committee venue, the introduction of new protocols for external speakers and stronger procedures for managing debates and motions would go some way to projecting a more authoritative committee role to the outside world. Members of the committee are keen to see these changes and their appetite to become more involved in the work of the service, for example through a better understanding of development management performance and monitoring of developer contributions, should be welcomed.
- 1.9 Looking beyond Nottingham City Council in its current form, there are tremendous opportunities for the city arising from the creation of the East Midlands Combined County Authority (EMCCA) and Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). Planning needs to be at the head of these initiatives and the recommendations set out below are designed to ensure that the service is in a better position to take advantages of such opportunities. This will require longer term change, responding to national planning reforms and preparing for the development of a new style local plan that can set out the city's ambitions. But it will also require more strategic engagement with developers and future investors, for example through a developers' forum, and the creation of a more enabling planning service that is better placed to work alongside the formation of a new regeneration function for the Council.
- 1.10 Overall, the peer challenge team have identified a range of challenges and opportunities for the planning service, which can be addressed with the support of the wider council. The team's recommendations for change will require commitment and work at every level but build on a strong track record of professionalism and delivery by planning. Economic growth and further housing delivery will help to provide the basis for a much more sustainable future that brings benefits to local people and, crucially, support the Council's wider recovery. Planning is central to delivering this and the new vision for the city, as well as the key to unlocking the potential of the wide sub-region.

2.0 Key Recommendations

This table sets out the key recommendations from the peer challenge. Further detail on each can be found in the main body of the report.

R1	Clearly articulate the new vision for Nottingham going forward to get staff and partner buy in. A rapid visioning exercise, supported by the planning service but working across the Council as well as with stakeholders from the private, public and community sectors. The vision should set out the role of Nottingham, locally and for the wider sub-region, as well as its key assets and how these need to develop to fulfil its potential.
R2	Urgently provide corporate resources to begin work on a Tall Building Strategy. This will enable the opportunities for high-rise development to be explored and identified ahead of the next local plan review, feed into the delivery of the vision and help inform the determination of emerging proposals, and respond to a strong political imperative for this work to be undertaken as soon as practicable.
R3	Ensure the new Greater Nottingham Strategic Plan and new-style NPPF local plan is promoted corporately and politically as the primary tool to drive housing and regeneration delivery in Nottingham. Political leaders from all parties should ensure that all members understand that the Local Plan is the delivery tool for future growth in Nottingham and a member-officer working group help to embed its use in future decision making. The group should also begin to scope out the requirements of a new-style NPPF local plan for the city, and what this may mean in terms of resources.
R4	Implement comprehensive changes to modernise the processes, procedures and operating model of planning's development management service so that it can play an enabling role in delivering the Nottingham growth agenda. This will involve: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Preparing a Development Management Manual to provide clear guidance to officers and consistency of approach in dealing with planning applications. ➤ Reviewing out-of-date planning applications and risks associated with the Planning Guarantee. ➤ Providing corporate capacity to implement the recommendations in the PAS Development Management review (April 2022) e.g. updating the back-office support systems to improve performance data and track case work more accurately. ➤ Embedding a stronger performance management culture within the planning service including lessons from benchmarking and good practice outlined in this report.
R5	Commit to taking forward the Development Management Workforce Strategy and Action Plan to ensure the service can quickly address resourcing issues and address single points of failure. Building on Recommendation 4, this means recruiting to fill all the positions in the new team structure and enabling the "grow your own" method of building planning officer capacity set out in the strategy.
R6	Align the planning support team to the new modernised performance management culture of the development management function. This includes a consideration of whether the support services team would be better managed directly by the planning service, through a matrix management arrangement or through a stronger service level agreement to better meet the needs of the development management function.

R7	<p>Modernise the operation of the Planning Committee and the public's experience of committee meetings. This should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Ensuring that the operation of committee meetings is more open and transparent with more structured discussions followed by a clear motion on decisions. ➤ A more appropriate layout of the committee room allowing external parties to be able to observe and follow proceedings and decision making. ➤ Allowing objectors and supporters/developers of schemes a limited time to speak prior to the committee debate and decisions being taken, drawing on best practice from across country. ➤ Scheduling any changes with care before starting the broadcasting of committee meetings and implementing government-driven planning committee reforms.
R8	<p>Commit to the creation of a developer forum to build long term strategic relationships with current and new investors.</p> <p>Developers and other private sector stakeholders are open to closer working and a formal arrangement like a forum would be an opportunity to gather information and intelligence from the development community as well as drive forward shared priorities. A number of developers are also keen to offer practical assistance which could mean that the capacity for hosting a forum does not fall on the Council directly.</p>
R9	<p>For the next review of the Local Plan, establish a Local Plan Member Working Group so that the Planning Committee and other Members can play a more central role in future policy development and innovation.</p> <p>Linked to Recommendation 3, planning committee members and the portfolio holder for planning have a key role in determining how the planning services responds to reforms in plan-making. A local plan working group would form a logical extension of work on the Greater Nottingham Strategic Plan.</p>
R10	<p>Consider the creation of a multi-disciplinary team to drive forward the new vision for the city recognising the strong links between planning and regeneration.</p> <p>Although the Council's regeneration capacity was significantly reduced under a duties and powers review, recent progress suggests that a newly formed regeneration team is possible. With an exciting new agenda and vision being set by the Council, and planning's crucial role in regeneration, a team to work with private sector partners and benefit from the combined authority is recommended.</p>

3.0 The peer challenge approach

The peer challenge team

- 3.1 Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected councillors and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the peer review and peers were selected based on their relevant expertise. The peers were:

- **Paul Barnard**, Service Director of Strategic Planning and Infrastructure, Plymouth City Council
- **Councillor Mike McCusker**, Lead Member for Planning, Transport and Sustainable Development, Salford City Council
- **Sarah Scannell**, Assistant Director Planning, Birmingham City Council
- **Steve Barker**, Principal Consultant, LGA/PAS
- **Garreth Bruff**, Peer Review Manager and Principal Consultant, LGA/PAS

The Planning Advisory Service (PAS)

- 3.2 PAS is an LGA programme funded primarily by a grant from the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). Our principal role is to help ensure that local planning authorities (LPAs) are able to improve in the execution and delivery of their services.
- 3.3 To achieve this, the PAS work programme focuses on:
- Helping local government officers and councillors to stay effective and up to date by guiding them on the implementation of the latest reforms to planning.
 - Promoting a 'sector-led' improvement programme that encourages and facilitates local authorities to help each other through peer support and the sharing of best practice.
 - Providing consultancy and peer support, designing and delivering training and learning events, and publishing a range of resources online.
 - Facilitating organisational change, improvement and capacity building programmes - helping to implement the very latest and best ways of delivering the planning service.
- 3.4 PAS also delivers some of its services on a commercial basis including change and improvement programmes for individual and groups of planning authorities.

Scope and focus of the peer challenge

- 3.5 The key aim of this planning peer challenge was to assess how well the planning service is delivering the council's planning duties and helping the council to meet its wider objective of becoming a financially sustainable, resilient and better run organisation which consistently delivers services that residents can trust and rely on.
- 3.6 As such, the peer challenge was designed to provide a comprehensive assessment of core planning functions in terms of performance, capacity, and organisational arrangements, comparing these against similar authorities and best practice. Peers looked at the operation of the planning committee, decision-making, plan-making, income generation and working practices in the planning service; identifying opportunities to maximise the impact of planning in Nottingham and ensuring the council can give the best service to its residents and customers.
- 3.7 These aims and the issues they raise were examined by the peer team across five key themes, which are common to all peer challenges and form the structure for this feedback report. They are:

- **Vision and leadership** – how Nottingham City Council and the planning service demonstrate leadership to integrate planning within corporate working and support corporate objectives.
- **Performance and management** – the effective use of skills and resources to achieve value for money, and the effectiveness of processes (and the roles of officers and members) in decision-making on development proposals.
- **Community engagement** – how the planning service understands its community leadership role and community aspirations and uses planning to help deliver them.
- **Partnership engagement** – how the planning service works with partners to balance priorities and resources to deliver agreed priorities.
- **Achieving outcomes** – how well the service leverages national and local planning policy to deliver the sustainable development and planning outcomes its community requires.

3.8 Given the importance of the **planning committee**, and its impact across all of these themes, the feedback report also includes an additional section which brings together the findings and recommendations from the peer team on the committee.

The peer challenge process

- 3.9 Peer challenges are improvement focused, and it is important to stress that this review of Nottingham's planning service was not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of all plans and proposals or to undertake a forensic analysis of every aspect of service. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by the people they met, the things they saw and the material they read; reviewing this through a strategic lens to focus on the most important issues for the planning service.
- 3.10 The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information to ensure they were familiar with the planning service and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent 3.5 days on site in late April/early May 2025 during which they gathered information and views from 29 different meetings or workshops and spoke to more than 90 people. All the information collected is on a non-attributable basis to inform this report.
- 3.11 At Nottingham's request, PAS also carried out a more detailed consideration of development management work in the planning service over recent years. This looked at issues like speed of decision making, delegation rates and extensions of time, etc as well as how these compare to similar authorities. The results of this are in the report where relevant (see section 5.2 below).
- 3.12 The peer team would like to thank councillors, staff, community representatives and partners for engaging so positively in the peer challenge process with open, honest and constructive responses. The team was made to feel welcome and appreciate the time people committed to supporting this work.

4.0 Context

- 4.1 This peer challenge took place at a critical time for Nottingham City Council. Commissioners, appointed by the Secretary of State in April 2024, are overseeing a challenging programme of work to ensure the Council improves its performance and secures a more sustainable financial position following the issuing of a Section 114 Report. As part of this, a new political leadership and Corporate Leadership Team are in place and have developed a Council wide improvement plan to address these issues as well as a new Corporate Plan, very recently agreed by the Council in March 2025. The corporate plan brings a completely fresh approach to the Council's vision, purpose and core missions; change, improvement and learning are central to all the Council is doing as it seeks to rebuild trust with the people and business community of Nottingham.
- 4.2 The planning peer challenge needed to understand these factors within the Council, and what they mean for the planning service, alongside other challenges and opportunities for the planning sector as a whole. Driven by the Prime Minister's [Plan for Change](#) and the national mission to kickstart economic growth, the role and priorities for local planning are changing with a greater emphasis on housing delivery, the construction of new infrastructure to facilitate growth and harnessing of new technologies to enable this. Reforms to the planning system will alter how local plans are produced, how planning application decisions are made and the performance regime that planning services are judged against.
- 4.3 The Government began to confirm some of the changes in late 2024 and will continue to do so through 2025 as the Planning and Infrastructure Bill progresses. For example, at the time of writing this report the Government published several working papers with proposals to speed up the planning process and accelerate build out rates for new homes. This includes a [technical consultation on changes to the work of planning committees](#) which will be of interest to Nottingham and all local planning authorities.
- 4.4 More widely, the whole of Nottinghamshire is undergoing change through Local Government Re-organisation (LGR) and moves to devolve more funding and responsibilities to the East Midlands Combined County Authority (EMCCA). As one of the eight English core cities, Nottingham has a key role to play in making sure that these changes are successful in the first instance and the city provides the engine for growth across the wider East Midlands area.
- 4.5 Planning (and local planning services in particular) must be at the heart of these changes, both shaping decisions and responding to a fast-changing context. In a recent [Written Ministerial Statement](#), the Minister of State for Local Government, Jim McMahon MP, reaffirmed the Government's expectation that local authorities continue to progress local plans and that neither LGR nor planning reforms should delay or disrupt this process. This reinforces the importance of sustaining local plan delivery in Nottingham and the need for clear strategic oversight. It is within this context that the recommendations and proposals in this report are made. They are designed to be forward looking, not just about tackling the immediate issues, but also seeking to identify what the planning service must do to remain effective in the future. Nottingham's planning service has a strong foundation and already operates at a high level. It now has the opportunity to build on these strengths and develop the agility needed to respond to the city's evolving needs.

5.0 Detailed Feedback

The following sections set out the findings of the peer challenge, including an analysis of strengths, challenges and areas for improvement. In line with the peer challenge process, findings are structured around each of the five key themes considered in a review, with an additional focus on the planning committee given its important role for Nottingham.

5.1 Vision and Leadership

- 5.1.1 The peer team identified a strong commitment amongst political leaders and senior managers to the development of an exciting new vision for Nottingham. This includes opportunities for tall buildings and design-focused development to enhance the city centre character and skyline. There is also a real ambition to grow the role and wider profile of the city, not just for Nottingham but across the East Midlands. Nottingham is extremely tightly bounded for a core city, and it already has strong functional and working relationships with neighbouring areas in Broxtowe, Gedling and Rushcliffe. The economic importance of these relationships and role of inward commuting, with the city providing over 60% of all jobs in the Greater Nottingham area, are well understood and the leadership of the Council are now seeking to develop and extend these relationships. As such, Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) and moves to devolve more decisions and resources to the East Midlands Combined County Authority provide some great opportunities. The peer team heard of good relationship between the city and the East Midlands Mayor, who recognises Nottingham's track record on delivery as well as success in attracting investment, from which to begin this work.
- 5.1.2 Political vision and leadership is matched by innovative leadership from the planning team in the work they do with the Greater Nottingham Strategic Partnership. The planning service has been a driving force behind the partnership and the preparation of a new Greater Nottingham Strategic Plan, an excellent example of positive planning in a time of change and uncertainty. The Nottingham planning service provides much of the expertise and specialist technical skills for the plan, for example through the GIS team and their technical capacity. The leadership shown by Nottingham in this context is a strong asset, particularly as the planning system continues to evolve and greater emphasis is placed on joint working and spatial alignment between neighbouring areas.
- 5.1.3 However, there are areas for improvement especially in terms of articulating the new political vision for Nottingham. Peers heard that ambiguities in the way that a new vision is communicated risks opportunities being missed. Private sector partners are ready to respond, but the lack of a defined political vision means that there is little consensus at the moment and a need to build confidence among external partners. For example, the Council's newly agreed corporate plan does not speak to these wider ambitions for the city. This is not a criticism of the corporate plan, but a necessary consequence of the Council's recent experiences. Given the Council's position and the challenges associated with financial recovery, it is understandable that the corporate plan is necessarily inward-looking and focused on internal stabilisation. Such an approach is not unusual for authorities in intervention and reflects the need to prioritise organisational resilience first and foremost.
- 5.1.4 As such, the broader vision for the city, particularly in relation to growth and regeneration, now needs to be more clearly articulated and embedded within the Council's strategic framework. This is a timely opportunity to reassert this wider ambition, alongside recovery priorities, to inspire partners and provide a stronger sense of direction for the planning service and its role in place leadership. The City Council should therefore consider undertaking a rapid visioning exercise to develop a clear and compelling narrative for Nottingham in the future, working collaboratively with staff, external

stakeholders and local communities. This should explore the potential for tall buildings and other forms of intensified urban development, so that a tall buildings strategy can be commissioned and then used as a material planning consideration to inform future applications.

5.2 Performance and management

- 5.2.1 The planning service continues to demonstrate strong performance and professional commitment in its Development Management (DM) function. Despite facing significant financial pressures, the service has maintained good outcomes across all the key planning performance indicators in terms of decision making around speed.
- 5.2.2 As Table 1 in Annex 1 sets out, the city DM service performs well when compared to those of other core cities in England. In terms of major applications, 97% of schemes were determined within statutory or agreed timescales in 2024, the best performance among the eight core cities. This strong performance includes a high proportion (91%) that relied on an extension of time agreement (EOT) with the applicant, as Nottingham does not currently offer Planning Performance Agreements (PPAs). Non-major applications (excluding householder) are similarly well performing, with 90% of decisions made within the statutory or agreed timescales and around half relying on an EOT. And householder applications matched this performance with 90% of decisions made in time or within the agreed timeframe, 40% of which relied on an EOT.
- 5.2.3 Data on caseload ratio in Table 2 of Annex 1 measures the difference between the number of planning applications “on-hand” (i.e. the number of planning applications that have been received by the local authority but not yet determined) and the number of decisions made. As such, it is a useful indicator of both workload and the capacity of the team to process applications in a timely manner. Again, Nottingham performs strongly on this measure when compared to other core cities, with a ratio of 1.26 at the end of 2024, lower than the England wide average of 1.44 and many other Core Cities. This suggests that workflow within the DM service is performing well and there is no build-up of a backlog of cases, which can happen at points during an economic cycle. Nottingham has worked well to reduce their caseload ratio to its current level from a high of 2.1 at the start of the year according to official data¹.
- 5.2.4 Externally, the service’s leadership and delivery capacity are praised, while staff internally continue to show strong morale and dedication. Conversations with officers revealed a shared sense of professional purpose and passion for quality outcomes, even in difficult times. The appointment of a non-planner as Head of DM is innovative and has brought fresh energy and momentum to the DM service. There is also a notable team culture, with good working relationships and recognition of a shared challenge.
- 5.2.5 Despite this strong foundation, however, the planning service faces several operational and financial challenges and there is a need to modernise its operation to ensure performance and quality continues to improve. Income from planning fees is falling in Nottingham – data provide by the Council for the financial year 2024/25 show income from application fees had reached £970,000 by February 2025, against an annual budget of £1.19 million (–18.5%). The previous year, 2023/24, saw a full-year income of £1.45 million against a target of £1.54 million (–33.3%). This fall in planning fees is similar in many other LPAs, but the shortfall between income and targets makes it vital that

¹ MHCLG planning application statistics:

<https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoibMDQ1MmRlMjEtMThlMy00MWlxLTNmNTU4MzI5ODNmYTJlIiwidCI6ImJmMzQ2ODEwLTljN2Q0NDNkZS1hODcyLTl0YTJlZjM5OTVhOCJ9>

income is monitored closely, and proactive steps are taken to boost income where possible. This includes following up on reserved matters after outline consents and working with economic development colleagues on investment pipelines for new sites.

- 5.2.6 Council monitoring reports show that income from discretionary pre-application fees totalled £85,659 in 2024/25—higher than the past two years but still lower than the £103,132 achieved in 2021/22. Given the size of Nottingham, the peer team feel that this is a relatively modest figure which deserves investigation. It is notable that the Council does not offer PPAs, which are a mainstay of discretionary income in many high-performing authorities. Introducing PPAs and reviewing the pre-app service offer (along with associated fees) should be a priority and is something that discussions with developers suggest would be welcomed as part of an improved planning service.
- 5.2.7 Many authorities have demonstrated how investing in planning services can yield measurable returns to a local economy. For example, Plymouth City Council calculate an average of £243 million a year has been invested into the city through planning consents over the last 11 years, nearly £2.7 billion in total. More broadly, recent [RTPI-commissioned research](#) estimates that good quality, pro-active local planning could unlock £70 billion in additional economic value through place-based design and denser, better-planned housing delivery. As a core city, the Peer Team would expect Nottingham's level of local investment to be significant and the council should use this type of evidence to look at investing in the planning service as an economic enabler, not just a regulatory service. A strong PPA and pre-app offer should play a central role in this, with [research by PAS](#) demonstrating how early engagement with developers through a PPA or pre-app can reduce delays in decision making, resolve problems sooner and generally enable more effective project management throughout the planning process.
- 5.2.8 It is also important to note the proportion of planning decisions relying on an agreed EOT in Table 1. Given the absence of PPAs in Nottingham, EOTs are currently the only mechanism to extend timelines, but unlike PPAs they do not attract an additional fee. Further work is required to understand why EOT are being used so heavily (eg is it due to delays in validation, slow responses from internal consultees or is it due to caseloads within the DM team) as well as to monitor cases following an EOT. For example, the fact that 40% of householder applications required an EOT is unusually high. These tend to be more straightforward schemes which should not be occupying as much officer time. The way that householder applications are dealt with warrants closer inspection, especially where validation delays or officer workload might be contributing factors. Importantly, discussions with the DM service also suggest that the numbers of applications being decided outside of the Planning Guarantee period of 26 weeks is not being monitored at the moment. This presents a financial risk as applicants are entitled to request a refund of planning fees if decisions breach the guarantee period. The situation needs to be proactively tracked to reduce any unnecessary financial exposure.
- 5.2.9 Until these issues are addressed there will continue to be capacity risks. We heard concerns about single points of failure within the DM service and a general fragility due to long-term financial cuts. These should be reflected on the strategic risk register. Given planning is a statutory, time-bound service, a basic level of resilience must be protected. While a workforce review has been carried out, and a workforce strategy and action plan agreed, this needs to be properly implemented and followed through with modernised systems, procedures and expectations. For example, the absence of a single DM manual for the service has led to variable handling of applications, especially at the validation stage. Investing time to prepare a manual and create more streamlined processes would

support better consistency and improved performance, including around early engagement and customer clarity.

- 5.2.10 Some of these issues were originally highlighted in a PAS review of the DM service in April 2022. Although several of the recommendations from this have been implemented, it is clear that others are outstanding. As such, the DM service can usefully revisit this work. Of particular relevance is the need to ensure that the back-office system, Enterprise, is properly embedded and still fit for purpose in the future. The lack of an ability to monitor and report issues like validation times, individual officer caseloads and case handling times will hold back modernisation and are issues which need to be regularly reviewed by managers, in team meetings and in one to ones.

Planning Support Team

- 5.2.11 Linked to many of the points made above, the peer team found that the relationship between the DM service and the planning support team represents a significant constraint on progress. As currently configured, planning support sits within a corporate Service Delivery function, managed through a “Working Together Agreement” rather than a more typical Service Level Agreement (SLA). While corporate approaches to a shared support service can bring efficiencies, they risk diluting the specialist focus and responsiveness required by the planning process. Unlike other back-office functions, planning support has a direct impact on development management performance and the applicant experience. It requires technical knowledge and a consistent application of procedures to ensure that the wider decision making process functions efficiently and effectively. The current agreement doesn’t meet the needs of the DM team. In particular, the lack of clarity around essential tasks, such as registering and validating applications within an agreed time frame, will hold back progress and risks undermining improvements to the wider DM process.
- 5.2.12 Other authorities, such as Thurrock, have found that a centralised arrangements hindered performance to such an extent that planning support functions were ultimately reintegrated back into the planning service. Nottingham also needs to consider how it should move forward to address this situation, and potential options are set out in Box 1 to help inform that discussion.
- 5.2.13 As well as sound organisational reasons for making such changes, a planning support team can be a source of newly qualified planners. Many LPAs recruit and train more experienced members of their support team to become fully qualified planners which is something that Nottingham could also introduce as the support team becomes more integrated into the wider planning service. The service is already starting to develop a “grow our own” approach to recruiting new staff and has a track record of success in recruiting through the national Pathways to Planning programme.

Box 1: options for closer integration of planning support team

The Council needs to ensure that the planning support team is better aligned with the technical and performance needs of planning's development management function. Options for this include:

- a. **A new and more detailed SLA** setting out the responsibilities of the planning support team and expectations around performance as part of the whole DM process, from submission of an application to issuing a decision notice and discharge of requirements. There should also be an ability to maintain and refresh the SLA at regular periods as the Head of DM introduces reforms and agrees a new DM manual.
- b. **Co-location of the planning support team** alongside the main DM service and case officers, with matrix management of the support team by the Head of DM to ensure closer working relationships with case officers and a more flexible approach that can respond to modernisation of the wider DM service.
- c. **Relocation of the planning support team** to sit within DM services with direct line management by the Head of DM in order to ensure end to end accountability of planning applications from submission to consent and issuing of decision notices.

5.3 Community Engagement

- 5.3.1 The peer team found clear evidence of a strong commitment to community engagement within the planning service, despite the obvious constraints of time, resources, and reach. In a short review window, the team heard from a diverse cross-section of residents, local stakeholders, student representatives, and professionals, reflecting the city's varied communities. The level and quality of participation (especially given the short notice) demonstrates a high degree of public interest and a willingness to contribute to shaping the city's future. This also reflects well on the accessibility and openness of the planning service.
- 5.3.2 The planning team clearly approaches its work with a community-first mindset. Conversations with staff across the service reflected a strong ethos of planning as a tool to tackle inequality and deprivation as well as to create opportunities for local communities. Officers appear to be motivated by creating better places, not just meeting targets, and this culture is commendable. The team heard positive feedback about the relationships between community groups and individual officers with people able to name officers who provided trusted advice and were consistently approachable. These relationships appear to extend beyond formal consultation processes, building confidence in the service among community stakeholders.
- 5.3.3 Community knowledge and involvement in planning matters was also notably high. Residents were well-informed on issues such as the scale of purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA) delivered, the return of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) to family housing stock, and the innovative use of Section 106 agreements. The team heard positive reflections on previous planning-led public engagement efforts—particularly the big conversation held on Broad Marsh and the future of the city centre. This appears to have been a genuine attempt to bring people together and co-develop a shared vision, a positive example of participatory place leadership.
- 5.3.4 However, there are a number of areas where planning could improve and extend their work with the community in the future. The current system of community engagement appears to rely heavily on a small number of individuals - both within the service and in community settings. While these

champions are invaluable, they are finite, and the service should explore more sustainable and inclusive mechanisms for engagement.

- 5.3.5 It is not always clear how new individuals or groups, particularly those outside established networks, can access or participate in planning. One stakeholder described the “front door” to planning as “fuzzy” and others reported difficulty navigating Council customer service channels. Limited staff capacity also means that case officers cannot routinely take unscheduled calls, creating a sense of inaccessibility.
- 5.3.6 As new development continues, especially in the city centre, there is a growing need to manage expectations and ensure new and existing communities can influence the shape of their neighbourhoods. While support for further development was evident, so too was a desire for it to be balanced with green space, public realm investment, and social infrastructure. Community concerns are also emerging around longer-term issues, including the future of PBSA, the potential adaptation of student housing into family homes, and the availability of amenities. Residents are watching closely how the Council navigates these transitions.
- 5.3.7 Finally, there is unease about the potential impact of LGR. Some residents expressed concern that a larger or more distant council could weaken the connection between planning and its local community. The planning service should therefore consider how it can protect and strengthen the community voice within any future governance structures as well as ensure that the visioning exercise recommended by the peer team harnesses and engages the local community. In developing its final proposal for government to be submitted by 28th November 2025, the planning service should identify some of the strategic planning advantages of planning for growth and infrastructure on a wider-than-local sub-regional basis.

5.4 Partnership Engagement

- 5.4.1 As noted above, Nottingham is widely recognised by stakeholders as a strong place leader, with the planning service well-regarded as a partner by internal council departments and external stakeholders who describe the planning team as engaged and responsive on many key issues. The city benefits from long-standing and productive relationships with neighbouring authorities through the Greater Nottingham Strategic Partnership, where Nottingham plays a pivotal role. This collaboration has provided a solid foundation for joint strategic planning and collective ambition, strengthening planning policy by demonstrating cooperation across the neighbouring LPAs as well as delivering savings and efficiencies with the preparation of a single evidence base and shared costs.
- 5.4.2 Emphasising this broader geographic role for Nottingham, there is also a strong relationship between the city’s political leadership and the newly established East Midlands Mayor, which is underpinned by a shared commitment to growth and delivery. The city’s leadership is realistic about the limits of what it can deliver alone and is actively exploring how joint ventures, regional partnerships, and multi-agency collaboration can help share responsibility for investment and through this accelerate delivery. The political appetite to support a new growth agenda across the East Midlands is matched by a recognition that the planning service is central to shaping and delivering that agenda. The service is seen as a key driver for unlocking investment and coordinating cross-boundary opportunities.
- 5.4.3 With limited planning capacity currently in place at the combined authority level, Nottingham is well-placed to provide professional leadership and technical input, building on its strong track record in cross-boundary planning. As such, Nottingham has an opportunity to position itself as a regional planning leader - setting the tone for collaboration and helping shape the strategic investment and

growth priorities emerging through EMCCA. The Council leadership could promote this role for planning in their work with the East Midlands Mayor and Combined County Authority.

- 5.4.4 Within Nottingham there is also a growing desire from external partners to work more closely with the planning service in order to take forward shared objectives. In particular, developers expressed a strong appetite to engage strategically (i.e. not just at the scheme or project level) with planning and several interviewees pointed to the lack of a formal mechanism for this, such as a developer forum. This absence of structured engagement opportunities like a developers' forum in Nottingham makes it difficult for developers to build this relationship, provide feedback, or contribute to long-term thinking in the city.

5.5 Planning Committee

- 5.5.1 The Planning Committee plays a central role in the decision-making process and is seen by many LPAs as the public face of the planning service, for both local communities and private sector interests. Although planning committees make decisions on only a small proportion of applications (with the great majority of determined by officers under delegated powers), the way a committee operates and presents itself publicly is important for any LPA, and especially so for a core city like Nottingham which has both ambition and an outward-looking culture.
- 5.5.2 Looking at committee practice across the country, a 2024 survey by PAS identified key features of a modern planning committee and Nottingham's planning committee mirrors many of these, as set out in Box 2. Whilst this points to a mature planning committee in many respects, there is a need for modernisation to reflect good practice, especially in relation to how decisions are made (and seen to be made) including the requirement to support future web-casting once procedural improvements have been implemented.
- 5.5.3 Observing the functioning of a meeting and speaking directly to elected members, the peer team found strong member commitment to their committee role with councillors who take pride in supporting the delivery of high-quality schemes. Officer presentations to committee meetings are clear, well-structured and supported by relevant plans or photographs. Reports are also thorough, clearly setting out key planning issues, policy alignment, and any proposed changes. Committee members remain engaged throughout committee meetings, asking informed questions that reflect both a familiarity with the officer reports and an understanding of planning matters. Members demonstrated an understanding of the need to balance competing considerations when reaching decisions, and the peer team was encouraged to hear several councillors refer to the city housing strategy, planning's role in delivering broader Council priorities, and the importance of securing quality outcomes.

Box 2: features of a modern planning committee

A [PAS survey on modernising planning committees](#) was undertaken over October to December 2024. This received 122 responses from across England and aimed to assess planning committee structures, processes and areas for improvement by generating a national picture of how Planning Committees operate. Details of these features are set out in Annex Two and it is clear that Nottingham's committee arrangements exhibit several, including:

- a single planning committee operating across the whole LPA, ensuring a simple and transparent committee structure;
- a committee made up of 12 members, within the usual range for a typical LPA;
- monthly meetings, in line with 75% of other LPAs;
- a short and focused agenda of 4 schemes or less, enabling time for members to give appropriate consideration to applications;
- meetings of under three hours (Nottingham's is typically one hour), demonstrating efficiency; and
- a delegation rate of 98% (the England average is 96%) suggesting that members are focused on the most important or controversial applications.

- 5.5.4 However, the peer team identified several opportunities to strengthen the public experience of the committee, increase the transparency and robustness of decision-making and generally modernise the way that it operates. This starts with the public experience of committee meetings, where access arrangements are unclear for those attending and the physical layout of the committee room makes it difficult for members of the public to see or hear proceedings clearly. The meeting is not currently streamed online, meaning residents must attend in person if they wish to observe. But once inside the committee room, there is no clear introduction or explanation of the committee's purpose, procedures or membership which can lead to a perception that the process is insular or inaccessible by the public.
- 5.5.5 The absence of any opportunity for objectors, supporters, or applicants to address the committee is also notable and, based on the PAS survey, places Nottingham as an outlier nationally alongside circa 1% of other LPAs. While officers present applications clearly and thoroughly, this lack of an external voice can limit the scope for meaningful scrutiny or open debate among members. It can also reinforce a perception that decisions are being taken without sufficient engagement or challenge. The Council's constitution is currently silent on a formal route for public speaking, although ward members are allowed to address the committee under certain conditions. Given the importance of transparency and public trust, this is an area that would benefit from review.
- 5.5.6 Discussion during committee meetings tends to focus on clarifying technical issues with officers rather than exploring the broader planning balance of an application amongst members. While some members expressed clear concerns about matters such as Section 106 contributions, these were not always followed through into a wider deliberation or debate. Greater distinction between the questioning and discussion phases of the meeting, as well as clearer signposting by the Chair, could support a more structured and transparent decision-making process.
- 5.5.7 The procedure for voting at committee meetings could also benefit from greater clarity. For example, the meeting observed by the peer team had no formal motion to approve or refuse the applications, and votes proceeded directly to a show of hands without any further discussion. It was unclear how dissenting views would be recorded, or how members would proceed if they wished to depart from the officer's recommendation. These are areas where additional formality could strengthen both the quality and perception of the committee's decisions.

5.5.8 Given the likelihood of future committee meetings being streamed online, this is an opportune moment for the planning service to reflect on how the committee operates and how it presents itself to the public. A number of changes could be made to improve the committee layout, accessibility, and procedures with a view to improving transparency, enabling more open discussion, and ensuring that the committee is seen to add value to the planning process. The peer team also recommend consideration of a revised public speaking policy, and improvements to how motions, voting and decision-making are managed in practice.

5.6 Delivering Outcomes

5.6.1 The planning service is clearly delivering meaningful and impactful outcomes across a broad range of indicators, with a strong focus on quality, innovation and local distinctiveness. The commitment of staff is widely recognised, with consistent feedback from stakeholders, partners, and external developers that planning officers are highly dedicated and passionate about delivering outcomes that support place-making and sustainable growth in Nottingham.

5.6.2 Officers are also proactive and innovative in addressing the city's complex planning challenges. This was evident in the use of PBSA as a means of alleviating pressure on traditional family housing stock. This strategic approach, involving the planning team actively engaging in shaping the market, has helped reduce the number of HMOs and increase council tax receipts—delivering real and tangible benefits to the wider Council. These outcomes are also reflected in data that show student HMOs have remained largely stable in number despite a significant rise in the student population, due to a large increase in the number of students housed in purpose-built halls.

5.6.3 The Broad Marsh regeneration programme is a clear and high-profile example of the planning service playing a crucial role in shaping and enabling major redevelopment. Stakeholders commended the Council's ability to maintain momentum on such a complex scheme, and it was clear from discussions that the planning service has supported the creation of a credible pipeline of investable and deliverable sites across the city, which is vital to economic growth.

5.6.4 Innovative use of digital tools such as GIS and 3D modelling has further strengthened the planning service's ability to deliver high-quality outcomes. These tools are being used not only to inform better decision-making but also to support communication with developers and the community. Nottingham's digital twinning and GIS capabilities were consistently highlighted by both officers and external partners as sector-leading and vital in visualising growth and regeneration opportunities.

5.6.5 Performance data from the Council's monitoring report reinforces these conclusions. Nottingham's Housing Delivery Test result for 2023/24 was 115%, with 2,015 homes delivered- over 96% of which were on previously developed land. An impressive 185 affordable homes were delivered through planning, and the city has an 8.59-year housing land supply. These figures provide strong assurance of the Council's ability to deliver housing at scale and in line with national expectations. The proposed target in the emerging Greater Nottingham Strategic Plan is ambitious, setting a housing requirement of 26,690 homes (2023–2041), equating to 1,483 homes per year, which is above the national standard method Local Housing Need figure of 1,247 per year and shows leadership from the city in delivering their growth agenda.

5.6.6 Section 106 performance on developer contributions is also strong. In 2023/24, £1.8 million was agreed through S106, £2.8 million received, and £1.5 million spent. The Council currently holds £17.8 million in S106 balances, with £10.2 million unallocated, and it charges a 3% monitoring fee up to a maximum of £6,784 per year. This is a credible approach to securing and managing developer contributions, although there is scope to improve the transparency and alignment between S106 agreements and local infrastructure priorities.

- 5.6.7 However, the ability to sustain and build on these outcomes will depend in part on how the service prepares for forthcoming planning reforms and the demands of future plan-making. In particular, the Council will need to develop a new-style local plan in line with the revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and do this within the 30 month timeline being set by the Government. This will be a major undertaking that requires longer-term investment in planning skills, capacity, and leadership. While current resources are under pressure, the peer team encourage the Council to consider how best to plan for and prioritise this work. A clear corporate strategy and realistic timeline for a new local plan preparation will be essential to ensure that Nottingham can deliver on its ambitions for housing, regeneration, and make the most of opportunities presented by the EMCCA.
- 5.6.8 Developers also shared mixed experiences of working with the Council. While some were very positive, others cited frustrations with ‘radio silence’ on stalled applications and a lack of clarity or dialogue. It was notable that developers said they wanted to work more strategically with Nottingham but felt there was no structured mechanism—such as a developer forum—to facilitate that relationship. This represents a missed opportunity. The establishment of such a forum could help strengthen mutual understanding, improve trust, and ensure the development sector plays a more active role in supporting shared growth objectives.
- 5.6.9 The lack of planning performance agreements (PPAs) is a further issue. As noted in Section 5.2, Nottingham does not currently offer PPAs, despite these being commonplace in other councils as a way to provide certainty for applicants, secure additional income, and manage expectations. Their absence means that 91% of major applications are reliant on extension of time (EOT) agreements—the highest proportion in the Core Cities Group. There is a risk that this undermines transparency and creates a reactive rather than proactive planning culture. The introduction of PPAs should be a priority, particularly for major and strategic schemes.
- 5.6.10 More broadly, developers expressed a willingness to work in partnership with the Council to support planning activity, not only through financial contributions but also through technical support or sponsorship of planning briefs and training. This reflects positively on Nottingham’s wider appeal, but these offers must be reciprocated with open and constructive engagement.
- 5.6.11 Overall, the planning service is delivering on multiple fronts, supported by an experienced and passionate team and a clear focus on place-making. The challenge now is to build on these successes, preparing for a new plan making system and formalising mechanisms (such as PPAs and a developer forum) that can improve delivery, manage risks, and help secure the resources needed to deliver on the Council’s ambitions. These innovations could also provide a route through which other council services could engage in planning issues across the city, for example enabling Council priorities around the “Grey to Green” agenda on urban greening and sustainable drainage as well as net zero to be promoted directly to developers through the developer forum and PPA advice.

6.0 Implementation, prioritisation and further support

- 6.1 Nottingham City Council and the planning service will want to consider and reflect on these findings. To support openness and transparency, we recommend that the Council also shares the report with officers and that they publish it for information for wider stakeholders. There is also an expectation that the Council responds to the findings and recommendations in the report with an action plan, publishing this alongside the report itself.
- 6.2 The action plan will need to be carefully prioritised and structured, with all the recommendations from the peer challenge brought together into a widely owned and agreed programme of work that has corporate backing. Crucially, the sequencing and resourcing of work over the short, medium, and longer term must be considered to ensure the planning service remains resilient and that day-to-day operations continue to run smoothly alongside any changes.
- 6.3 In terms of **quick wins and early priorities**, it will be important to:
- i. begin to scope out and detail the work required for a tall buildings strategy, looking to similar exercises in other cities as a way forward;
 - ii. take advantage of any momentum from the peer challenge exercise to co-opt support from external partners in the development sector and the EMCCA, helping to articulate and promote the new vision for Nottingham;
 - iii. create capacity for the head of DM to prepare a DM Manual with his case officers, using experience from other LPAs;
 - iv. undertake a speedy review of cases in hand to identify planning applications that have breached the planning guarantee and close these or address them;
 - v. track the journey of a sample of applications as they are managed by the planning support team and passed to the DM service to better understand the implications of current arrangements for case officers and agree how the support team can be better aligned with the wider DM service, as well as the best option for improving this;
 - vi. create corporate capacity to help the planning service implement outstanding actions from the PAS 2022 development management review, including the adoption of stronger back office support systems and software to improve customer service.
- 6.4 These actions should impose minimal financial costs and involve less officer time, but will help to set the planning service on its journey to further modernisation. They also prepare the ground for further **changes in the medium term** that may take more time and/or resources, such as:
- vii. recruiting to fill the structure in the DM workforce strategy and action plan;
 - viii. further work to embed a performance management culture in the DM service including a review of pre-application fees and the creation of a new PPA offer;
 - ix. measures to modernise the planning committee, which can be implemented alongside the outcomes of centrally driven reforms; and
 - x. the establishment of a developers' forum for the city.
- 6.5 Recommendations on the Greater Nottingham Strategic Plan, to embed this in the work of the Council and prepare for future local plan reforms may be implemented over the **longer term**. However, they are no less important and early consideration is critical to ensure that the Council has a realistic timeline and resourcing strategy in place.

- 6.6 However, these decisions need to be properly assessed by the planning service and agreed by senior leaders so that they are right for the Council more widely. Examples of how this has been approached elsewhere are available and Nottingham may want to refer to the experience of other LPAs that have successfully implemented recommendations from a planning peer challenge. For example Thurrock Council, developed a comprehensive [Planning Service Transformation & Improvement Programme](#) (PSTIP) in response to a peer challenge in 2024. This incorporates recommendations from the peer challenge to set a roadmap for enhancing the planning service, with work overseen by a planning improvement board and monthly highlight reports to the council's corporate leadership team. Subsequent [updates in February 2025](#) and a comprehensive [review of progress published in May 2025](#) demonstrate the impact of their approach and some useful lessons from the experience.
- 6.7 Similar examples are available elsewhere and both PAS and the LGA will support Nottingham with the implementation of the recommendations as part of the Council's action plan. A range of support from the [LGA](#) and [PAS](#) is also available on their websites. For example, some specific areas of support that the authority might wish to look at includes:
- [Development Management IT Support](#)
 - [Planning Committee Protocols](#)
 - [Modernising Planning Committee Survey](#)
 - [Improving governance of developer contributions](#)
 - [Pre-application and Planning Performance Agreements](#)
- 6.8 Nottingham City Council are also invited to discuss ongoing PAS support with Garreth Bruff, Principal Consultant, garreth.bruff@local.gov.uk and any corporate support with Mark Edgell, Principal Advisor with the LGA mark.edgell@local.gov.uk
- 6.9 As part of the LGA's peer review peer impact assessment and evaluation, PAS and the LGA will contact the Council in 6-12 months' time to see how the recommendations are being implemented and the beneficial impact experienced.
- 6.10 The author of this report is Garreth Bruff (garreth.bruff@local.gov.uk), on behalf of the peer review team.
- 6.11 This report was finalised in agreement with the Council on 13/06/2025.

We are grateful for the support of everyone that contributed to this review.



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Annex One: Development Management Data

Table 1 - Summary of district matters decisions, year ending December 2024

Planning authority	Majors				Non-majors							
	Number of decisions on majors applications	% using performance agreements	% within statutory time period or agreed time period	% within statutory time period (13 weeks)	Householder development				Non-major development excluding householder development			
					Number of decisions on householder applications	% using performance agreements	% within statutory time period or agreed time period	% within statutory time period (8 weeks)	Number of decisions on non-majors (exc H/H) applications	% using performance agreements	% within the statutory time period or agreed time period	% within statutory time period (8 weeks)
England	10,352	77	91	19	161,206	31	93	63	106,015	52	87	40
Birmingham	104	83	88	15	1,935	43	77	38	1,018	57	77	31
Bristol, City of	64	88	80	9	1,290	44	71	33	980	54	59	17
Leeds	114	79	88	19	2,088	23	96	73	978	49	89	44
Liverpool	44	80	91	11	639	33	88	56	650	46	88	43
Manchester	86	66	94	33	768	9	96	88	637	27	93	70
Newcastle upon Tyne	34	88	88	12	438	42	87	51	305	50	85	39
Nottingham	34	91	97	6	513	40	90	53	306	51	90	42
Sheffield	72	64	78	25	1,127	24	85	65	527	41	76	44
Nottingham's Position	Joint 7th	Highest	1st best	8th best	6th	4th Highest	3rd best	5th best	7th	3rd Highest	1st best	5th best
Notes	Performance agreement = PPA or EOT											
	Source: District matters (PS1/PS2) returns											
	e-mail: planning.statistics@communities.gov.uk											

Table 2: application and backlog data at December (Q4) 2025

Planning authority	Overview Statistics: decisions and use of performance agreements			
	Number of applications on hand Dec 24	Applications received	Applications decided	Applications on hand / decisions
England	108,870	78,979	75,355	1.44
Birmingham	1,716	966	841	2.04
Bristol, City of	835	497	561	1.49
Leeds	999	904	855	1.17
Liverpool	982	605	368	2.67
Manchester	554	491	451	1.23
Newcastle upon Tyne	361	229	277	1.30
Nottingham	225	182	178	1.26
Sheffield	403	430	441	0.91
Nottingham position				4th best
Source: MHCLG dashboard page 7				
e-mail: planning.statistics@communities.gov.uk				

Annex Two: Modernising Planning Committees Survey

The figures below are taken from the [PAS Modernising Planning Committee Survey 2025](#). The position of Nottingham's Planning Committee is marked in red on each figure to demonstrate its position or category alongside that of other LPAs.

Figure 1: number of elected members on Committee



Figure 2: Meeting cycle

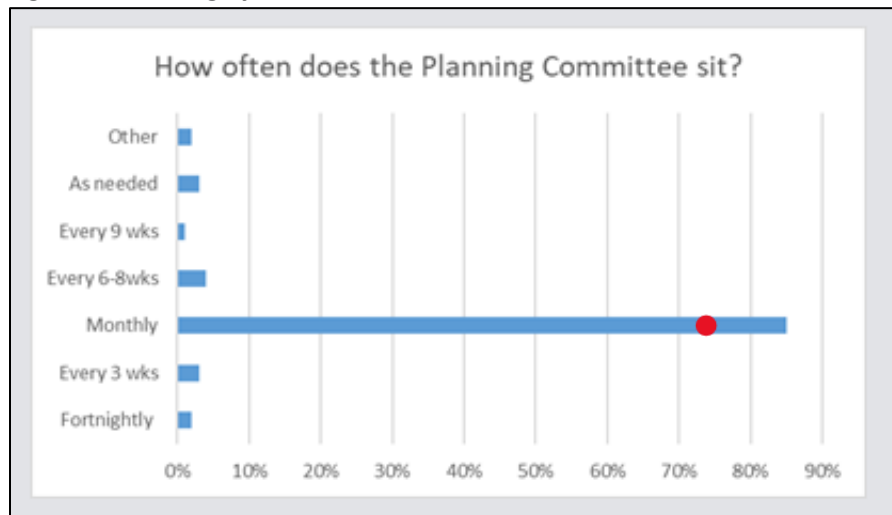


Figure 3: Length of meetings

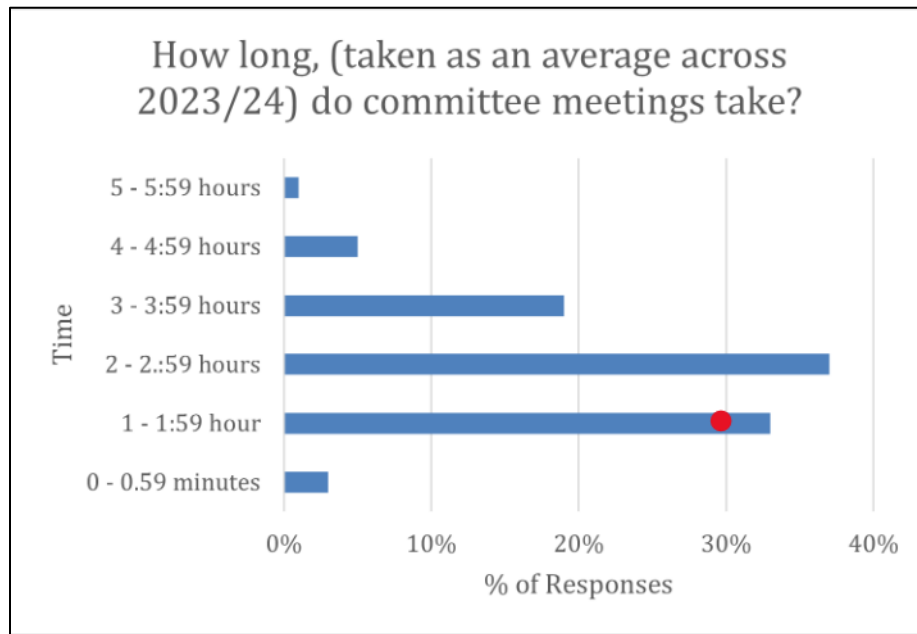


Figure 4: Applications considered within each meeting

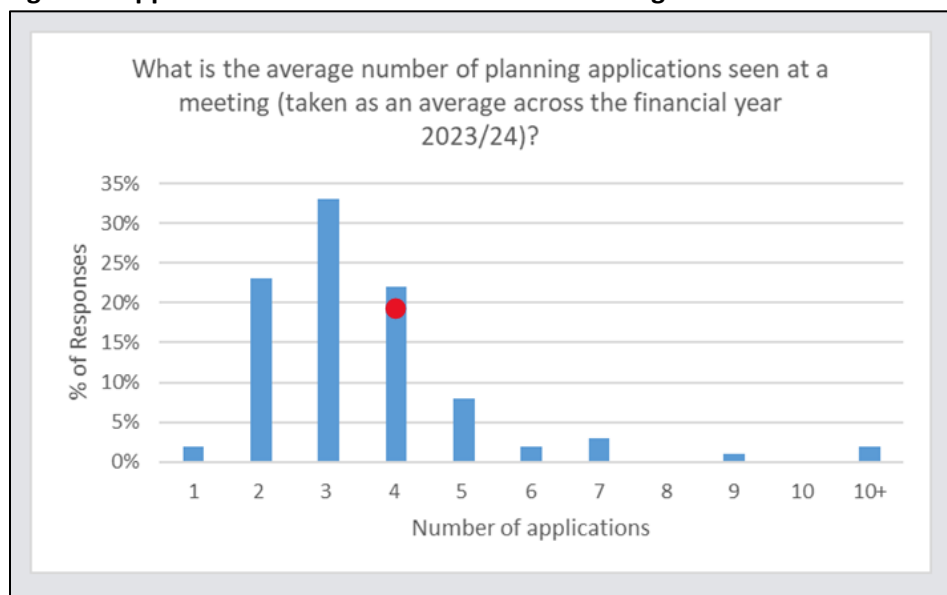


Figure 5: Delegation rate

