

# Planning Services Review

## West Lancashire

### FINAL REPORT

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## 1. Introduction.

RedQuadrant were invited to review elements of the Planning Service as part of a broader corporate strategic consideration as to how each Service element within the Council can contribute to achieving the Council's Vision and Priorities. In all of these priorities the Planning Service represents a significant resource in terms of intellectual and organisational capital.

Its enabling and place shaping role can set the tone locally and regionally as to how a multitude of stakeholders perceive the Council. It therefore can have a positive and negative impact on the reputation of the Council. The opportunities for misunderstandings and or a failure to appreciate the functional and strategic parameters for a planning service are correspondingly high. Strategic Planning and Policy also occupies the political terrain which can be closely fought over as policy considerations and planning adoptions shape the future for a generation and beyond.

It is correct and proper that given this privileged duty that expectations of the Planning Service are of the highest order from within planning, the corporate entity, elected members and external stakeholders. The Planning Service in seeking to review and improve is embracing this responsibility as part of a process of continuous improvement. West Lancs benefits from having an experienced, professional and competent planning team that is open to change but uncertain as to how change may manifest itself and impact on operational practices. There is also some uncertainty as to the expectations of the Corporate Management Team.

The Governments' Planning White Paper stresses digital technology as the means by which development management resources will be freed up to process applications in a timely manner. A digital first approach is presented as the key with interactive map-based Local Plans, 30 month time frames and the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) serving as the primary source for development management policies. Local Design Codes will demand community engagement and the facility to borrow against a new infrastructure levy to fund infrastructure and planning gain becoming the primary resource to fund the cost of the planning system.

It is imperative that West Lancs along with all planning authorities does not wait until the entrails of these planning changes are revealed but prepares now by ensuring its planning processes and systems are fit for purpose. It needs to be capable of achieving a successful transition without major disruption, loss of data and reputation. The council should also review its spending plans for planning consultants on developing the currently paused Local Plan and prepare an action plan to meet the demands of the White Paper. The current situation in two tier regions for commissioning Local Plans is inherently expensive and wasteful as no economies of scale are achieved with each district usually commissioning their own consultants. There may be an opportunity for a partnership approach to commissioning by the region's authorities to drive down costs and share knowledge as to the best approaches for meeting the demands of producing a Local Plan within 30 months.

The Council has outlined its direction of travel by establishing a clear set of priorities and vision for today and tomorrow. Beginning with community empowerment, inclusion and engagement this represents a significant cultural shift that is outwardly focused. To drive forward these priorities the Council has embarked on an organisational cultural change strategy that is reflected in its continuous improvement programme. Service areas are expected to be efficient, confident, capable and contribute to the Council becoming financially sustainable. As with the best of forward planning that is flexible and dynamic the Council is reviewing the impact of Covid on operational practices to develop a future proof hybrid model that continues to enable the council to achieve its social and financial objectives. The Council is clear that for it to be sustainable "inclusion" is as important a cultural matrix for organisational development as it is for community engagement. To continue to

improve the efficiency and effectiveness of service provision demands that at every level of managerial leadership senior managers, team leaders, individuals should reflect an “attitude” that embodies and embeds a One Council approach. With so many interdependencies and mutual obligations underpinning service improvement and delivery no service can afford to be an “island”. This takes on a particular imperative within service areas where there are strongly developed divisions of labour that lend themselves to insularity. In the case of Planning the mutual dependencies demand a holistic approach. Furthermore it is what all elected Members interviewed expect from their Planning Service. They fully understand the critical nature of these relationships with many of their observations focusing on what “falls through the cracks” as well as having their own views on local planning policy and the demands of the impending implementation of the governments White Paper on a “new vision for England’s planning system”. While this review does not seek to make any commentary on local planning policies it does approach the Planning Service as a whole. The constituent elements offer an important resource in terms of professional skills, service resilience and innovation especially around the anticipated digital transformation that is fundamental to delivering planning services in the immediate future. The title of the Directorate-Place and Community – stresses in itself that services are there to serve the community and that “Place” encapsulates everything from opportunity to heritage. Insularity within divisions is therefore a luxury that the subject of this review, the Planning Service, can ill afford. Enforcement, development, advice, consultation processes are wholly dependent on the strategic and legal context within which they operate. As Covid has compounded an already challenging financial situation for local government the complete Planning Service has an opportunity to demonstrate it is a dynamic resource that is deployed across its own organisational boundaries thereby fully releasing its inherent capacity on behalf of the whole council and itself.

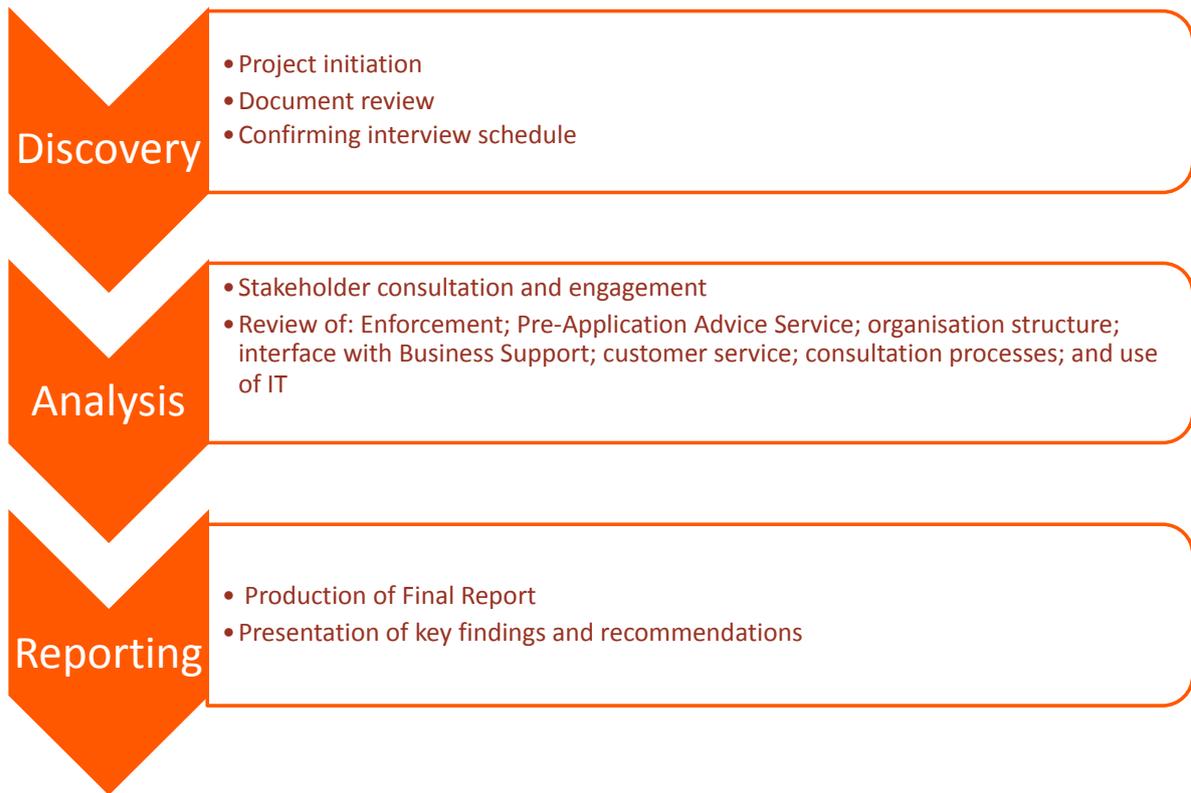
#### **Scope of review and methodology.**

RedQuadrant were asked to undertake a review of a number of areas within the Planning service. These included:

- Planning Enforcement and resources to deliver the service
- Pre-app Advice Service
- Structure of team/Neighbourhood Model
- Interface with Planning Support
- Customer Service
- Consultation processes
- IT Technology

Our overarching methodology was a three stage approach:

- Stage 1 – Service discovery
- Stage 2 – Analysis
- Stage 3 – Final Report



Interviews have taken place with senior elected Members including all the Leaders, Portfolio Holder, Opposition Leads and Planning Committee Members. In addition, planning officers at all levels, the COO, Directors and other LA's- Sefton, Liverpool, Preston and Lancaster have all shared their working practices thereby provoking thoughts and suggestions which are reflected in the body of the full report. Desktop research has also been carried out by reference to LA web portals, the Planning Portal (MHLG), the White Paper and discussions with the RTPi.

## 2. Key Findings

### Planning Enforcement and resources to deliver the service.

The NPPF (Feb 2019) states that “Effective enforcement is important to maintain public confidence in the planning system. Enforcement action is discretionary, and local planning authorities should act proportionately in responding to suspected breaches of planning control. They should consider publishing a local enforcement plan to manage enforcement proactively, in a way that is appropriate to their area. This should set out how they will monitor the implementation of planning permissions, investigate alleged cases of unauthorised development and take action where appropriate.”

As this review was starting Planning confirmed an additional resource had been secured within Legal Services thereby fulfilling the complement of resources required. (Nb this came from the head of legal services so we have no grounds to doubt this is accurate) This service while considered important by Members, the management team and Enforcement Officers themselves attracted very few complimentary notes in terms of outcomes. Members acknowledge the competency of staff as doing their best but felt “nothing happened”. Some senior Members considered that conditions were breached, investigations were long winded, officer time was often consumed on minor issues around neighbourhood disputes, some petty, the outcome was usually a retrospective application to make the breach good and next to no prosecutions. Officers want to see Enforcement take its place as a Service priority that in itself reflects the ethos of the Council. Officer’s report they had to devise their own KPI’s and create their own records of income generated. The service feels very much on its own. The Planning Service benefits from having highly experienced and committed Enforcement staff that are not being effectively deployed and utilised as part of the One Council approach. They appear to be on the outside looking in as they are “getting on with it”. There appears to be no integration within the broader Planning Service or corporate entity and by definition the opportunities for learning at corporate and service level are being squandered.

While one must acknowledge the nature of Enforcement is time consuming, requires often personal contact and site assessments, futile and productive conversations with complainants it is indeed about ethos, compliance and public standards as expressed in the planning system. This work is unfortunately not helped by the Planning Enforcement Charter which is out of date (2014) and while it is a useful academic treatise on Enforcement regulations was not designed with the customer at its heart. Having a 2014 date does not inspire confidence in the reader that they are accessing the most up to date guidance and practice note for practitioners and citizens. It is an unwieldy document for the uninformed, far too long, personalised which is a basic failure in terms of governance and the role of officers in a public service, it offers a useful training reference point for officers but is no longer fit for purpose as a document offering guidance to the public, is almost completely devoid of KPI’s other than unexplained time frames for site visits; places the collection of evidence burden on officers and fails to outline when other methods of enquiry will be deployed that are directly linked to the priority ratings within the Enforcement Plan.

A new Enforcement Plan for 2021 with links to complaints and the appeals templates on the Planning Portal and one that is contextualised within the Councils Vision and Values is essential. This would go part of the way to meeting the demands of Enforcement Officers for an ethical context that is linked to council policy priorities. There also needs to be clarity about what will not be prioritised or indeed responded to. The Officer’s role is not to broker petty neighbourhood disputes and they should be empowered to say “no” within a clear policy framework of priorities and thereby be able to allocate resources accordingly.

There should be clarity around KPI’s for each priority; a re-evaluation of the priority listings, when the council will be pro-active as opposed to reactive; guidance for officers and information to the

public and Members that informs and manages expectations. Each priority listing should contain a methodology statement as to how a potential or criminal breach will be investigated. The Enforcement Charter should be clear as to what will be considered very low priorities and how Enforcement Officers will respond to each priority. An annual report with perhaps a six monthly review to the Scrutiny Committee and CMT on Enforcement would help manage expectations and promote the service.

A common complaint made by Planning Officers is that what happens in terms of enforcement is not “seen” by them in terms of outcomes. While acknowledging the calibre of the team it is accepted the service is not seamless. There is also a view that when matters are referred to legal services they just become part of a backlog. The figures on backlogs by time and volume are not readily available or distributed to promote understanding and enable Service Heads to prioritise resource allocation. This in turn impacts on the reputation of planning enforcement in general as being “toothless” and creating a “nothing happens” syndrome among some Members and possibly wider afield. There are also concerns that dealing with non-expedient reports and or recommending formal action is very demanding requiring the attention of a Principal Planning Officer’s time. Similarly, it is reported that there are lengthy delays in issuing Enforcement Notices. Again it is stated this is due to the absence of dedicated resources. Legal Services now have a part time Legal Planning Assistant in place. The expectations from Legal Services are that evidence bundles must be robust and thorough to enable them to consider whether action can be taken with any prospect of success. There are no Service Level Agreements in place which leads to an inability to manage expectations, a lack of clarity as to what and when should happen which flows from the absence of any basic KPI’s or flow charts between the services. A Performance Management Framework that underpins an SLA would provide an audit trail of case progress and enable management oversight. As Prosecution is a ‘tool’ of last resort, reserved for criminal matters including non-compliance with an Enforcement notice breach of conditions such as unauthorised works to a listed building or protected tree it is inevitable that this step will be by exception. The council must also decide whether it wishes this service to be seamless or built around the availability of Officers. As this issue has been unresolved for around 10 years a resolution is self-evidently overdue.

Planning may wish to consider delegating ‘downwards’ decision making to Enforcement Officers to write the reports for Legal Services with the PPO carrying out a ratification role before referral to legal services. With a skilled and experienced Enforcement Team in place and ready access to templates from the Planning Portal this would appear to be well within their skill sets particularly around drafting evidence bundles. The Enforcement Team are the first and generally the last point of contact; they will be the most knowledgeable on the issues of concern; they are the first interface with local Members, the public, the planning service, other Council departments and the police should an incident occur on site. They are best placed to provide a seamless service from within planning from start to referral to Legal Services, own the case throughout and advise and inform Legal Services. A formal SLA with Legal Services will crystallise mutual obligations and expectations while providing a transparent process that in turn will promote internal understanding and facilitate the management of expectations. Only one officer opposed this approach on the grounds of an SLA representing an additional bureaucracy. As the current process is at best opaque an SLA offers transparency, underpins partnership working, creates mutual obligations and a basis for the imposition of fees and costs.

One authority has transferred the Enforcement service out of planning and into a corporate anti-fraud unit thereby providing a different perception and emphasis. The view that a PPO is needed to drive Enforcement and write time consuming non-expedient reports is one that needs to be juxtaposed against alternative, less expensive solutions. As the gathering of evidence can be costly other approaches are worthy of consideration. Other council officers such as Building Control who have to carry out regulatory inspections could gather evidence on site; the use of virtual technology

and placing a greater burden on complainants to provide evidence on line could reduce site visits and distractions; cross referencing contact with other council departments will provide other means of validating and or rejecting a complaint.

### **Recommendations**

- Planning and Legal Services produce a status report on backlogs for the Corporate Management Team.
- Produce an up to date outward focused Enforcement Charter with KPI's.
- The Planning Service, Enforcement Team and Legal Services conduct a Workshop exercise to produce an SLA based on mutual undertakings and obligations. The SLA should include KPI's, fee structure and minimum documentation requirements.
- An Annual Report on Enforcement activities be submitted to the Scrutiny Committee and CMT. Consideration be given to a six monthly review.
- Member Training be provided on the Enforcement Process with particular reference to prosecutions and retrospective applications.
- The Planning Service consider if capacity and risk issues can be resolved via the delegation "down" to Enforcement Officers for writing non expedient reports and reports for action.
- The Planning Service and Council consider whether the absence of a seamless service is in the best interests of the Council, the planning service and the citizens and stakeholders of West Lancs.
- The Planning Service consider how the current West Lancs website referencing Enforcement links can be improved to reflect the Councils Vision and Values, public access, understanding and external sources of advice including links to the Planning Portal.
- The Planning Service and Corporate Communications engage in a plain English review and communication strategy for Enforcement within the context of the law, planning policy and the Council's Vision and Priorities mission statement.
- The Planning Service ensure its IT capabilities enable virtual site assessments to support Enforcement, Development and Policy review.
- The Planning Service consider how best Building Control officers and others can support Enforcement Officers gather and corroborate evidence when carrying out site visits.
- Strategic Planning in conjunction with Corporate Communications provide Members and Officers with a monthly "horizon scan" that enables elected Members and Officers to stay abreast of major emerging policy developments and best practice across the region.

### **Pre-Application Advice Service**

The NPPF advocates early engagement with applicants as the means to "improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning application system for all parties. The Council supports this and encourages, "the use of early discussions with agents and developers as part of the development management approach to facilitating acceptable development. Open and constructive discussions about schemes before they are formally submitted as a planning application can help steer proposals into a form that are more likely to be acceptable to the Local Planning Authority whilst leading to the reworking or dropping of proposals that appear to be fundamentally unacceptable. Entering into pre application discussions will help save time, avoid wasted expense and avoid frustration."

The Council's Vision and Priorities sets out as a key objective that it will be financially stable by 2023. Income generation from Planning fees that are predictable and transactions that can be tracked and placed into the appropriate account as a condition of service delivery will impact on performance, reputation and service planning. The aggregation of such data will inform strategic decisions emanating from the review of all council fees and charges. The Government's White Paper sees the cost of operating the Planning Service as being principally funded by the beneficiaries of planning gain i.e. landowners and developers rather than the taxpayer. The Planning Service therefore has no other option but to ensure its fees and charges are appropriate to the work involved; that the financial transaction process is transparent and timely and that digital technology is embraced to add value and deliver operational efficiencies.

The Planning Service reports that there is already some tension between service provision and the charging for the same. Officers are aware there can be inconsistencies in approach whereby driven by good will or advocacy one officer may offer more opportunities for a customer to gain more than preliminary advice without charge either via a personal or email conversation. There may also be elected Member pressure in carrying out their advocacy role that leads to an individual gaining some advice without charge. Planners also express concern about tensions being created when an applicant does not seek pre-planning advice and their application is refused or needing amendments. This in turn can generate complaints and Member involvement thereby demanding more investment of an officer's time and the potential for dissatisfaction. An unintended consequence can also be the perception that there are two services at work:

- a) one that is understood by agents and representatives who expect to be charged and
- b) one whereby an applicant doesn't wish to utilise a fee paying service but then expects their complaints and or member involvement to resolve matters without a charge or at least to gain more before a charge is levied.

The outcome is two-fold. One generates a fee, and another which may attract a subsequent fee but involves much more unpaid professional time. In terms of wider reputation the potential impact is that no one is content- officers, members, agents and applicants. This all stems from a lack of clarity, consistency of purpose and operational practices. The Service should offer clear guidance as to what are acceptable parameters for providing preliminary advice that does not incur a fee to help case officers be consistent in dealing with the public. It is acknowledged that this can be a subjective area driven by good will. However, if operational practices can be codified and communicated to elected Members and other stakeholders this should lighten the workload to the benefit of case officers.

### **Fees and Charges (and policy requirements)**

Planning fees in England are set nationally by the government and are detailed in the Town and Country Planning (Fees for Applications, Deemed Applications, Requests and Site Visits) (England) Regulations 2012, as amended. This is referred to as the "2012 Fees Regulations". A further general increase to the planning fees was introduced by the Town and Country Planning (Fees for Applications, Deemed Applications, Requests and Site Visits) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2017. Local planning authorities use the 2012 Fees Regulations to charge the correct fee for each application.

The overall planning service is funded from a local authority's revenue, which includes Council Tax, retained business rates, and central government grants. The link to the national fees for England by type of dwelling are dated 17th January 2018 although it includes an amendment for September 2020, and a gap in fees not resolved for additional storeys on a home. The government sponsored Planning Portal service stated (2018) that it has become increasingly obvious to us that the biggest pain point within the planning process is validation, with around 25 per cent of all invalid

applications being due to missing cheque payments. In fact, 'offline' payments, including cheques, still account for more than two-thirds of all online application payments. As you know, this causes a huge headache for Planning Authorities, but also for Agents and Applicants."

They offer a complete transaction service so that LA's on receipt of nomination from the portal know the service has been paid for. For West Lancs 16,849 payments were made online. The Scrutiny Report (Dec 2020) does not break these down by service area. However, the thrust of the Council's policy objectives is to achieve a significant channel shift for receipt of payments. The council currently receives fees by cheque, BACS and cash. The merits of each method of payment should be evaluated by a cost benefit analysis. This would inform policy decisions on the administrative overhead associated with each option and how fees should be paid.

West Lancs planning enquiry fee schedule was last reviewed in 2016. It is therefore four years past its sell by date and comparatively low within the Merseyside Region. The hourly rate does not cover the cost of the service and Officers frequently do not charge for additional work as outlined above. In addition, the draft Validation check list (Parts 1 and 2) October 2010 remain on the council Web links alongside the current Validation August 2019 check list and appendix. By comparison the West Lancashire Local Plan 2012-2027 ('WLLP'), as adopted in October 2013, is the current Local Plan for the Borough. The removal of the drafts will help avoid confusion and reduce customer distraction. As Validation and invalid applications attract a fee as do retrospective applications it is imperative that the reader has confidence in the consistency and contemporary nature of the guidance provided by the Council. The reader also needs to know that the document remains policy compliant. A simple step is to remove the drafts. The web link on fees is also unnecessarily defensive. The justification for charging is given as "being in line" with other authorities. This almost apologetic tone should be replaced by simple statements of "the charge for the following service is". If the Council feels it needs to apologise or adopt a herd analogy to justify charging professional fees it immediately introduces a question mark as to the validity of the fee itself and undermines its presentation as a professional service that demands fees in return for a service. This undermines the clear statement of fact that the service fee is "for the drafting, negotiating and monitoring of legal agreements".

The charging and tracking of transactional costs are as important as ensuring the fee structure is regularly updated to reflect on-going costs, overheads and efficiency savings. The allocation of fees to the proper account in a timely manner is the first step in validation. In addition, any internal recharging service to planning must consider the impact this has on unit costs and the ability of the service to become self-sufficient. Of equal importance is the collection of any offset of planning policy conditions in exchange for commuted sums.

### **Recommendations**

- The level of charging fees for Planning Services be updated from 2016 to 2021.
- A mechanism be introduced using a variety of criteria to provide an annual review and uplift of charges as part of normal business in setting the Council's budget.
- The turnover of planning applications from all categories for an agreed period be utilised as a base line for predicting income generation against the costs of the fee based service.
- Financial and Planning Service include in their internal KPI financial transactions received and paid for online linked to the Validation Process.
- Financial and Planning Services evaluate the costs and benefits of utilising the Planning Portal only as a means of processing offline payments as against the current range of payment options.
- A precise explanation be provided on council documentation explaining that charges are for professional services provided by the Planning Service.

- The Planning Service and Corporate Communications devise a periodical promotional campaign of the benefits of the Pre Application Advice Service.
- The Planning Service devise a consistent way of working for all planning staff that provides clarity to officers, elected members and applicants as to the limits of preliminary advice prior to it becoming a chargeable service.
- Planning Officers apply their time within this criteria and ensure this is recorded on Idox/Uniform for charging and management purposes.
- The Planning Service ensure that embedded links in web documents actually function.
- A workshop training module be developed for elected members and officers that covers the Pre-Application Advice Service Charging and Validation process.
- Strategic Planning ensure that all out-dated planning documents are removed from the councils Web Portal and time of last review dates be placed on all documents as a matter of course. This should become part of the council's service risk assessment in order to protect and promote the reputation of the Council.

### Dissecting a Complaint

Councils' have well established complaints procedures. They are often time consuming but as a public service Council's feel duty bound to provide a reasoned and comprehensive response to complaints that may be justified in seeking some form of redress. There are also those which contain the wildest of allegations. It is a fact however unwelcome that allegations of underhand tactics, a disregard for the law, or the council's own policies can occur in relation to planning. The following emanates from one complaint as a useful case study that illustrates the liberty some consider they have to express themselves when it comes to public servants. The many 'charges' against the planning department in this example include the following:

- WLBC is weak and biased towards the applicant.
- The process was not transparent and genuine material matters of concern are swept under the carpet.
- A wide range of planning conditions have been breached and ignored
- The applicant knows no enforcement action will take place
- Local residents are doing the work of the council
- The impartiality of officers is called into question as their reports are not perceived to cover every objection made as they are already biased
- The officers are considered to be advancing the cause of the applicant
- There is inconsistency in how one business is treated to the next
- The personal integrity of planning officers are called into question
- The role of councillors and their integrity is called into question
- Suggestions that money may have been exchanged or backroom deals done.
- The character of the applicant and his/her conduct may be called into question
- A potential malpractice may have occurred.

**Faced with such a complaint, the Council has several options.** If taken at face value a charge of corruption and malpractice has been levelled despite the absence of a "shred of evidence" in the words of the complainant. The planning department, the Planning and Licensing Committee have all been accused of "backhanded deals" where money may have been exchanged for planning gain. To respond to this fully would require the following:-

- Consultation with affected elected committee members
- A review of the reports and the recording of the licensing and planning committee's deliberations and minutes
- A discussion with the Monitoring Officer
- The involvement of legal services for advice
- Discussions with the Enforcement team
- An independent assessment of the planning report author's recommendations.
- Discussions with the Director and COO to inform and engage due to reputational and standards issues
- The involvement of HR due to the potential impact on the officers health and mental well being
- The involvement of corporate communications as the complainants approach would appear to indicate there will be political involvement with potential referrals on social media and the local press
- The production of a lengthy line by line report addressing the allegations contained therein.
- Potential referral to the police.

A detailed response could affect around 20 individuals and consume an enormous amount of council resources. An alternative response is more succinct but for it to be effective however requires confidence among the lead officers that such an approach will be supported by the Service... The Council's HR policy declares that:-

*The Council wishes to create a harmonious working environment where all employees are treated fairly with dignity and respect. Importantly the Council does not wish to permit any behaviour, which would undermine its efforts to provide a secure and encouraging environment wherein employees may contribute to the best of their ability.*

In this particular complaint there is a distinct and deliberate lack of respect for the council's resources, elected members and individual officers. It is in effect an abuse at work that carries with it the premise that the council and its officers are "fair game". In terms of this review the questions are around capacity, customer perceptions, reputation and the well-being and confidence of employees. A succinct response to this type of complaint takes organisational courage. It enables the recipient to state that the Council's policy is to protect its officers from any form of abuse and should this continue it will be treated as vexatious and potentially harassment. The latter step places the correspondent and council officers in the realm whereby injunctions can be sought to desist and ultimately referral to the High court for action if necessary. Councils are under no legal obligation to protect officers or members from libellous material but they are when it can be established that consistent complaints or actions are tantamount to vexatious harassment.

The provision of a template response agreed between legal services and the affected service area would not deny the ability of such complaints to be made but would save many days and weeks of council resources providing a line by line response. Such an approach would thereby engender confidence in council officers that they are not alone in such circumstances and would enable them to focus energy where it needs to be. It would also become a powerful organisational communication tool about standards in public life and begin to tackle the "free for all" syndrome that such complaints reflect. If members of the public consider that without "a shred of evidence" they are free to accuse officers and members of what in effect are criminal acts then that could be considered as is a failure by West Lancs in its communication strategy as to what is permissible in the

conduct of the public towards West Lancs employees and Members. The Corporate Policy already states that:

*“If a request or complaint is clearly frivolous, vexatious or made in bad faith, the Council will be justified in choosing not to respond. Such a course of action will only be taken with the agreement of the appropriate Head of Service. As a matter of courtesy, notice will be given to the complainant of the Council's intention not to respond to further requests or complaints unless new issues are raised or new information is provided on the matter.”*

The communication message is simple- behave towards the staff at West Lancs as we are expected to behave towards you- with simple mutual dignity and respect. The failure to do so will lead to restrictions on how WL will communicate with you with the potential for repeat offenders to have legal action taken against them by the council where this amounts to vexatious harassment. The challenge for the Council and Customers is do they feel already stated policy is working as evidenced by how they feel in the workplace and a reduction in such complaints?

Where of course there were evidence of material unlawful activity or maladministration by Members or Officers then the Council's constitution and the law provide for other procedures to be followed.

More generally the volume of complaints including referrals to the Ombudsman within the context of planning applications is not disproportionate. The challenge is always to be seen to learn from them, to go beyond response times and focus on elements that may offer a source of innovation, identify inconsistency in service delivery and or provide reassurance to the corporate entity and service area that services are being delivered as intended. The Council has an established Scrutiny and Overview processes, reports are made to Cabinet on a quarterly basis that flow from deliberations by the Corporate Management Team. This reassures the public and provides a disciplined reporting framework for Officers. In terms of planning the Committee Report (10th December 2020, Cabinet 12th January 2021) show the Service is consistently achieving above target for its PI's for major and minor applications despite the impact of remote working and COVID.

However this does not include reporting on complaints in terms of volume, accepted, resolved or rejected. It may be worthwhile reflecting on how Complaints may be utilised to reinforce the quality of service provided as part of a learning organisation for the Planning Service. This would also serve as a source of reassurance as to transparency on performance and integration to a whole council approach.

### **Recommendations**

- The Planning Service affirm or otherwise that it is content that current council policy statements are sufficient reassurance to Officers who are the recipient of complaints alleging corruption and malpractice.
- The Planning Service affirm or otherwise that appropriate HR support is available should it be sought under such circumstances.
- The Planning Service and Corporate Communications reflect on how best to promote in the public eye the integrity of the Planning Service.
- The Planning Service carry out an annual and sixth monthly review of complaints to identify any learning opportunities (and/or gain reassurance) from complaints that may help both the planning service and corporate entity improve service delivery and reputation.
- It is good practice in relation social media sites where Council Officers and Members are maligned to demand the Administrator remove the postings.

### **Stakeholder engagement and consultation.**

Planning Services are by definition obliged to formally engage with stakeholders- many of whom have a vested interest that can be financial gain through gaining development value. There are also more broader and equally powerful community wide interests around investment, the environment, contamination prevention, conservation, heritage, climate change and place shaping for today's generations and those of the future. The terrain for planning can therefore be fraught with pleasure, achievement, disappointment, frustration, individual and community tensions. It has therefore a citizen and customer base that is also of political interest. The "wrong and right" decisions may lead to the loss or gain of an electoral seat if a single issue campaign dominates at the time of an election. The primary function however of a planning service is to develop a comprehensive Local Plan that informs and directs the decisions and recommendations made by Officers and Councillors on development planning and place shaping.

The degree and type of consultation and engagement is reflected in the nature of any given planning application- strategic policy formulation- the Local Plan and any amendments- ; a householder seeking an extension; a developer wishing to develop housing and or a retail or commercial development, highways, traffic light control, etc. The stakeholders are therefore many and varied with immediate too long term interests. For the purpose of this review the starting point was elected Members. This included the Leaders of all three parties, Portfolio leads, the Chair of Planning and Committee Members.

#### **The Members View.** (NB the list that follows does not mean this reflects a consensus view)

The general view is that the Planning Service is a professional and competent one. However there are several key areas that need to be addressed that will inform and 'manage' the expectations of Members. Much of this focuses around having clarity and understanding of the role of Officers, the production of reports, the recommendations contained therein, presentation and direction. Without exception all Members would endorse the provision of regular training for Committee Members and the whole body politic. In addition, the Leaders of each party agree that training is made compulsory for Planning Committee members.

The areas of concern as expressed by Members include the following:-

- Being seen as customer friendly and able to engage with developers
- The service is not seamless and is structured around how people work or are employed
- IT infrastructure is not fit for purpose which impacts on the Members ability to access large documents and visualise the wider context of an application
- The broadcasting of the Planning Committee is static and not interactive with a tendency to crash
- A perception by some Members that officers are too inflexible in their presentations and recommendations
- Lead managers are held in high regard for their professionalism and competence
- Several consider the Corporate Management Team do not understand Planning and attribute this to organisational change
- Members acknowledge they need more training and that this would help all ward councillors in their constituency work
- Enforcement and Legal Services are seen as ineffective in terms of prosecutions and enforcing breaches of planning conditions with too many retrospective approvals

- Members are alert to the loudest voice prevailing and acknowledge that this may not always reflect a given issue in full but feel there should be more engagement with Parish Councils that go beyond the weekly planning lists
- Members would like to see more types of consultation methods deployed
- The absence of a case officer should not mean that an elected Member or member of the public should have to wait for their return before being able to receive updates on progress
- A sense from some Planning Committee Members that they are being led to make a decision that Officers put forward but which they do not feel wholly comfortable with. This may create an impression that Committee Members have not fully reflected on matters and that they are simply falling in line due to warnings of dire consequences
- Access to Principal Planning officers is cited as good although some consider access is difficult
- Introducing nominated officers to cover a number of parish council areas would facilitate consultation, engagement and development of Neighbourhood Plans
- There was a view that a Flood and Drainage committee would be helpful
- More members should be required to attend site visits
- An alternative venue to the Council chamber that enables more public engagement face to face with Committee Members may help.

### **An External Stakeholders Perspective**

External stakeholders form a wide spectrum of viewpoints and opinions from the political and community standpoint of Parish Councils, the aim of delivering professional services by organisations and individuals, broader commercial objectives from developers through to a resident seeking approval, for example, a home extension. While their broad aims and requirements for engaging with the Planning service are wide and varied, at the core is a desire for competent planning services and consistency. The emerging views from external stakeholders is mixed, albeit the views were from a limited number of sources. However, they do in a number of areas confirm the views from Members and provide additional insight of the planning service in general.

- Officer feedback was generally positive
- Some concerns expressed of inconsistent approaches undertaken by different case officers, including response times
- Parish Councils consider more site meetings would be helpful rather than relying on maps
- Professional relationships are not as supportive or engaging as experienced with neighbouring councils
- The rationale behind the pre-application service is well understood by professionals and considered a compulsory element. However, there is a lack of clarity regarding what is being offered and how discussions within the pre-app process can lead to additional payments being required
- Residents views of the pre-app service are mixed and appear linked to accessing (or failing to) appropriate information on the website
- The website isn't actually supporting the planning service to reduce traffic but is having the opposite effect of pushing customers to contact officers via email or phone for advice
- Parish Councils are not in most, if not all, cases informed of an enforcement action and would welcome that

- There is a view that planning could be more proactive when work is in progress on sites without planning permission
- The Pre-Application service is not considered expensive and raising charges is not seen as being unreasonable

Examples of customer experience maps are contained in the appendix.

### **The Planning Officers Perspective.**

Those who provide the Planning Service are a key stakeholder. Collectively they have many years of experience and present as being thorough, competent and committed to their profession. Many work beyond the call of duty and are generally open to meaningful changes that will lighten their workload, enhance their own capacity and have a self-critical awareness that is a bedrock for any change. However, they also express uncertainty as to the direction of travel being sought by the Corporate Management Team in the sense they are not clear what that is. Covid 19 and Remote Working has had its impact with the absence from contact in person with fellow officers although there remains a strong team spirit. In addition, there is an absence of knowledge around IT (see below) with dependency on local bandwidth and finding a private space to work where more than one person may be working at home and/or children are present. The issues they identify are as follows:- (again this does not mean there is consensus)

- There is some concern and disquiet as to why this review is being conducted now
- A universal dissatisfaction with IT infrastructure that does not facilitate fully operational remote working without difficulty
- An integrated management system that aggregates data would enhance management oversight and priority setting
- There should be more standard template letters with easy access to case management notes for development and enforcement regardless of whom the case officer may be
- The system should provide a case management process for Enforcement
- More training should be provided to all elected Members especially the Planning Committee to enhance understanding of planning law and constraints
- Planners consider the impact of COVID has affected their ability to be a visible service with senior management and promote understanding of their challenges via face to face team meetings and briefings
- Support going digital but identify a number of technical challenges especially around presentation of large plans in their context
- General view that workload is high and that where it could be automated or facilitated by IT and shifting administrative tasks this should be done
- The council should reinforce its conduct expectations from the public
- Confidentiality of planning reports should be reinforced and protected from casual or incidental access
- Would support an appointment system for Members that enables case management tracking and as a way of protecting the integrity of the service and elected Members from spurious allegations
- There should be consistency on providing and recording pre-application preliminary contact discussions prior to charging
- The WL web portal is considered difficult to navigate and long winded

- There is general support for enabling capacity for planning officers by transferring tasks to administrative support with a lack of clarity as to what could be successfully transferred to planning support/customer services
- Officers acknowledge the challenge around site visits under Covid which in turn has led to an emphasis on improving technological access and the ability to have a remote overview of an application
- There are mixed views around expanding the mechanisms for consultation which are related to the loudest voice syndrome and resources
- There is agreement that fees and charges are out of date and should be sophisticated enough to capture each element of a planning consideration in terms of cost that reflect real time effort through billing
- Internal council services that are required to contribute to Validation processes should ensure responses are timely
- There is strong support for an SLA with Legal Services and Enforcement
- There are concerns that the senior planning management structure is light and that the capacity for reflective and strategic thinking is under pressure due to workload

### **The Corporate Perspective**

The Corporate perspective is encapsulated in the Council's Vision and Values Statement. Progress against this mission statement is reported in the Council's Annual Plan 2019-21. The Leader's Foreword reinforces the Administrations primary goals as:-

- Delivering tangible and visible improvements in the Borough
- Engaging and empowering our local communities
- Actively promoting the Borough as a great place to live, work, visit and invest.

The Chief Operating Officer (COO) in noting this is now the second year of the SORP change management project adds:-

*The intention once again is to focus on the delivery of a series of specific initiatives alongside day-to-day service delivery including the Sustainable Organisation Review Project, a cross-cutting review touching on every aspect of the Council's operation, to ensure sustainability of services going forward. The environment in which local government operates continues to undergo significant change and a traditional model of operation no longer fully reflects the expectation of our residents, businesses and other stakeholders, or the funding available for public service delivery.*

*During the past year the Council began work on our Sustainable Organisation Review Project (SORP), which will:*

- *Deliver a sustainable operating model and strategy for delivery for the Council*
- *Address the estimated £1.9m GRA gap in funding by savings or income generation*
- *Enable the Council to be 'self-financing' to meet Government's requirements by 2022/23*
- *Provide a consistent and quality based customer experience with effective, efficient and accessible services*
- *Be in the best possible position to deliver the area's ambitions.*

This is the policy framework and direction of travel for the whole Council. It is incumbent upon all officers to be thoroughly familiar with these objectives both in their operational daily activities and as ambassadors for the Council. As both documents are contemporary and carry the imprint of the two leading council figures there is no lack of clarity as to the authority of the contents and their objectives. They reflect the Values and Ethos to be promoted and a range of specific objectives. The uncertainty to be found within the Planning Service in terms of values and direction of travel can therefore be narrowed down to structural matters. These are expressed around a reduction in management capacity following earlier re-organisations, having a voice in the Corporate Management Team and some specialised areas such as the management of Enforcement. While the latter has been reviewed above it is worth noting that the CMT includes the Head of Growth and Development Services. The Corporate Management Team is relatively new but not without experience of the organisation, other LA's and sectors. The impact of Covid has brought its own particular challenges but in common with all of local government CMT see this as becoming a driver for change the success of which rests on effective technology and infrastructure. The CMT acknowledge the impact of sudden change, the move to largely remote working, the absence of a golden thread that enables aggregated data from all service areas to be utilised with ease for forward planning and reflection. The CMT would encourage a workshop approach for both Members and Officers with reference to Planning and across divisions to embed corporate developments and organisational learning. The emphasis remains as outlined in SORP - a need to shift basic processes away from professional based services to front line customer contact and support services. The intention is to release inherent capacity and improve the customer interface by enabling real time conversations and resolutions to take place.

The threat of COVID has proven that WL can respond to the biggest of challenges, continue to provide leadership, manage change and deliver services in a completely different way. CMT take heart from this as it shows West Lancs is resilient and flexible with a strong value led culture around maintaining standards in public life and providing high quality services. CMT see the purpose of this review as providing an external assessment of matters that are of equal importance to the Planning Service and CMT. The emphasis on transforming service delivery and becoming financially self-sufficient for planning are external and internal drivers. For Planning there are no other options but to release capacity through work load transfer; digital planning processes and generating fee driven income for the provision of professional services. This future that will be driven by the White Paper coincides with the Council's journey which provides the opportunity for the Planning Service to be a pioneer and exemplify change and innovation.

### **Recommendations**

- Democratic Services amend the Council's Constitution following agreement with Members to make formal training a condition of serving on the Planning Committee.
- The Council's Constitution be amended to ensure newly elected or appointed Members to the Planning Committee may attend with Observer Status until training is provided.
- Democratic Services build into Members Annual diary provision for several training modules including Enforcement, Pre-Application Advice and Validation on Planning for all Members.
- Party Leaders consider whether training for all members on Planning be mandatory.
- The Planning Service in conjunction with the Planning Committee prioritise key areas of training that are essential to their role including the role of Officers in presenting Reports and recommendations.
- The Planning Service breakdown its weekly Planning List by Ward to enable councillors to readily become aware of planning applications.

- The Web Cam facility for broadcasting Planning Committees be reviewed to ensure it is robust and fit for purpose.
- An appointment system be introduced for Members enquiries with casual attendance at the planning office discouraged.
- The hardware available to Members and Officers with particular reference to visual presentations be reviewed.
- The capacity of software and hardware be reviewed to enable easy downloads for large plans.
- The survey data on home working be evaluated to inform best practice working and collate any issues that impact on the planning service that may have implications for service delivery
- The Planning Service produce an Annual Report on Enforcement to CMT, Scrutiny and Cabinet and consider the production of six monthly reports.
- The Planning Service with Customer Services, Business Support and Legal Services engage in a workshop to assess process transfer and case monitoring to the first point of contact via the case management system and greater use of templates.
- The Planning Service review its case management processes and expectations to ensure all elements of the Planning resource have a formal responsibility and ability to respond to internal and external enquiries thereby enhancing the ability to manage case load in a seamless way.
- The issues around IT and understanding of its capabilities and limitations be addressed as outlined below.
- The Councils Planning Web Portal be reviewed and decisions made as to which elements of planning processes should be provided solely via the governments sponsored Planning Portal.
- Strategic Planning review and remove all redundant documents from the Web Portal and validate that embedded links actually function.
- Legal Services and Planning agree an SLA for Enforcement.
- The Planning Service with support from Customer Services initiate periodic customer experience interviews
- A review of the public facing documentation relating to the pre-application service is undertaken to ensure there is clarity of service offer and charges

### **Neighbourhood Planning**

Neighbourhood planning is a new area of experience for West Lancs and as such some Members anticipated that more bids may follow led by Parish Councils. Members were keen to gain some reassurance that Council resources would not be overwhelmed should a trickle become a flood and that a broader understanding of these challenges and opportunities be communicated to ward members and Parish Councils The following seeks to outline what is expected of a Council and makes some limited recommendations to ensure the whole Council is sighted on any emerging developments and opportunities nationally and locally.

Government advice on Neighbourhood Planning is repeated below (MHLG 09/05/19) (Neighbourhood Planning Regulations 2012). The Localism Act (2011), The Neighbourhood Planning Act (2017).

Neighbourhood planning gives communities direct power to develop a shared vision for their neighbourhood and shape the development and growth of their local area. They are able to choose where they want new homes, shops and offices to be built, have their say on what those new buildings should look like and what infrastructure should be provided, and grant planning permission for the new buildings they want to see go ahead. Neighbourhood planning can offer a way for local people to plan for the types of development to meet their community's needs and where the ambition of the neighbourhood is aligned with the strategic needs and priorities of the wider local area.

A neighbourhood plan should support the delivery of strategic policies set out in the local plan or spatial development strategy and should shape and direct development that is outside of those strategic policies as outlined in the revised National Planning Policy Framework. A neighbourhood plan should, however, contain policies for the development and use of land. This is because, if successful at examination and referendum (or where the neighbourhood plan is updated by way of making a material modification to the plan and completes the relevant process), the neighbourhood plan becomes part of the statutory development plan. Applications for planning permission must be determined in accordance with the development plan, unless material considerations indicate otherwise. Local communities can choose to

- Set planning policies through a neighbourhood plan that forms part of the development plan used in determining planning applications.
- Grant planning permission through Neighbourhood Development Orders and Community Right to Build Orders for specific development which complies with the order.

Neighbourhood planning is not a legal requirement but a right in which communities in England can choose to use. Communities may decide that they could achieve the outcomes they want to see through other planning routes, such as incorporating their proposals for the neighbourhood into the Local Plan, or through other planning mechanisms such as Local Development Orders and supplementary planning documents or through pre-application consultation on development proposals. Communities and local planning authorities will discuss the different choices communities have to achieving their ambitions for their neighbourhood.

### **The Position in West Lancs**

A parish council or similar organisation leads on producing a neighbourhood plan, rather than the Borough Council. However, once a neighbourhood plan has reached an advanced stage of preparation, the body preparing it submits it to the Borough Council. The Borough Council is then responsible for taking the NP forward for completion and adoption.

Organisations such as "Locality" provide support to neighbourhood planning groups on behalf of the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government. They offer two types of support: Grant (financial support) and Technical Support (professional assistance and advice). It is also open to Parish Councils to commission independent planning consultants. In West Lancs there are 21 Parish Councils. To date only one Neighbourhood Plan has been adopted or made. This was in July 2019 when the Council adopted the Burscough Parish Neighbourhood Plan. The Plan is now part of the development plan for West Lancashire and must be taken into consideration (alongside the West Lancashire Local Plan) when making decisions on planning applications in Burscough Parish.

A Parish Council can access funds to develop a Neighbourhood Plan and it can commission its own expertise to develop the plan. This means that the Borough Council's job is essentially to validate and guide to ensure the Plan is policy compliant with the Local Plan. It will organise the independent examination of the neighbourhood development plan, neighbourhood development order or

Community Right to Build Order. The local planning authority is also responsible for organising the neighbourhood planning referendum. The referendum ensures that the local community has the final say on whether a neighbourhood development plan, neighbourhood development order or a Community Right to Build Order comes into force in their area. It is apparent that to date the demand on resources is by exception and well within the resources available.

The discussion with some Members and Officers is around the question of how Neighbourhood Planning should be resourced. All parish councils undertaking an NDO can access grants of up to £10000 and an additional £8000 if the issues are more complex e.g. developing a business led neighbourhood plan, a cluster of three parish councils, a population of around 25,000, areas of high deprivation, technical support etc In addition if the plan will bring forward sites for affordable homes for sale a further grant of £10000 may be available.

. If Members and the Planning Service are concerned as to where the first point of contact should be in the case of a Parish Council coming forward with a proposal to develop a Neighbourhood Plan it may wish to consider having an initial group of named officer(s) for groups of Parishes. In practice however this is a resource decision best made at the time although having a first point of referral will help present a customer friendly face of the Planning Service.

Other than that there is no evidence base or driving force to suggest that anything other than a pragmatic approach will suffice. The Planning Policy Team are not being overwhelmed by demands for Neighbourhood Plans at this time.

### **Recommendations**

- Maintain a pragmatic approach in response to demand.
- Strategic Planning supported by Corporate Communications ensure all Parish Councils and Ward Councillors are kept abreast of grant regimes and opportunities to develop Neighbourhood Plans.

### **Consultation processes**

West Lancs outlines its principles for consultation in the October 2020 Statement of Community Involvement (SCI). The council notes that *“One of the main principles behind the planning system is community involvement. We encourage the public, local organisations, businesses, and others with an interest in the area to take part and have a say in different aspects of planning. The Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) sets out who we will consult on various aspects of planning, and what methods we will use.”*

In addition to this particular form of consultation an Annual Report is produced that provides a summary of the Local Plan’s objectives against outcomes. There are also the legally binding obligations to publicise all planning applications. The online records of these go back to 2005. The planning service is obliged to notify adjoining neighbours that may be affected by any given development, place site notices where details of land ownership is not available, publishing press notices, and notifying Parish Councils. When it comes to consulting on a new Local Plan the approach has to be Borough wide and will usually involve a number of public meetings. With the demise of the published printed word in local newspapers Planners have to be sure that “traditional methods” such as the lamppost are complimented by the use of social media, its own web portal and a pro-active approach to communication an application however small.

The SCI contains many positive and welcoming comments on the consultation process although there are some negative comments which are to be expected. The document offers the opportunity for West Lancs to respond by clarification, accepting commentary and or explaining why a given comment is wrong or not accepted. As such it is the most useful tool for Planning from a strategic process for consultation. Within the SCI and also from the interviews with Members a clear theme is “knowing your parish”, and having more engagement with them on consultation. Some Members also feel that consultation on domestic applications should go beyond immediate neighbours. This is acknowledged and expanded upon within the SCI responses by Planners. In terms of communications and maintaining awareness there is a valuable role to be played here by Ward Councillors, Parish Council staff where they are employed, and any community news-sheets that are not party political. The SCI is an informative document and educational tool for the council, the citizens of West Lancs, the participants and a key means of community engagement on place shaping today and tomorrow.

### **Recommendations**

- The SCI’s role as a critical tool for community engagement, education and promotion of the Councils reputation be reflected in the Planning Web Portal with an appropriate explanation that is more than a short link.
- The weekly planning list be broken down into Parish area and by Wards to enable Ward Councillors and Parish councillors to gain easy access to planning applications.
- The Parish Councils be encouraged where they have staff to accept the responsibility as the first point of contact for the promotion of awareness of local planning applications.
- The Planning Service with Corporate Communications consider how best the utilisation of local social media sites and community newspapers can be deployed for major planning applications.
- Corporate Communications and the Planning Service pro-actively promote the Strategic Planning Consultation data base.
- The Planning Service engage with developers and council partners on major applications to persuade them to deploy a wider range of tools including Planning for Real sessions that are interactive thereby promoting a greater understanding of their objectives.
- Given the current challenges impeding site visits the Planning Service consider how an interactive technical solution can be provided to Members and on line to the public.

### **Organisational Structures in Planning**

The current senior management structure for the council was introduced in 2019. (4/11/19). The general concern for Planning officers are around operational workload, a perceived need for having a PPO to lead enforcement and management capacity to offer strategic contributions to the council. A proposal for Enforcement is presented earlier for consideration. In terms of workload around case work and complex applications the general thrust of the council is reflected in the implementation of its Sustainable Organisation Review, Vision and Values and Annual Report.

It is acknowledged that a key mechanism to relieve workload i.e. transfer administrative work and first point of contact would generate more capacity within the professional element of planning. The role of IT support, infrastructure and functionality are also seen as enablers that if deployed well will generate more time and capacity. Both of these matters are discussed above and below.

## Organisational Structures West Lancs.

The current organisational structures for Planning in West Lancs are presented below at **Appendix B. – Development Management, Heritage and Environment; Building Control and Technical Services and Strategic Planning, Regeneration and Implementation.**

This reflects common organisational structures for planning with divisions around Development, Enforcement, Policy and Building Control. In other councils variations are influenced by whether they are a unitary authority or working within a two tier environment. In West Lancs for example Planning Policy is “twinned” with regeneration and economic development. In other LA’s regeneration can be part of a large department or be seen as a corporate function. Some argue that having regeneration and planning policy together may be seen as constituting a conflict of interest as it may appear that development is the driving force. The counter to that is development can only take place within the constraints of the Local Plan and that planning has both a regional and local role to play in place shaping and laying the foundations for economic, social and community development. One informs the other and ensures the Council is an intelligent partner within the region and the LEP subject to it being fully engaged with the Corporate Centre.

Building Control is another responsibility that as a regulatory function is closely related to planning and often sits within the Planning Service. However as much of its activity relates to minor or single dwelling works including disabled facility grants the location of this service is open to choice around best fit and strategic direction. Other LA’s have adopted a shared service partnership model to enable Building Control services to combine as Teckal arms-length companies able to compete with the private sector and offer greater career opportunities by becoming a larger regional service. Where LA’s have established Home Improvement teams focusing on DFG work, Building Control are critical in terms of building regulations, on site visits, dialogue with clients and builders, fee income and as a means to help promote the long term business construction standards of SME building companies thereby sustaining local employment and apprenticeships. Enforcement is another ‘traditional’ service with appeals that comes under the Planning remit. In the Mersey region one LA reports that this function has moved to the corporate anti-fraud centre, another that all enforcement reports and appeals are delegated to the Enforcement Team to write and produce. In all areas Enforcement teams are small often drawn from former police officers or developed as graduate trainee schemes. In the case of West Lancs the challenges around Enforcement are outlined earlier in this report. It has been suggested a PPO post is re-instated to existing structures as an additional resource to lead and manage this function. As stated above we have been informed this is an issue seeking a resolution for around 10 years. At this time it’s difficult to support that view until there is consideration of the potential impact of alternative approaches such as ensuring model templates are used consistently in the production and verification of reports; transferring to other regulatory parts of the council or to devise simple mechanisms to validate reports with a greater responsibility on Enforcement Officers to produce final reports and evidence bundles for Legal Services. There is little merit in recruiting officers with such skills and then failing to deploy these assets and ensuring they are accountable for their recommendations.

Other issues raised by the Planning Service relate to grades of Planning Officers, education and training within planning services, barriers to the same, the interaction between Planning Services, Planning Support/ Business Support and customer telephony services. While the individual grading and pay of Planning Officers is a matter for internal job evaluation and retention schemes particular to West Lancs, grades can vary across Districts, especially with a pull effect of major cities within commuting distance. In Lancaster for example a graduate planner may be a Grade 7, a Planning Assistant a Grade 8, a Planning Officer a Grade 9 with Principal Planning Officers being Grade 11. By comparison in the South East a District Principal Planning Officer can be a Band 10 (£46K) a Development Team Manager a Band 12 (£54k) a Planning Officer Band 5 (£28k) a Senior Planner

Band 8 (£35k). In areas where there are major development sites dedicated posts may be created to oversee such developments and a premium paid. A Planning Apprentice can be a Band 1 (£17k). In West Lancs a Principal Planning Officer is a PO2, a Senior Planning Officer PO1 and Planning Officers pitched at Career Grades Sc6-SO1.

In West Lancs the Policy Planning side is well resourced with a range of senior officers including a fixed term contract for a senior Development Manager (PO3), two Senior Planning Officers (PO1), a Research Officer (PO1) and a Principal Planning Officer (PO2) directed by a Strategic Planning Manager (SM2) with a career grade Sc6-SO1 Planning Officer. This is a significant resource for planning, economic development and regeneration. In relation to the direction of travel the Council is taking, the governments White Paper and the workload issues experienced by all elements of planning it would be instructive to carry out a full business process mapping review of operational practices.

### **The Councils Direction of Travel.**

As this is covered earlier in the report it can be succinctly addressed as **One Council** where all council services are obliged to address the challenge as to how service quality can be improved and delivered with as few individual service interactions for the citizen, partner and stakeholders including elected Members. As this division plays the leadership role in taking forward a Local Plan it has to reflect on how the White Paper may impact of how resources are deployed and the manner by which Local Plans are produced. In addition the Service should reflect on how these changes will impact on work load and daily operational activities including the mechanisms for commissioning external planning consultants, costs and potential for partnership commissioning with other local authorities. The reduction in time for producing a Local Plan should eventually lead to a reduction in commissioning costs subject to the Policy Team taking on more of the burden in producing a Plan under the new framework and any subsequent amendments.

### **The White Paper.**

A view expressed by several officers is that the proposals will never happen or be significantly changed. The report takes it as given that significant changes will to the planning system will occur. The government announced in March 2021 that it has commissioned resources to drive through a digital transformation for planning and development. The key elements affecting this division –as currently proposed- include the following: a fixed infrastructure rate levy that replaces S106 and CIL; local authorities will be able to borrow for infrastructure against this levy; national design bodies to support the role of local design codes; interactive map-based Local Plans that are to be produced within a statutory time frame of 30 months. The Digital First approach will mean that IT will become increasingly important for access, comment and input to the development of a Local Plan. Areas for growth, renewal and or protected areas from development will be set for a minimum period of 10 years. The National Policy Planning Framework is to serve as the primary source for development management policies. A single statutory sustainable test will replace the current tests for “soundness”. The current practice for an LA to produce a local plan can take up to four years. Authorities normally commission planning consultants separately with Policy Officers working with them to produce a document that is fit for purpose to present to the public and elected Members for consideration and adoption.

On the assumption that the principal changes proposed in the White Paper will come into place, however modified, the Planning Division needs to prepare in good time. The Officers view is that the “start up” to prepare for such a change will present a major demand but once achieved this theoretically will lighten the burden on policy officers in terms of essentially having rolling reviews of a major policy document. The focus will be on compliance with the Local Plan, neighbourhood plans

should they emerge in scale, a new performance management framework, negotiation and collection of the infrastructure levy.

This in turn produces several issues for the Planning Service to consider as a whole. The question of who collects CIL and S106 monies; who negotiates the quantum, who tracks the debt and who ensures the sums are actually paid up front, in phases or at the end of a particular scheme. There is an inherent danger in planning services that sight of the debt can be lost, a developer may go bust before payments are made in full and/or a developer may negotiate payment terms that are wholly favourable to the developer. As the White Paper sets the tone that the costs of a planning service are to be funded by planning fees this becomes an even more important area of work that supports the Council's own budget, infrastructure costs and development overheads to deliver this service. The Council needs to satisfy itself that appropriate processes and personnel are in place to track and collect such sums to prevent debt secure income and deliver desired outcomes

The Policy officers report that it is not unusual for telephone calls to be directed to them when other elements of the service are unavailable. They will then access the case file and endeavour to provide a holding response or note the call. In terms of a One Council approach the Planning Service should consider how the "additional" qualified planning resources available in Policy may be deployed to support development process enquiries as a matter of daily operational practice. This may require additional training but would help alleviate work load, improve customer access and reduce the volume of failed calls getting through to the "back office". If as expected the White Paper leads to a reduction in the demand for policy development within the context of high quality design and national bodies then theoretically there will be capacity to be released for other tasks within Policy. Skilling up such officers with regular case work tasks can only serve to help bolster the capacity of the planning service as a whole and enrich their own working experience and potential for career development. By the same token if the White Paper were to fall by the wayside it would still be incumbent on the Planning Service to ensure its resources are deployed as part of mutually dependent sub-divisions working together. A digital future for example is non negotiable from the council's perspective regardless of the detail.

The focus of the White Paper is to shorten the development process, enable sites to be developed for residential and commercial use, conservation, produce Local Plans in much shorter time-scales and promote high quality design and beauty to the built environment. The functional divisions of a Planning Service will remain in broad terms:- Development , Policy and Enforcement. Other service areas that may compliment planning-, building control, conservation orders, regeneration and economic development, housing development, can be found as stand-alone services, within other regulatory structures, or in large authorities as significant departments.

The structure in West Lancs reflects a number of decisions made by senior management endorsed by elected Members that have produced this organisational matrix for the prevailing circumstances within West Lancs. As such there is no right or wrong, just a pragmatic approach to what works now that may or may not change in the future. With specific reference to the core services of Planning the impact of the White Paper, the current law and local circumstances all demand that a Planning Service has the capacity and focus to deliver these three main strands.

As presented throughout this report the external world is a dynamic place, resources are becoming increasingly scarce and financial pressures have been ever present in significant terms since the 2008 financial crisis and cuts of 28% to council budgets at least. There is therefore a challenge for all sub-divisions within the Service to provide mutual support, capture their collective work experience and intellectual endeavours to deliver their distinct but shared outcomes as One Service.

## **Education, training and development.**

The Planning Service includes posts that are career grades Sc6-SO1. It is reported that an “educational bar” exists that prevents career progression. Recruitment and retention practices will vary in LA’s as some discretion will be exercised in determining what are the acceptable graduate qualifications and other types of work experience that are relevant. All require formal qualifications at degree level or equivalent in a planning related discipline. Apprentices have a different career development path as this can take NVQ’s, training and experience as the process of becoming a fully accredited planner. The Chartered Town Planner Apprentice is aimed at enabling individuals to work and study at the same time. Successful completion of the apprenticeship provides a professional recognition and status as a qualified planner. The apprenticeship scheme has two possible entry points and will typically take 3-6 years overall, depending on prior qualifications. Apprentices are assessed through a Professional Discussion and the RTPI Assessment of Professional Competence. A District Council due to its size can offer limited opportunities for apprenticeship development with the demand to focus on the “day job”. This in turn can create retention issues as staff move to neighbouring authorities to achieve their personal ambitions.

The Council could continue in its current approach in terms of career development or adopt a different scheme based on work experience and evaluation. It is perfectly acceptable for a professional service to have expectations that officers should attain appropriate qualifications or have them already as a condition of employment and personal development. However when a service area is characterised by a national skills shortage, local issues of competition, an aging profile common to local government, it would be reasonable for the Council to look at all service areas to ensure that current recruitment and retention measures are fit for purpose.

Given the interrelated dependencies within a planning service, - Development, Policy, Enforcement, Appeals, Member and citizen engagement- it is open to a council to consider a wide range of meaningful personal development thresholds. In addition a One Council approach infers there should be cross –fertilisation of resources within a service area and where feasible beyond organisational boundaries. In West Lancs the opportunities in Planning for such an approach are severely curtailed with divisions operating within their own hierarchies. A much richer organisational approach would be to enable qualified and unqualified planners to gain experience in each area as part of a planned human resource development strategy. This would enable those in sub-divisions to gain this experience as a requirement of becoming a fully- fledged planning officer with transferrable skills and experience. This would provide resilience and if made a requirement offer an incentive to gain this experience as a condition of promotion inside and outside any career grade posts. There would also be merit in seeking mutual exchange working and joint training experiences across the region for all levels of grade within the Service.

The importance of recruitment and retention of planning officers is a countrywide issue. While the RTPI stress professional qualifications they struggle to maintain other access routes due to numbers, financial viability within educational institutions and the very long period of time taken to produce apprentice schemes. The criteria set out by councils to embark on this route can vary. Within the Merseyside Region this is indeed the case as to what is actually a relevant degree and experience. A discussion with trade unions, staff, HR and planning could test current criteria against other LA’s to reflect upon whether the current “education bar” is counter- productive and to agree with justification which academic qualifications could be applied going forward. In addition, the opportunity to gain experience across planning disciplines would promote resilience and shared knowledge.

## **Recommendations.**

- The senior managers of the Planning Service produce a joint position statement in relation to the opportunities for change and service delivery within the context of proposals contained in the current White Paper for the Corporate Management Team.
- The Planning Service anticipate the changes in the White Paper and review operational work practices to identify potential latent capacity and digital platforms for delivery of the service without disruption.
- The Planning Service adopt an integrated approach to work flows and operational practices that place the responsibility for customer engagement with all elements of the Service to support a seamless service delivery and promote resilience.
- The Planning Service and HR consider pathways to promotion and development thresholds for career development based on work experience and qualifications.
- The Planning Service and HR review with trade unions and staff the range of acceptable qualifications and type of work experience relevant to becoming a Planner or career development within the Service.
- The Planning Service enable staff to gain experience across all divisions and develop a mutual exchange programme with other LA's.
- The Planning Service engage in an internal divisional workshop to consider how daily operational practices for customer engagement and satisfaction can be enhanced by all elements of planning contributing to managing the customer engagement process including telephony contact and case management.
- Financial Services and the Planning Service review the processes, audit tracking mechanisms for determining the level of CIL/infrastructure payments to be paid and collected.
- The “traditional” approach to the management of Enforcement be replaced with greater accountability placed on Enforcement Officers and changes to management oversight.

## **Business Support and Customer Services**

There is some reluctance to transfer functions to these areas that are considered technical or a potential risk. The former Planning Support/Business Support is now part of a wider support unit. In addition, there are questions as to what functions the Customer telephony Service can usefully provide if technical matters arise. The reasons given are around business confidence, monitoring and tracking of any responses or undertakings given to applicants or the view that the work may be too complex. There is also a perceived sense this could lead to a lack of control. On the other side of the equation there is a danger of overload via transferring too much without evaluation of processes and efficiency gain to Business Support. However, Planning Officers would welcome greater automation, channel shift for enquiries and an improved Web Portal to improve service delivery and customer satisfaction. The national Planning Portal service is used by the council as a self-service route for ‘automated’ planning applications. It includes templates for Enforcement complaints.

The challenge then is what, when, where and how as opposed to not at all. A joint workshop between Business Support and Planning that includes a risk assessment on particular processes such as Validation on receipt could be the first port of call for example as a means of building confidence and reassurance within the Council. In the last reporting quarter for December 2020 the Web Portal was visited 143,104 times with 7450 self-service forms completed– after the green waste peak of 28,451. Customer Services report that there were 44,000 attempts to call the back office with a success rate of 81%. This in itself indicates that telephone contact remains important for all

customers but also the demand this must have on council officer resources and perception of service delivery when the “back office” cannot be contacted. With the digital opportunities available to and expected of Planning it is timely to carry out a business mapping exercise to capture these opportunities now.

To successfully achieve this however there must be confidence in the IT systems and infrastructure to deliver this alongside a policy matrix that identifies which processes will be delivered by others outside planning safely. An essential element of this is case management oversight and access by others. The Validation process and take up of the Self-Service account for planning would represent a useful case study for Officers to engage in with a “test to destruction” approach. The Council’s Validation List explains that (August 2019 and Appendix):-

The Council will seek to ensure that the level of information requested on a case by case basis is proportionate to the nature and scale of the proposed development and will be a material consideration in the determination of the application. This means that if an application is submitted without the required information the Council will be entitled to declare it invalid. It is essential therefore that the checklists are referred to before formally submitting an application, and that the list of requirements is carefully scrutinised to ascertain its applicability to a particular development proposal. The combined use of the national and local list will:

- Help applicants, to understand the type and extent of information that will be required of them
- Provide greater certainty for applicants
- Enable the Council to have all the information it needs in order to determine the application, draft the planning permission and word any planning conditions required
- Minimise the risk that the Council will have to go back to applicants for more information and thus the risk that the authority will fail to achieve performance targets
- Reduce delay in processing applications
- Enable consultees to have all necessary information to provide early and meaningful comments on the application

This first step is carried out by the Business Support Unit (Planning Support) and is a vital customer interface that can present complex and simple matters from customers. The questions to be asked are how can this be broken down and simplified to help both customers and the council officers navigate the process via such means as a simple template check list? The Planning Portal self-service, other electronic means or by paper are all options available for the submission of applications. In all cases officers have to check the right fee has been paid and log the transaction unless the Financial Transaction Portal service has been used. While offering all these options is a holistic approach a cost benefit analysis that considers one primary electronic route with others by exception e.g. the volume of paper for a strategic plan where the system does not offer capacity to accept a large file(s) - would inform a decision that current procedures for large paper applications offer the best customer service and/or a more efficient alternative route that drives digital transfer with greater automation is preferable. Either way an intense Workshop taking Validation as a case study would enable the Council to examine a critical first step in the planning process that generates income, can be complex and very basic at the same time and is one that involves agents and individuals, several electronic and paper routes and telephone contact.

## Recommendations

- A subject and volume analysis of back office calls to Planning including failed attempts be carried out.
- The council consider carrying out a full business mapping process exercise of a planning process that focuses on complexity, risk , customer pathways and income generation.
- A business workshop exercise be conducted between the Planning service, Telephony and Business Support to identify service transfer opportunities and the means by which they can be delivered to provide a seamless service
- The three service areas agree thresholds of access to case management systems to enable enhanced communications with the public on progress and annotations recording contact and response.
- The Council satisfy itself that the Planning IT system is fit for purpose and/or whether the universal dissatisfaction can be resolved via training and awareness of system functionality.

## Information Technology Infrastructure

### Technology overview

WLBC are longstanding users of the IDOX Uniform suite of software. This is one of the main suppliers in the marketplace, deployed across the UK across a range of service areas, including planning, building control, gazetteer management and street naming & numbering.

The applications are all hosted on-premise, with BTLIS providing application support. At the time of writing, the versions in use were:

Idox TLC v10.1.3

Idox Uniform v.10.4.1

Idox EDMS v.5.0

Idox CICO Add In

Idox Redact

Idox Image Viewer (for EDMS)

These are not the current versions of the application suite, in the main being one release behind. Each upgrade will bring a combination of feature enhancements and problem fixes and so systems should be upgraded according to the supplier's recommended schedule.

### Usage

Customer facing usage of the Uniform suite is fairly standard, with the WLBC website providing a "Your West Lancashire" function that, amongst other functionality, allows for the listing of planning and building control applications for selected properties. Planning applications, appeals and enforcements can all be searched. It also provides a link to a map-based search facility to allow locality-based enquiries. Weekly and monthly planning lists are also available. However, several of

these links require the user to register with the West Lancashire “Your Self Service Account” which is different from the public access registration system, leading to additional effort and confusion.

There is the ability to register on the IDOX planning public access portal. This provides additional functionality, such as:

- Being able to save search criteria for future use
- The ability to track a particular application as it progresses
- The ability to be notified online and via email of applications that match a saved search, or when a tracked application’s status changes

The public access portal is responsive, in that its “look and feel” adapts to the device being used, however the visibility of documents, especially plans, is constrained by screen size.

The website also provides links to the Planning Portal (albeit, confusingly via the gov.uk “planning permission” page) to enable online submissions of planning applications. The planning webpages are not especially user friendly and would benefit from a review of their content. They also reference out-dated legislation (for example the Data Protection Act 1998 rather than 2018).

The planning pages contain links for a variety of common planning related tasks:

## Popular tasks

### Planning applications

- [Search and view planning applications](#)
- [Submit a planning application \(external link\)](#)
- [Comment on a planning application](#)
- [Planning application forms](#)
- [Pay for a planning application](#)
- [Report an alleged breach in planning control](#)
- [Make a pre-application enquiry](#)

### Building regulations

- [Submit a building regulations application \(external link\)](#)
- [Pay for a building notice, full plans submission or a regularisation certificate](#)

### Other planning services

- [Make a planning enquiry](#)
- [Planning and building regulation documents photocopy request](#)
- [Pay a photocopy request fee](#)
- [Join our consultation database](#)
- [Apply for street naming and numbering](#)
- [Apply for conservation area grants](#)
- [Apply for a tree preservation order](#)
- [High hedges complaint](#)

However, several of these links require the user to register with the WLBC “Your Self Service Account” which is different from the public access registration system, leading to additional effort and confusion.

### *Key issues*

The issues raised by users and stakeholders can be divided into 2 main areas – functionality and familiarity.

Users have expressed a broad dissatisfaction with the IT systems in use within planning, but this is accompanied by an acceptance that there has been a lack of formal training over a period of years and that much learning is carried out either by trial and error or by peers.

The relationship between council staff and the supplier is very much “at arms-length” – as the contractual relation is between IDOX and BTLs, there does not appear to have been the degree of supplier engagement that would usually be expected from a more direct relationship. A closer relationship between the planning service and the supplier could deliver a range of benefits, including:

- Engagement with user group activity
- Informal facilitated access to other Uniform users, enabling learning and sharing of good practice
- Insight into the systems roadmap and the ability to influence future developments
- Access to professional services
- More effective knowledge transfer, enabling the development of more in-depth expertise about the IDOX suite within the planning service itself

IDOX have an audit offer available for their clients. This takes place over a number of days and involves in-depth engagement with staff and other stakeholders. It involves a full review of the configuration of the system, including the enterprise workflow management aspects. It provides an opportunity to examine how the service operates, how it uses the systems available and suggests efficiencies based on an in-depth understanding of the software’s capabilities and how it is deployed elsewhere. This audit looks at a range of “digital journeys” in order to define and implement the best user experience for staff, clients and councillors.

The usability of the system is constrained by a number of factors:

#### *Display equipment*

Planning papers do not lend themselves to being viewed on smaller sized screens. As the council moves towards a model of more flexible, peripatetic working, there is a need to invest in improved display screen equipment for planning staff. Dual 28” displays are often considered to be a respectable baseline standard, but this does often pose challenges in a home-working environment rather than in an office setting.

Planning committees present their own challenges. Committee members working from tablet or laptop devices are often handicapped by small screen sizes, and the difficulties in viewing both reports and plans at the same time. Consideration should be given to upgrading display screen equipment to larger formats in all locations used for planning committees.

Having viewed the recording of a recent planning committee, more effective use of Powerpoint would also assist. Slides are not always shown full screen (thus making plans etc smaller and more difficult to read) – more user training in presenting using online tools would be beneficial.

#### *Systems access*

The ease of access to systems is broadly constrained by 3 factors: the necessary security provision protecting the application and infrastructure, the connectivity, and the end user device.

The West Lancashire planning systems are hosted locally by BTLs. Access to these systems is via corporate remote access solutions which add an additional layer to the login process and is a

bottleneck in terms of simultaneous user access. Whilst network connectivity between council offices and the council data centre is good, the proliferation of homeworking at a result of the COVID pandemic means that users are more reliant on local broadband infrastructure. The local infrastructure is variable, with some fibre to the premise (FTTP) infrastructure, the majority of the local area being covered by ADSL copper connections. Most home connections are contended, meaning that the “backhaul” (links from local cabinets, to exchange, to internet) is shared between potentially dozens of users, meaning that performance at peak periods of demand is degraded. In some cases this may mean that the recommended upload/download speed of 10 Mbps cannot be achieved, leading to degraded performance.

Some users may have the option to upgrade home connections to a business grade offer, which typically offers lower contention rates, but this of course comes at an increased cost.

The ongoing national programmes to upgrade broadband infrastructure will undoubtedly help in some areas, as will the eventual rollout of 5G mobile coverage, but these are long-term initiatives.

### *Hosting options*

iDox offer three main options for the delivery of their systems – on-premise (as now, with the applications running on WLBC servers in local data centre), hosted (where the application is hosted by iDox on their own infrastructure) and a cloud based offering (“IDOXCloud” – previously Tascomi) running on cloud infrastructure. (<https://www.digitalmarketplace.service.gov.uk/g-cloud/services/146264240047413>)

An IDOX hosted or full cloud offer may present some benefits to WLBC by ensuring that application versions are maintained at the latest level and that more seamless connectivity is available. The hosted solutions also provide a full “off-line working” capability, so if a mobile worker loses network coverage, work is saved and automatically synchronised when the connection next becomes available.

The ICT strategy developed as part of the Sustainable Organisation Review suggests that moving applications from on-premise data centres to cloud provision should be the default, but that each proposed migration should be subject to a full business case, taking into account not just the base-line ICT costs but the total cost of system ownership.

### *Systems functionality*

It is not clear that key parts of the system (for example the enterprise workflow functionality) is being used to its full capability. Effective workflow ensures consistent handling of cases by staff, especially where job-sharing or fractional appointments are in place. Again, this can be examined should the council decide to commission an audit of the system.

### **Further analysis and commentary**

There is “uniform” dissatisfaction with Idox Uniform. Other authorities report similar levels of dissatisfaction. This is compounded within West Lancashire due to the lack of knowledge as to the systems capabilities within the Planning Service. No one was able to express confidence as to what the system could fully offer in terms of case management oversight, reporting and controlled access to the data base by those outside the planning service or consistency in terms of annotation updates that would support a more seamless service. The opportunities for aggregating data as a performance and communication tool whether this is data analysis or by exception reporting appear to not being fully utilised. Learning is by trial and error and limited to “what I need to know” to get the job done. No one expressed any confidence in the outsourced provider to respond in a timely

manner, offer training on updates or systems development. While this is a fundamental corporate weakness, Planning Services along with the rest of the council were able to respond to the national Covid crisis and move to remote working “overnight”. While that is quite an achievement by any standards, planning officers and members report issues around band width, space to work in, downloading large documents and the challenge of working in an isolated virtual space as opposed to an office. This does demonstrate however that the basics of the systems are functional while their full capabilities remain unknown.

This lack of knowledge means that when it comes to managing workload Officers simply do not know how or if the systems can lighten this burden. Are there particular management modules for trawling and aggregating data that can inform strategic decision making, the prioritisation of resources, risk management, the management of peaks and troughs or that can fully enable the transfer of daily activities to others outside the planning service? This lack of knowledge and experience of deploying systems in this manner means that consideration of work load transfer appears to occur in isolation as opposed to a whole systems approach. While there is much discussion about risk there does not appear to be any risk assessments on record that reflect discussions on how customer engagement workload transfer can mitigate risk. If this is the case then the danger of inertia becoming the prevailing cultural organisational matrix, e.g. respond when you have too becomes a high risk “non-activity”.

Idox itself declares that it supports the wider use of mobile, mapping-led systems and simpler processes and the “vision for standardised, spatially aware local plans which allow the underlying data to be aggregated to enable better support for the development process.” Carol A Brown, DM Systems and Technical Support Manager at South Downs National Park Authority states: “We are delighted to renew contractual arrangements with Idox for the provision of our Development Management, Appeals and Enforcement solution. As our organisation continues to mature, we look to embrace innovation and technology in our aims to deliver an exemplary statutory planning function. We welcome Idox’s commitment to continuing to develop solutions that enable remote access working for our teams and partner authorities, and mobile apps to assist in our continued drive towards paperless working and better on-site data capture”. This covers 13 LA’s so taking this 2018 marketing statement at face value it suggests Idox can provide a comprehensive and uniform service that includes remote and mobile working. The challenge for West Lancs is to master the utilisation of the systems it already has and start by opening the tool box. By so doing an informed judgement can be made as to how capacity can be released and the burden lightened for all.

In addition, from both a Members and Officer’s perspective there are some issues around IT equipment within a planning context. These are very simple challenges such as the size of a screen, having additional screens, providing a truly web- cammed interactive Planning Committee, having confidence that the system will not crash out during a live committee, the ability to download reports and applications quickly and easily. There are other providers who provide a web cam service successfully to LA’s. Members, the public and planning officers should expect this facility to be fully functional as a matter of routine, a tool that exemplifies the work of one of the Council’s most important functions rather than being static with a potential for live embarrassment. There are also presentation and access issues around the Web Portal’s Planning Section that are referred to under Customer Service below.

### **Recommendations**

- West Lancs should if possible novate the contract with IDOX from BTLs in order to benefit from a more direct contractual relationship
- Engage with IDOX to undertake a full audit of the use of the planning system as well as provide a cost/benefit analysis of on-premise v hosted delivery

- Following the audit, West Lancs should commission a formal programme of training on the Uniform system for all planning and planning support staff
- WLBC should consider the need to upgrade display screen equipment for planning staff and within environments used for planning committee meetings
- Establish a user group of district councils that utilise the same systems. Its purpose would be to provide collective leverage that focuses on sharing operational practices; intelligence, problems and workaround solutions to system applications, pilot test updates and sign off regardless of whether the management of IT systems are externalised
- Identify lead officers from within other LA's who are familiar with IDOX Uniform and commission them to provide regular training for planners on a regional or bespoke basis.
- IT facilities and access to the Idox case management system should be reviewed to enable Planning Support and Customer services to provide a wider range and deeper level of service
- The look and feel of the Planning service web planning portal requires fundamental change to facilitate the promotion of the Planning Service as part of the One Council Vision and to enhance customer access and understanding.
- IT systems should support the easy uploading of large files
- The Planning Portal (MHLG) function, templates and financial transaction services should be assessed by Planning and Finance to determine which links may offer efficiency savings in monetary and work load transfer terms.
- CIL resources should be deployed to invest in broadband infrastructure to enable remote working by the Council and support sustaining and growing local business.
- The Council ensure that IT can support virtual site assessments and presentations to the Planning Committee.

# Appendix A: Customer experience maps

Customer experience maps: WLBC Planning Services												
Objectives, scope & journey type	Building a concrete garage on my property					Customer segment	Domestic customer: Certificate of Lawfulness					
Moments of truth												
Key Journey Steps	Reviewed website	Rang Council general number	Email	Email from Business Support	Chaser email from Business Support	Form submitted	Email response to form	3 phonecalls	Form resubmitted by hand	Email response	Planning officer visit	Certificate received
Actions, feelings, thoughts and reactions at each step	Fairly sure I didn't need planning permission. Checked on the website. Still not totally sure but I thought I needed a Certificate of Lawfulness, which I'd never heard of before.	Rang the general Council number from my address book to be certain. He said I should email with as much detail as possible. Feeling fairly optimistic.	Wrote a detailed email about what I wanted to do. Still feeling fairly optimistic.	Received email from "Planning" saying I needed to apply for a Certificate of Lawfulness with the form provided. My mother had sadly died so I didn't respond immediately.	A few weeks later, I received a reminder email with the form from "Planning" and this reminded me to take action.	I submitted the form, with a sketch showing where the garage would be placed next to the house and a written description including the measurements. I still felt fairly optimistic.	I received a detailed reply with "a great long list of what had not been done properly". I felt like giving up. What they were asking for, for a garage seemed. The cost was mentioned at this point, and hadn't been mentioned before. We also had to pay to download the OS maps. If my partner hadn't been able to draw plans, I would have had to pay someone.	I was a bit confused about what I needed to complete the form correctly, so I rang Planning a number of times. The person kindly gave me their direct number so I could speak to them. I had to ring 3 or 4 times. They were very nice but I felt I was bothering them.	It took all day, but me and my partner were able to submit the form. We felt that what we needed to supply was "excessive" and "seemed laborious" e.g. a floorplan and to scale plans just for a garage! It seemed an awful lot of effort for something so simple". Also seemed a lot of money. Especially as we know other councils don't charge. We had to supply 3 sets of printouts which was frustrating as our printer is really slow. They said this was legally required.	I received an email saying we would hear by Feb 4. I was glad to hear from them but a little frustrated that we wouldn't hear until then.	A Planning Officer came round taking photos. She was very nice. I felt this must be we were making progress.	The certificate arrived 2 or 3 weeks earlier than they said it would! I was very pleased - we could now get on with it e.g. applying to Lancashire Council for the dropped kerb.
Emotional Journey												
Touchpoints	Website	Contact centre	Business Support	Business Support	Business Support	Certificate of lawfulness form	Business Support	Business Support	Certificate of lawfulness form	Business Support	Planning Officer	
Objectives, scope & journey type	Placing LPG tank in front garden					Customer segment	Domestic customer: Applying for Planning Permission					
Moments of truth												
Key Journey Steps	Contacted Calor Gas	Rang Planning department	Checked website	Submitted Certificate of Lawfulness	Email response to form	Supplied additional information	Email response	Certificate of Lawfulness refused	Submitted request for Planning permission	Planning permission received		
Actions, feelings, thoughts and reactions at each step	They mentioned planning permission might be needed.	I contacted Planning (my son's in the building trade, so he had some ideas who I needed to speak to) to check what I needed to do. I was referred to the guidance on the website.	Being a layman, I struggled a bit to understand the information on the website. But since it was going in the front garden, I realised I would need some sort of permission. I wrongly thought that a certificate of lawfulness was the right way to go.	I filled in the form, and paid the fee via the Planning Portal. I mentioned in my application, that I knew it wasn't within permitted development rights but that I thought that I needed to do this certificate rather than apply for planning permission.	Received a response from a Planning Advisor saying they had checked the information and that they needed more plans and diagrams. It was clear what they needed. I felt like things were progressing well.	I sent in the other items that were asked for.	I received an email saying they now had everything that was needed and that I would have a response within 8 weeks.	I received notification 1 day before the 8 week deadline that the certificate had been refused since the work wasn't within permitted development rights and that I needed to apply for full planning permission. I really wish they'd told me this at the initial check. I had even mentioned this in my application. I had to delay the work and would now be paying twice.	Straightforward to fill in. I just wish I'd done known I needed to do this in the first place.	Notified after 5 weeks that I had planning permission. I was so glad I could now go ahead with installation and thankfully because of Covid it hadn't been a problem delaying the work.		
Emotional Journey												
Touchpoints	Calor Gas	Business Support	Website	Certificate of Lawfulness form	Business Support	Business Support						