



**EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE: 6 SEPTEMBER 2022**

Report of: Corporate Director of Place & Community

Relevant Portfolio Holder: Cllr Anne Fennell

**Contact for further information: Paul Charlson (Extn. 5246)
(paul.charlson@westlancs.gov.uk)**

SUBJECT: PLANNING SERVICES REVIEW UPDATE REPORT

Wards Affected: Borough wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 To update Members on progress with implementing the recommendations of the Planning Services review.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 That the Update on progress with implementing the recommendations of the Planning Services review be noted.

2.2 That future progress reports be reported via the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Members Update, unless there are specific recommendations that need consideration by this Committee and Cabinet.

3.0 BACKGROUND

3.1 Cabinet agreed the implementation of the recommendations from the Planning Services Review Report in June 2021. A working group was then established to drive forward the implementation of the recommendations at that time supported by Red Quadrant, which aimed to create capacity and drive forward implementation. The detail of this has been previously shared with Members which focused on each of the recommendations that addressed:

- Enforcement

- Pre-application Process
 - Interface with Business Support
 - Complaint Handling
 - Customer Self-Service
 - Workforce Planning
- 3.2 At the heart of each theme is the use of existing and new technology to both make processes more efficient and enable customers to self-serve, improving communication and engagement and delivering a range of training for Officers and Members.
- 3.3 The Planning Review Implementation Project officially commenced in October 2021, with an expected completion date of November 2022. However, a great deal has changed within the service since the last update was provided to Members which has had a significant impact on delivery of the project plan and relevant timescales.
- 3.4 It was agreed at Executive Overview and Scrutiny Committee in January 2022 that a further update would be provided in early Autumn.

4.0 CURRENT POSITION

- 4.1 The service has implemented the new corporate staff structure, which has resulted in a new management team, all of which are new to the service and have only been in post since no earlier than April 2022. This period has also seen significant changes to staffing levels, which has resulted in difficulties in maintaining the previous performance of both development control and planning policy functions. However, the amount of work undertaken by all staff in the service (and those that support the service) cannot be underestimated during this time and must be acknowledged. The new management have also had to quickly familiarise themselves with the review and address the staffing challenges.
- 4.2 Despite these challenges, the team has made great strides to improve collaborative working, performance practices and embed a one council approach to service delivery. This has been completed in a very short time, underpins a great deal of the work contained in the project plan and is reflected in those actions marked as 'in progress' or 'completed', which demonstrates progress since the last report.
- 4.3 It has therefore been necessary to review the project plan, including all 56 main actions that were originally further sub-divided into 210 individual tasks with approximate completion dates. This has been a significant task, however one that has been necessary to ensure our new management team understand what is expected from the review and can own and drive forward delivery of the action plan. The service risks outlined below have also necessitated a focus away from certain aspects of the project plan (i.e., pre application advice and legal service level agreement) to the more critical service and corporate risks that have become apparent. This has resulted in

some tasks being reprioritised in favour of others that will address these service risks. Accordingly, every action, and the corresponding target date, has been reviewed to ensure this is realistic and achievable within available resource. Members can be assured that managers and the team are motivated and very determined to realise the project plan, but it is critical that the timescales remain reasonable so that the required change can be managed effectively.

4.4 Key tasks undertaken to date include:

- Use of shared knowledge and support from neighbouring authorities in application and validation processes.
- Change of relevant processes within the IDOX software to improve the efficient handling of documents resulting in more capacity for business support staff. Officers have also been given the functionality and required permissions to carry out their own indexing enabling them to upload documentation directly into IDOX reducing the need for double handling / hand offs to other service areas.
- Creation of new and regular management links between the Planning service and the managers of relevant Council services – tree management, GIS services, business support.
- Measures are robustly in place to ensure that officers feel supported in their work, that their case loads are being managed and opportunities are available to share good practice and positive feedback. This is done through individual Application Case Reviews held with all operational staff to allocate applications fairly and to monitor performance. These also serve to provide staff with support with their workload.
- A review of home working has been completed that links in with the Council's health and wellbeing agenda and a standard approach has been agreed ensuring that there is regular connectivity between officers and their line managers. Further work linked to lone working is also scheduled to take place shortly.
- Planning lists display Ward information to enable Councillors to readily become aware of planning applications.
- Officers are being supported to expand their knowledge and improve their experience through access to online events, webcasts and undertaking further CPD activities underpinned by robust case load reviews.
- A Technical Officer has now been recruited who will be supporting staff, processes and systems. This role will also be able to undertake some of the key tasks within the project plan freeing up officer time and reinforcing knowledge sharing and business continuity.
- The Officer Working Group for the review project has been revitalised, meeting on a regular basis to monitor the delivery of the action plan.
- Additional resource secured in February 2022 to increase officer capacity within the team.
- Delivered Member training to the new Planning Committee.
- Introduced appointment system for Members to be kept informed of planning matters in their wards.
- Revised fees and charges for planning service.

- Recruited new the management structure.

4.5 Throughout this, recruitment and retention remain the single greatest risk to the service and the review project. Without available resource, the service will continue to struggle to progress the implementation of the review recommendations and meet service delivery. Concerns around capacity have previously been shared with Members and the lack of available Planning Officers, both locally and nationally, remains a key concern and significant challenge for the service. Officers have therefore implemented several measures to ensure key aspects of the service have been maintained to minimise service risks. These include:

- Use of agency workers to bolster staff resources to determine applications.
- Approaches made to authorities in Merseyside and Lancashire to seek any spare capacity to assist, but those approached were unable to help.
- Job descriptions have been revised to attract new graduates and aid staff development and retention.
- Increase in the hours of those officers working part time or on reduced hours.
- At time of writing, a further recruitment exercise is underway for all vacant posts, but it should be noted [and whilst not directly relevant to the review project] recruitment to several key posts within the Planning Policy team has been achieved.

4.6 The full amended project plan is provided at Appendix 1 to this report, and if agreed by Members will be used to track future progress and provide updates. Of the 55 main actions derived from the original Red Quadrant recommendations:

- 20% are 'Completed'
- 25% are 'In Progress'
- 55% are 'On Target'; some of these actions have yet to be started, but all are scheduled in the project plan.

4.7 Those actions marked as 'in progress' above have varied completion dates due to their nature, with the latest to be completed by May 2023. Other actions will be addressed as detailed in the plan. Completion of the overall action plan is anticipated by 31 March 2024. However, the substantive amount of work would be completed before this date. These timeframes will be kept under constant review and amended accordingly to reflect the resources available.

5.0 NEXT STEPS

5.1 The Officer Working Group has been revitalised and will continue to meet on a regular basis and monitor the delivery of the actions. Progress will continue to be reported into the Our Future; Our People Transformation Programme Board and it is proposed that future progress reports will be reported via the

Overview & Scrutiny Members Update, unless there are specific recommendations that need consideration by this Committee and Cabinet.

5.2 Attention will continue to be given to those aspects of the service that generate the greatest operational risk and these will be reflected in the project plan that will be presented to Members. The focus over the next three months will be on reviewing the relevant actions in the plan, which will include a revised and updated Enforcement Charter. Specific attention will also be given to:

- Ensuring customers who wish to access information linked to the planning service can do so through the website and planning portal and that existing links work as expected.
- Review the lone working policy linked to home working.
- Review and support the requirement for Member Training, ensuring that options are available to improve and embed knowledge to support their planning obligations.

6.0 SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS

6.1 The recommendations look to modernise and make the service more efficient whilst maximising income opportunities and providing a clear offer for customers making the service more sustainable and improving customer satisfaction.

6.2 This report has no significant impacts upon crime and disorder.

7.0 FINANCIAL AND RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

7.1 The additional costs associated with recruiting temporary planning staff will be met from vacant posts and the reserve, should this be necessary.

8.0 RISK ASSESSMENT

8.1 A corporate risk is currently in place in relation to staff recruitment and the corresponding impacts on the service. This in turn impacts on the ability of the service to deliver against the action plan. In mitigation, Officers are currently trying all available options to secure resource, which will also include a continual review of the action plan itself. The risk of not taking forward the recommendations will continue to impact on service delivery. Regular monitoring will enable progress to be mapped and resources reviewed.

9.0 HEALTH AND WELLBEING IMPLICATIONS

9.1 If additional staff resources are not provided to manage the current vacancies, daily workloads, backlog of cases and the recommendations of the review, the quantity of work has and could continue to have a direct impact on the health and wellbeing of the current staff. Management is closely linked to Human

Resources colleagues to ensure continued engagement and support for staff. The addition of extra resources into the team will help to create some capacity to manage this work moving forward, subject to successful recruitment.

Background Documents

There are no background documents (as defined in Section 100D(5) of the Local Government Act 1972) to this Report.

Equality Impact Assessment

There is no direct impact on members of the public, employees, elected members and / or stakeholders by virtue of this report. Therefore an Equality Impact Assessment is not required.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Planning Service Review Summary Level Project Plan