Report of: Head of Planning and Regulatory Services

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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 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.

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). 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   The Planning Review Implementation Project officially commenced in October 2021 and has an expected completion date of March 2024. This is owing to several changes within the service throughout the duration of the project which has had a significant impact on delivery of the plan and relevant timescales. A report was last presented to this Committee in September 2022 and this report is submitted at the (then) request of this Committee to provide oversight of the progress made to date.

4.0   CURRENT POSITION

4.1   Whilst the service has previously seen significant change in staffing levels, which resulted in challenges across the service, staff turnover has stabilised substantially during the last 12 months. This, in itself, has led to a great number of service risks being either addressed and/or reduced. That said, and like many other local authorities, recruitment challenges in the Development Management service remain and the risks are referenced later in this report. However, the amount of work undertaken by all staff in the service (and those that support the service) in both maintaining the service and progressing the review cannot be underestimated and should be acknowledged.

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 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 considerable progress since the last report to this Committee in September 2022.

Progress of Project Plan Actions Sept 2022
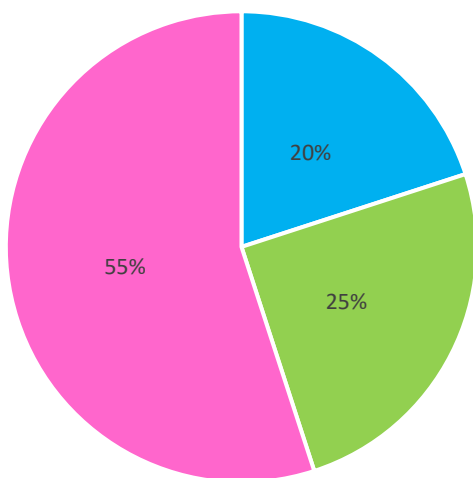
- Completed: 20%
- In progress: 25%
- Not Yet Started: 55%

Progress of Project Plan Actions May 2023
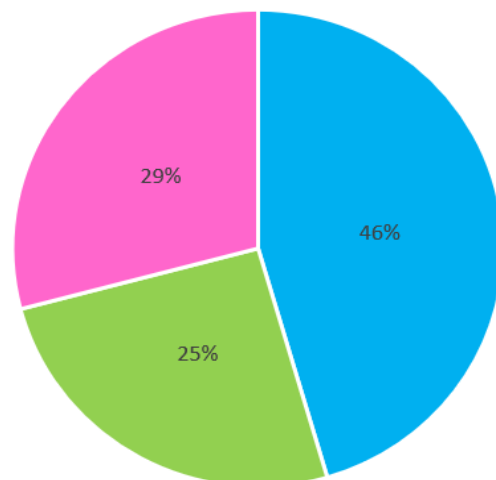
- Completed: 46%
- In progress: 25%
- On Target: 29%

4.3 It has been necessary to continually 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 resulted in some tasks being reprioritised to address service risks and help to support improvements. A critical path remains in place to ensure visibility of all milestones throughout the lifecycle of the project. Members can be assured that managers and the team remain motivated and 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:

- Working with the Planning Support Team to undertake a benchmarking exercise to understand the pressures and challenges with the validation process and the risks associated with these timeframes.
- An improvement plan has been put in place and support commissioned via Terraquest to remove the backlog of validations in the system.
- A review of the Enforcement Process has taken place, with a full end-to-end process map detailing the steps taken by the Planning Service and the Planning Support Team.
- A new Enforcement Charter has been created and approved by Planning Committee and Council on 5th April 2023.
- Further meetings/training have taken place throughout quarter four of 2022/23 with Sefton Council, with the aim of investigating practicalities of developing and procuring a system that works for everyone in relation to IDOX.
- Further work has taken place to understand the challenges around the Enforcement Complaint process and platform. The ability to upload Jpeg photographs would support the ability to assess such requests – this is underway with LCCD for implementation.
- Approximately 50% of applications are returned to the agent due discrepancies and missing information in the form. However, this process was cumbersome and resulted in many applications remaining pending for some time. A revised letter and process has been implemented ensure incomplete applications are returned promptly to reduce unnecessary impacts on the Planning Support service that were causing validation delays. A comprehensive FAQ document is also developed and tailored to the gaps and common thread of queries to reduce contacts with the service to improve response times.
- All Planning Service letter templates have been reviewed, revised and amended to ensure all are accurate and up to date.
- All planning notices now include a QR code to directly signpost the public to the relevant application on the Planning Portal.
- Use of shared knowledge and support from neighbouring authorities in application and validation processes.
- Further changes and system upgrades have taken place of relevant processes within the IDOX software to improve the efficient handling of documents.

- Measures are robustly in please 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.
- Several new Planning team members have been recruited, including additional dedicated Legal support staff. This has already seen improvements in the pace and frequency of enforcement action.

4.5 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 recommendations:

- **46% are 'Completed'**
- **25% are 'In Progress'**
- **29% are 'On Target'**

4.6 Those actions marked as 'in progress' above have varied completion dates due to their nature, with the latest to be completed by March 2024. 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 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/or 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. The focus over the next three months will be on reviewing the relevant actions in the plan, which will include improvements to validation turnaround times. This will be supported by the commission of Terraquest to remove the current backlog of submissions.

5.3 The strategic focus for the next six months will be on the following themes:

- Pre-Application Service – Total of 7 Recommendations
- Elected Member Training – Total of 3 Recommendations
- ICT Infrastructure – Total of 13 Recommendations

5.4   Specific attention will also be given to more general themes as below:

- 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.
- Seek out opportunities to review and improve the website content, design and layout in line with the WLBC website transformation programme of work. [Chorley BC has been cited as an example of best practice.]
- Review and support the requirement for Member Training, ensuring that options are available to improve and embed knowledge to support their planning obligations.
- Work will continue to improve the enforcement service beyond the requirements of the review stated above.
- Accordingly, increased public messagaing is planned to promote the Enforcement Charter tailored to stakeholders and varying audiences.
- Creation of an Agents Forum to improve communication and transparency between the service and relevant planning agents.
- Implementation of a Duty Officer role within to provide improved access to the service. This will provide generic advice and support but will not advise on specific matters that would otherwise be subject to the pre-application service. Embedding this as a robust function will provide several improvements across the service as well as to the Planning Support team.

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.

8.0   RISK ASSESSMENT

8.1   A corporate risk remains 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 and wider service aims. In mitigation, Officers are currently trying all available options to secure resource, which will also include a continual review of the action plan itself.

8.2   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