



**Report To:** Planning Portfolio Holder  
**Lead Officer:** Planning and New Communities Director

10 August 2015

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## **Performance 2014/15 and Progress in Service Improvements**

### **Purpose**

1. To update the Planning Portfolio Holder on a number of service issues and progress concerning planning and building control performance and the delegation of planning decisions to officers.
2. This is not a key decision.

### **Recommendations**

3. It is recommended that the Portfolio Holder notes the performance issues facing the planning service and progress made towards addressing them.

### **Reasons for Recommendations**

4. Members need to be aware of the increasing challenges facing the planning and building control services and consider ways in which they may work with officers in addressing them.

### **Performance**

5. Attached are summary graphs of performance in 2014/15 for the processing of planning applications, planning enforcement cases and building control approvals. They indicate the following key features:
  - Planning application workloads have remained at high levels and there was an 18% increase in the number of planning decisions;
  - Performance for minor and other application categories saw a marked decline;
  - Planning enforcement performance remained steady;
  - Appeals performance has noticeably improved and
  - Building control applications declined.
6. These features have been reported by other councils in the region. The recent changes in PD regulations have led to new forms of planning decisions being required by property owners and prospective purchasers. The housing market has also encouraged growth in the numbers of house adaptations and extensions, as occupiers make better use of their current homes, rather than purchase a new one. These have added pressures to planning officers' workloads, so affecting performance on minor applications.

7. Building control applications declined due to increased activity of commercial competitors. This has been noted in the preparations for the sharing of building control services with partner authorities. It is hoped the new shared service will make it more resilient to market pressures and adaptable to changes.
8. These trends for both planning and building control have been noted to continue into the current year, and will be reported to a future meeting. An additional, recent workload pressure is the growth in number of housing applications on land outside of current or emerging planning policy in the Local Plan. These applications, although few in number at the moment are likely to increase workloads in processing applications and responding to appeals.
9. The pressure on performance during a period of rapid changes in the nature and complexity of workloads has come at a time when the regional demand for planning skills and competent planners has been greater than ever before. Due to high staff turnover and vacancy levels, the service has had to rely on private contractors, with extremely variable results. It has been challenging to plan and allocate staff resources to meet fast changing workloads. This has affected the flow of work, created some backlogs and therefore affected performance.

#### **Response to Performance Issues**

10. The planning service is now running with unacceptably high individual staff workloads. In the short-term and as an urgent measure, capacity is being bought in by the use of external consultants:
  - Contract staff
  - External planning validation service and
  - A team of external appeals specialists.
11. This additional capacity will assist in reducing individual workloads to allow backlogs of cases and enquiries to be tackled, and training on improved processes and system upgrades.
12. The duty planner service is being transferred to an appointment system to help manage customer expectations, provide tracking of enquiries and reduce the number of lost and repeat calls.
13. In the autumn, a series of process and system upgrades will be introduced that will improve the ease with which customers may use the web pages, and gain information on progress, plan amendments, and consultations. These will assist in working towards a paperless planning office and bring considerable productivity gains and efficiencies in the processing of pre-applications and applications.
14. A consolidated recruitment campaign for planning officers of all grades has been launched. Market supplements have been applied where appropriate. Should this be successful, then new starters will join the Council in the autumn.

15. It is intended, therefore, that the purchase of additional capacity, process improvements and recruitment will put the planning service in a much better position to face future challenges.
16. It is encouraging that, despite an increase in the number of appeals, there have been more dismissals, so indicating improvement of judgement in planning decisions by members and officers.

### **Housing Land Supply**

17. The deferral in the Local Plan timetable has, as expected, raised additional interest from landowners and agents in bringing forward more sites as planning applications. A number of complex appeals are likely result, such as at Foxton and Melbourn. Officers are responding to this by commissioning external specialists from outside the local area to advise members and officers and represent the Council. Our team is working ever more closely with County Council colleagues in the negotiation of planning obligations. Senior managers are meeting regularly to review cases and improve working arrangements. In addition, a series of operational workshops have been arranged to consider s106 requirements for significant applications, which bring together parish clerks, education, highways, transport, health and other infrastructure providers. Further advice is awaited from the Planning Officers Society, who are reviewing officer reports, where a 5 year under supply of housing is a material consideration.

### **Review of Planning Decision Delegations**

18. A review of how planning decisions are delegated to officers and referred to members is planned. It is intended to bring forward for members' approval suggested changes to address the following issues:
  - Desire to align delegation arrangements across the planning committees and joint committees
  - Need to clarify the role of local members and parish councils
  - Retain a simple process that is robust from challenge.

The current delegation arrangements incorporate parish councils, as third parties, into the decision making process, through their automatic referral to Planning Committee, which raises a number of concerns about the role of local members and integrity of the Council as Local Planning Authority. The review of delegation should resolve these concerns and also have the side benefit that planning officers will be able to focus their energy on cases most significant to the district.

19. The suggested programme for approval of changes is:

Meeting	Date	Decision
Planning Portfolio Holder	8 September	Approve draft for consultations

Joint Committees & parishes	Sept/October	Make comment
Planning Committee	4 November	Make comment
Planning Portfolio Holder	10 November	Recommend to Council
Council	26 November	Approve

### **Implications**

20. In the writing of this report, taking into account financial, legal, staffing, risk management, equality and diversity, climate change, community safety and any other key issues, the following implications have been considered: -

#### **Financial**

21. The costs are contained within budgeted resources for this financial year.

#### **Legal**

22. There are no specific legal implications arising from this report.

#### **Staffing**

23. Training of staff will as much as possible be 'in the work' to prevent loss of productive effort. Current high workloads are untenable in the long term without affecting the stress and morale of staff. All improvements to process and working arrangements are being made with the fullest involvement of staff.

#### **Risk Management**

24. There is a considerable risk from not addressing the challenges facing the service. However, in doing so, there will be a risk of short-term disruptions to service as improvements are introduced and staff learn to work with new systems and structures.

#### **Equality and Diversity**

25. The recruitment campaign and working arrangements allow for full flexibility to meet specific requirements of current staff and candidates.

#### **Climate Change**

26. No specific implications.

#### **Effect on Strategic Aims**

27. The recommendation seek to achieve the Council's three A's

### **Background Papers - None**

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