

**Report To:** Overview and Scrutiny Committee  
**Lead Officer:** Planning and New Communities Director

7 April 2016

---

## Planning Performance and Progress in Service Improvements

### Purpose

1. To update the Scrutiny and Overview Committee on performance and service improvement within the Development Management Service.
2. This is not a key decision.

### Recommendations

3. It is recommended that the committee notes Quarter 4 2015 performance and proposed service improvement measures for the Development Management Service.

### Reasons for Recommendations

4. Members need to be aware of the challenges facing the Development Management Service and the improvements that are being put in place to achieve an excellent Service.

### Performance

5. The summary of performance figures for the last quarter in 2015 is included in **Appendix 1**, these show an improvement over this period. Performance was last reported in August 2015, this report outlines progress made in service improvement subsequently and planned improvements for the next 6 months. These improvements are essential in supporting the team in achieving required growth in performance moving forward.

### Laying a solid foundation for Service Improvement

6. Looking back to the previous Planning Portfolio report (August 2015) on Performance 2014/15 and Progress In Service Improvements. Planning application volumes and complexity of cases have remained high as a combination of local demand and the 5 year land supply referenced, in paragraph 17 of the August 2015 report.
7. Conversely the measures, which have been put in place over the past year, have laid a solid foundation to support our ambition for a high performing planning service. We have now started to yield improvements in our performance (evidenced in **Appendix 1**).

### **Technical Support Team and Validation**

8. Following the Review of the Department's Support Service in 2014/5, the new Technical Support team including the Team leader Technical Support Officer post was implemented between June 2015 and September 2015. This has now enabled application validation to be undertaken by this team freeing up planning officer time to focus on assessment of applications. It will also help improve consistency in validation, to the benefit of applicants.
9. The transition of validation to the Technical Support Team has been well managed, and the team are currently engaged in a phased training plan. We have also benefitted from outsourcing elements of validation to Uttlesford District Council, which has freed up time to prepare, deliver and engage in training. We have over the last two months experienced a short term increase in time taken to process validation of applications. We have communicated this to applicants and both planners and the technical support team have made commendable progress in getting new applications determined in time. The team agreed a target of 5 days for validating new applications by end of February 2016.

### **System Improvement**

10. A further feature of the Support Services Review was the creation of a System Support Lead officer post, implemented in July 2015. The upgrade to a new build of the Service System APAS, in addition to delivering a hosted environment was completed by October 2015. These improvements will provide the necessary infrastructure to support further ICT improvements for the Service area and our new ways of working.
11. The system upgrades did affect performance and created a short-term backlog in processing applications for a period last year. This was difficult to avoid, as the System was down for 10 days in October 2015. However on going commitment from the team, management and effective communication helped minimise impact on customers.

### **Team and staffing**

12. The position regarding recruitment has also changed since the August 2015 report; at this time we had a number of vacancies and a number of agency staff covering some of these posts. Recruitment subsequently has been largely successful and will provide continuity for the team moving forward. These include a Head of Development Management in November 2015, which will strengthen Service leadership and drive forward the Director's ambition for excellent service across all areas of the Planning department.
13. Also in November 2015 five project officers were appointed across the Directorate, three of which are in Development Management. The post holders were recruited within a "grow your own" staff development initiative, which was introduced to

respond to a recognised shortage in planners. Their training and development plans will include a period of experience in all of the Planning sections in the department so they have an exposure to the other aspects of planning including New Communities, the Consultancy team and Local Plans.

14. We have also recruited to two senior planner posts within the Service and are currently only holding one vacancy for a principal planner post, which we are actively working on recruiting to.

### **Looking to the future**

15. We are encouraged by growth in performance (see **Appendix 1**) and are confident that our improvement programme will continue to grow the success of our service both quantitatively and qualitatively.
16. We have been developing new processes, which with the new Build implemented, we can now adapt our ICT system to manage workflow. The application processes are being redesigned to make them efficient as possible. This will enable us to spend more time on assessment of proposals, including at pre-application stage and increasing effective engagement with partners and the community. We are aiming to have improvements in place for all types of applications and the team trained in a consistent approach by May 2016. Meanwhile we are actively identifying and managing significant and complex cases, including a forward plan for committee. A review of the scheme of delegation was undertaken in March 2016.

### **Project Management Approach**

17. Drawing on best practice across our department on project managing applications, such as Planning Performance Agreements and successful pre-application engagement with parishes, our partners and the public. We have set up a project to look at how we can use our experience to develop project management frameworks to increase emphasis on delivery, taking sites from inception stage through to delivery. As part of this we are developing category management of areas with high development activity. We will be implementing changes and training staff within the next 6 months.

### **Performance Management**

18. We are embedding a bottom up and top down approach to performance management, which continues to draw lessons learnt from complaints and compliments and well as from how officers process cases. All staff have objectives and training agreed as part of the Corporate process, these are regularly reviewed at monthly 1 to 1s. In addition a project has been set up to review departmental training, supporting officers in making qualitative assessments of applications.
19. We have met with the PAS (Planning Advisory Service), who has agreed to work with us to implement their Quality Framework which seeks to measure the quality and

effectiveness of processing decisions as well as benchmarking with relevant high performing planning authorities.

20. Finally, we have recruited a temporary resource to manage and close down out of time applications by July 2016. This will also identify any further lessons learned, which we will seek to address in order to minimise delays in processing applications in the future.

**Six Month Forward Plan for improvement**

21. In summary the timeframe for improvements are as follows:

<b>Measure</b>	<b>Target timeframe</b>
Validation within 5 days	End February 2016
Scheme of Delegation	March 2016
PAS quality framework and benchmarking	April 2016
New application process and System workflow and improvements	May 2016
Implementing best practice project management for significant sites including Development Delivery Agreements	June 2016
Closure of out of time applications	July 2016

**Implications**

22. 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**

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

**Legal**

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

**Staffing**

25. All improvements to process and working arrangements are being made with involvement of staff and training will be included as an integral part of implementation.

**Risk Management**

26. Whilst improvement has improvement in the last quarter there is still room for further improvement, the measured outlined above to be implemented in the next 6 months are essential to enable the team to build on what have recently been achieved.

**Equality and Diversity**

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

**Climate Change**

28. No specific implications.

**Effect on Strategic Aims**

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

**Background Papers - None**

**Report Author:** Julie Baird – Head of Development Management  
Telephone: (01954) 713144