

Report to:	Scrutiny and Overview Committee 11 November 2021
Lead Cabinet Member:	Councillor Dr. Tumi Hawkins Lead Cabinet Member for Planning Policy and Delivery
Lead Officer:	Stephen Kelly, Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development

Planning Performance Overview for Period from 1 September 2019 to 30 September 2021.

Executive Summary

1. This report provides an overview of SCDC planning performance in relation to decisions made on planning applications during the time period between 1 September 2019 and 30 September 2021. It includes information and analysis in relation to the numbers of decisions made within the governments statutory targets, numbers of decisions made with and without extensions of time (EOTs) together with the numbers of applications on hand/outstanding at the end of each month within the assessment period. Whilst the government’s target indicator for decision times is not the single determinant of the “quality of the service” it remains an indicator that government values and upon which national performance standards are based. The use of EOT to extend the “benchmark” statutory indicators around decision times has in recent years become widespread across local planning authorities (LPAs).
2. The report has been prepared in response to a motion from Councillor Heather Williams at Full Council on 23 September 2021 which was referred to Scrutiny and Overview Committee.
3. In the period September 2019 – September 2021, the shared planning service received 8,887 applications in SCDC area. It also made 8,586 decisions. The period corresponds with a time of considerable disruption across the service and local government as it sought to progress with its integration (of systems and teams) and address the effects/limitations/changed practices arising from the Covid 19 Pandemic. The data that accompanies the report (Appendix A) points to times over the last 24 months of particular challenge – and the consequent effect on throughput – whilst also highlighting how the overall number of decisions made each month has remained broadly consistent across the whole assessment period. More recent data also points to some positive signs - with September 2021 representing the highest number of decisions within the 24-month assessment period as additional resources and measures have started to take effect.

4. The data shows the pattern in the use of EOTs. It also shows how the total numbers of applications on hand has increased through 2020-2021 compared to 2019 -despite the significant commitment of the team. Whilst the numbers on hand of Minor and Other applications increased during 2020- 2021, it can be seen from the data that September 2021 also saw a 28 % reduction in the numbers of Other applications outstanding. The numbers of Major applications on hand has meanwhile remained stable during the assessment period. The reduction in Other applications as well as the increase in the total number of decisions made in September 2021 shows a more positive trajectory starting to take effect, as a result of recent initiatives and new additional staff to fill vacant posts.
5. In recognition of the challenges facing the service, a planned service wide review has been brought forward from 2022 to 2021, with the support of the Transformation Team. Changes have also been made which seek to optimise the use of the available planning resource and to tackle areas contributing to delays. The service is also currently reviewing options for tackling the legacy of those applications which remain undetermined for some time whilst continuing to seek early determination of new and recently submitted proposals.
6. Key Decision
No

Recommendations

7. It is recommended that Scrutiny and Overview Committee note the contents of this report.

Reasons for Recommendations

8. This is an information update report only and has been prepared in response to a Full Council motion. There are no decisions for Scrutiny and Overview Committee arising from the report.

Details

Background

9. For the Full Council meeting on 23 September 2021, a motion was tabled by Councillor Heather Williams that:
“At the next meeting of Full Council a report will be presented to Council in relation to planning performance. It will clearly show the number of applications determined within the statutory time period, how many of those had extensions agreed and how many applications were awaiting determination at the end of each month. This report will cover the last 24 months (September 2019 to September 2021)”

The motion was referred to Scrutiny and Overview Committee and accordingly this report has been prepared in response.

10. The dataset that provides the basis for the report is contained in Appendix A and is cross-referenced throughout the report. This includes information on numbers of planning applications determined within the defined timescales by category together with numbers of decisions made with and without extensions of time (EOTs) and numbers of planning applications outstanding/on hand at the end of each month within the assessment period of September 2019 to September 2021. Analysis and contextual background are also provided.
11. The assessment period covered by the report was one of significant change for the Shared Planning Service and included the implementation of the new planning software system and further ICT upgrade projects, the creation of the three Development Management (DM) planning teams and merging of the former City and SCDC Technical Support Teams. In parallel, this part of the service was significantly affected by issues and outcomes arising from Covid19/lockdown during 2020/2021, including the validation backlog and changes to the operation of Planning Committees, as the Council moved to virtual Committees in spring 2020 and then to in person/hybrid Committees in spring 2021.

Overall number of planning applications decided

12. The Shared Planning Service received some 8,887 applications for consideration between 1 September 2019 and 30 September 2021. In the same period, it determined 8,586 applications. The appendices point to variations in throughput over the two years but overall through the 24-month assessment period the output of the DM Teams has remained reasonably consistent in terms of the overall/average numbers of planning applications decided per month. Using the data in Chart 1 in Appendix A as a basis, the average number of decisions made on a per monthly basis between September and December 2019 was 306; for 2020 the average per month across the year was 291 and for 2021 for the period from January to September, it was 335. The lowest number of decisions made during the assessment period were in February and May 2020, at 165 and 186 respectively. This period coincided with the implementation of the Uniform/IDOX planning software system upgrade and the onset of Covid19/lockdown and issues arising from the implementation of lockdown measures - including reduced numbers of site visits carried out by case officers, a period when no site notices were posted and the change from in person to virtual Planning Committees.
13. September 2021 saw the highest number of total decisions made during the whole 24-month assessment period at 406 decisions made in September 2021, compared to the next highest monthly figure in the assessment period which was October 2020 at 374. This is likely to be an outcome of changes to processes – including restrictions on amendments - starting to take effect and the impact of the additional staff who have started with the service in recent months.

Numbers of applications decided within and outside statutory time periods

14. The total numbers of applications decided within the statutory time periods has, again, remained relatively consistent for most months during the assessment period, with 15 out of the 24 months period at 70% or more. There was a significant dip in performance in February - May 2020 when the percentage of overall number of decisions made within statutory periods ranged between 47% in February to 64% in May. The context for this is explained in paragraph 10 above. In 2021, following Scrutiny's consideration of the approach to EOT's and despite MHCLG's confirmation of its validity, the service changed its process around EOT in line with the recommendations of the internal audit report. There was also a reduction in the number of overall decisions made within the statutory time periods in the early part of 2021 -at 63% in January and 62% in February. This coincided with a period of staff turnover and some agency staff contracts not being renewed.
15. Chart 4 shows that in terms of the numbers of Major applications decided within the statutory period, these have remained relatively stable with performance generally above 75%. Chart 7 shows that for Minor Applications, performance has been more variable and affected by the validation backlog, changes to the EOT procedure in 2021 and variations in the available staff resource. The period of between February and May 2020 also reflects reduced performance which correlates with the planning system software upgrade and Covid 19/lockdown restrictions. Performance then improved but declined again between October 2020 and May 2021 because of a range of factors including a growing delay at the validation stage and higher staff turnover. Performance on the Others category of planning applications shows the same pattern of variations in performance as can be seen in Chart 10. A higher number of decisions were made from September 2020, with the same dip in performance during early 2020.

Extensions of Time

16. Chart 2 shows the number of EOTs relative to the number of total decisions/decisions made within the statutory time periods. The use of EOTs has increased over the assessment period. The use of EOTs was low during the 2019 part of the assessment period -at 21% in September 2019. The increase in EOTs began in March 2020, coinciding with the implementation of the new planning software system, process integration challenges which caused delays at the validation stage and the effect of Covid19/lockdown. By September 2020, EOTs were at 42% of total decisions, at January 2021 at 34% and July 2021 at 36%. Graph 1 shows the impact that the use of EOTs has had on planning performance. Alongside the shared planning service integration, in 2020 a number of exceptional factors also impacted upon decision times and required the increased use of EOT's. Agents and applicants recognised that travel and access restrictions for example meant officers could not undertake site visits, post site notices or visit the office to undertake activities critical to the process at that time such as scanning and printing operations and the processing of land charges records. This early delay in the validation phase continued through 2020 and meant that case officers were having to request EOTs almost as soon as they received applications. Following a successful development programme

in that team, through 2021, the validation performance has improved significantly so that this phase of the process is now substantially quicker. The service has also (see above) reviewed its processes for seeking EOT and some outstanding applications were accordingly caught (out of time) under the revised process.

17. In parallel with delays at the validation stage, the DM Teams also experienced a period of staff turnover and a number of vacant posts during the first part of 2021. Recruitment has been undertaken into vacant posts since early summer, with mixed success. Although the DM and Strategic Sites teams have been successful in recruiting senior planners, it has been difficult to recruit planners and a third recruitment round for planners is currently under way.
18. To optimise the use of the available staff resource, and to combat the very high caseloads being experienced by case officers, the Delivery Teams recently introduced a no amendments approach to planning applications and discharges of conditions, subject to a set of published criteria setting out the exceptional circumstances when amendments will be accepted. It is still too early to assess the impact that this is likely to have on the use of EOTs. Initial feedback has been mixed, with some agents beginning to decline to agree EOTs whilst for third parties, the reduction in the number of revisions to an application upon which they may wish to comment, could be viewed more positively.
19. In terms of Major planning applications, Chart 5 shows the total number of applications subject to EOTs as compared to those that were not. A high proportion of Major applications were subject to EOTs. This is not surprising given that these are the more complex types of applications, where the need for amendments and public re-consultation would normally be expected. Chart 6 shows the positive impact on performance that EOTs have had on performance on Major applications. Chart 8 shows the total number of Minor Applications subject to EOTs. The average has increased from 39% in September 2019 to 76% in more recent months. Chart 9 illustrates the positive impacts that use of EOTs has had on performance. Charts 11 and 12 show a similar pattern of the positive impacts of use of EOTs on Other categories of planning applications.

Number of applications on hand/outstanding

At the end of September 2021, the service had 1278 planning and related applications live and “on hand” for SCDC. This compares to 1027 in September 2019. Graph 1 shows that the number of applications on hand/outstanding has increased gradually since 2019. The main factors that have influenced this are highlighted in previous paragraphs. It should be noted that the number of Major planning applications has remained relatively stable in terms of numbers during the assessment period. The number of Minor planning applications outstanding has increased by 106 since 2019 and the number of Others by about 140 (this includes householders). The figures reflect turnover in application numbers but also some specific proposals that take some considerable time to resolve because of their complexity and history. Some cases were also impacted by the need, to focus on committee work stalled through the early stages of lockdown

(with up to four planning committees being held per month in summer 2020 across both Councils). The longstanding cases are not distributed evenly across the three area teams and the service is currently reviewing the most appropriate means to address these cases – and to remove them from officers current work in progress in order to reduce the adverse impact upon current officer caseloads.

Service Improvement and transformation programme

20. Despite a significant commitment by staff in the development management teams between September 2019 and 2021 the service has found that the “on hand” cases have increased, and that performance in terms of the determination of planning applications has suffered. The causes of these increases have been set out above.
21. In response, the service has made a number of material changes to its processes, ways of working and protocols. Considerable additional information has been moved online, the new Idox system is now, according to the supplier, being used effectively and a number of improvements from the validation process to Parish and Agent engagement are underway. The service has also brought forward its service wide review from 2022 to 2021. Additional resources are also now being deployed (including an external support partner) to explore how performance, and the on-hand work within the department can be managed down to create more positive conditions for officers, but also enhance the experience of using the shared planning service for all users, including members.
22. In conclusion, the assessment period contained a number of unusual and one-off type events which impacted on planning performance during this period. Whilst the number of overall decisions made has remained relatively consistent, with the highest number of decisions made during the 24-month assessment period having occurred in September 2021. The number of EOTs and number of planning applications on hand have increased overall during the assessment period (Minors and Others) However, September 2021 also saw a 28% reduction in Other applications. The variety of measures that have been introduced in recent months including the no amendments strategy appear to be starting to take effect and the recent trajectory is positive. The Planning Service transformation process is continuing to address these issues including through the proposed use of temporary agency staff, to focus on reducing the current DM backlog of applications as soon as possible, to reduce staff workloads and increase service capacity.

Appendices

Appendix A: Planning performance summary tables and graphs for period from 1 September 2019 to 30 September 2021:

Schedule of Charts and Graphs contained in Appendix A -

Chart 1 -Total Decisions vs Total Decided in Time -All Applications

Chart 2 -Total Applications Extended vs Not Extended -All Applications

Chart 3 – Extension Effects On Performance -All Applications

Chart 4- Total Decisions vs Total Decided in Time -Major Applications

Chart 5 -Total Applications Extended vs Not Extended Major Applications
Chart 6 -Extension Effects on Performance -Major Applications
Chart 7- Total Decisions vs Total Decided in Time -Minor Applications
Chart 8 -Total Applications Extended vs Not Extended -Minor Applications
Chart 9 -Extension Effects on Performance -Minor Applications
Chart 10 -Total Decisions vs Total Decided in Time -Other Applications
Chart 11 -Total Applications Extended vs Not Extended –Other Applications
Chart 12 -Extensions Effects on Performance -Other Applications
Graph 1 -On Hand Cases by Type
Graph 2 -On Hand Cases -Major Applications
Graph 3 -On hand Cases -Minor applications
Graph 4 -On hand Cases -Other Applications

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