

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the **Environment and Communities Committee**
held on Monday, 31st October, 2022 in the Committee Suite 1,2 & 3,
Westfields, Middlewich Road, Sandbach CW11 1HZ

PRESENT

Councillor M Warren (Chair)
Councillor S Akers Smith (Vice-Chair)

Councillors M Addison, J Bratherton, J Buckley, L Crane, T Dean, A Farrall,
L Gilbert, P Groves and C Leach

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

Paul Bayley- Director of Environment and Neighbourhood Services
Helen Davies- Democratic Services Officer
Jane Gowing- Interim Planning Service Review Lead
David Malcolm- Head of Planning
Fiona Seddon- Place Business Manager
Jayne Traverse- Executive Director of Place

36 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Quentin Abel,
Councillor Jonathan Parry and Councillor Mike Benson (Councillor Mary
Addison was substituting).

37 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received.

38 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting 29 September 2022 be
accepted as a correct and accurate record.

39 PUBLIC SPEAKING/OPEN SESSION

There were no members of the public registered who wished to speak.

40 LOCAL PLANNING AUTHORITY REVIEW AND SERVICE

Jayne Traverse, Executive Director of Place introduced the report. Jane Gowing, Interim Planning Service Review Lead was in attendance and had assisted in the production of the report.

The Committee was advised that a team of officers had been brought together in January 2022 and had been tasked with reviewing the planning backlog and the systems supporting the planning service. The review was not an inspection, it was a thorough improvement focussed review of the Planning service including best practice and outside services such as Legal, Democratic Services and Statutory Consultees.

The Committee was advised the review had gathered information including published Committee meetings, face to face meetings, over 200 comments from staff including ideas for improvement. Applicants, agents and Member's complaints had been reviewed including the Member Advisory Panel from this Committee.

The Committee was advised that prior to the pandemic, the service was fragile, busy and dealt with complex work. Cheshire East Council is the eighth busiest planning service in the country and processed the most applications in the Northwest.

There were seven themes to the report recommendations:

- 1) Capacity, Workload and Recruitment;
- 2) Culture and Leadership, encouraging innovation;
- 3) Processes and Use of Technology;
- 4) Customer Experience;
- 5) Policy and Governance;
- 6) Members; and
- 7) Managing the Transformation.

The Executive Director of Place advised that one of the major issues in relation to the backlog of applications was due to the aging ICT system and that a more modern system was in the process of being implemented.

Reassurances were given to the Committee that:

- all major applications had been allocated to officers as they were received, but the applications held in the backlog related to minor and household applications;
- the backlog had reduced and more applications were being processed than received;
- the contract to procure Capita to assist with the applications had been extended, to date 1500 had been processed this way with capacity for an additional 500;
- Career graded posts had been appointed to;
- A 2-day fast tracking event resulted in 200 applications being determined; and

- Site visit protocol changes had been implemented using photographs and video evidence to support applications, in line with best practice within other local authorities.

In summary, the Executive Director of Place noted that there was excellent work within the planning service and this included enthusiastic staff who were committed to Cheshire East Council. Next steps were to implement the Modernisation Plan, it was envisaged this would evolve over time and have an officer accountable for each of the actions. The Modernisation Plan would include additional areas to look at in more detail including Section 106, ICT Systems and Enforcement. The Transformation Board would have oversight and drive through the outlined recommendations and this Committee would receive updates on progress..

The Chair welcomed the comprehensive report and how it objectively reviewed the service acknowledging the areas for attention and wide demands placed on the service. The Chair noted that whilst some actions could happen now, some actions could take a couple of years to complete.

The Chair extended the thanks of the Committee to the Executive Director of Place, the Deep Dive Team, Staff within the Planning Service and the Member Advisory Panel chaired by Councillor Tony Dean.

The Committee was given the opportunity to ask questions and noted that:

- Improvements in planning training for Councillors at Borough and Town and Parish Council level should reduce issues to officers; and
- Members raised concerns about the Planning Portal, although acknowledged that this was managed by central government, it was difficult to use and caused frustrations from residents which was reputationally damaging for the Council.

There was some discussion about the enforcement planning function and if the council should be more robust in its approach to enforcement.

The Executive Director of Place advised that the enforcement team worked within legal and statutory parameters and part of that was the need to give time for applicants to apply for retrospective planning permission. One of the roles the council had been unable to recruit to was the Monitoring and Compliance Officer which could strengthen future enforcement work.

Reassurances were given to the Committee that:

- best practice from other authorities (such as Cornwall and Wiltshire) would be proactively sought as well as an effort to formalise networking with other local authorities;
- the work from this report had a communication plan to ensure messages reached the appropriate communities and stakeholders;

- the refresh in joint Member and Officer planning training would seek to address non-material planning considerations being debated during planning committee meetings;
- the new ICT system should speed up planning processes and reduce repeat complaints that were often applicants chasing their applications. ; and
- the enforcement team had showcased a couple of successful prosecutions to help educate residents in what could and couldn't be done through the planning process in turn helping to reduce the workload for officers.

RESOLVED (Unanimously): That:

- a) the findings and recommendations of the Local Planning Authority Review and Service Transformation report be received and noted;
- b) the establishment of a Transformation Board to oversee the Modernisation Plan which is to be chaired by the Executive Director of Place be received and noted;
- c) the range of measures already implemented as part of the review, particularly in relation to reducing the backlog of planning applications be received and noted; and
- d) That a Member / Officer group be established, following the findings of the proposed Section 106 funding Internal Audit, to explore the process of Section 106 planning obligations as part of the Modernisation Plan.

The meeting commenced at 2.30 pm and concluded at 3.21 pm

Councillor M Warren (Chair)