

## **Environment and Communities Committee**

**9 November 2023**

### **Update on the Planning Modernisation Plan**

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**Report of: Peter Skates, Acting Executive Director - Place**

**Report Reference No: EC/31/23-24**

**Ward(s) Affected: All**

#### **Purpose of Report**

- 1 To provide an update on the progress made so far on the Planning Modernisation Plan that was endorsed by the Environment and Communities Committee on 31 October 2022.

#### **Executive Summary**

- 2 A review of the planning service was undertaken, led by the former Executive Director of Place, to consider how the Local Planning Authority (LPA) was performing in the context of its statutory and regulatory obligations, and to understand how the Planning Service was delivering against the vision and objectives of the Council's Local Plan Strategy 2010-2030, and the Corporate Plan 2021-2025.
- 3 The review was needed because of an increase of planning applications received which had resulted in delayed decision making and a backlog of undetermined applications. This had resulted in an increase in complaints about the service. The review resulted in the LPA Review and Service Transformation Report which was reported to Environment and Communities Committee in October 2022 and can be found here - [LPA Review and Service Transformation Report](#). This report detailed the issues that the service was having to deal with against the context of the national pandemic, increasing workloads, changing practices, pressure on staff and recruitment and retention issues. The wide-ranging review identified service improvements needed to reduce the backlog, improve the customer experience and to modernise the service.
- 4 The planning teams face many challenges, and the review highlighted the extremely complex nature of the service, its dependencies, and challenges – being one of the largest Local Planning Authorities in the country. Resource

issues are still a factor with some vacancies, especially senior planner roles, being difficult to be fill - it should be noted that the issue of recruitment is being experienced across the country, it is not just a local issue.

- 5 A full service restructure was also proposed, including a review of staffing resources and structures, to enable the service to meet expectations and deliver its statutory functions. This is currently being progressed.

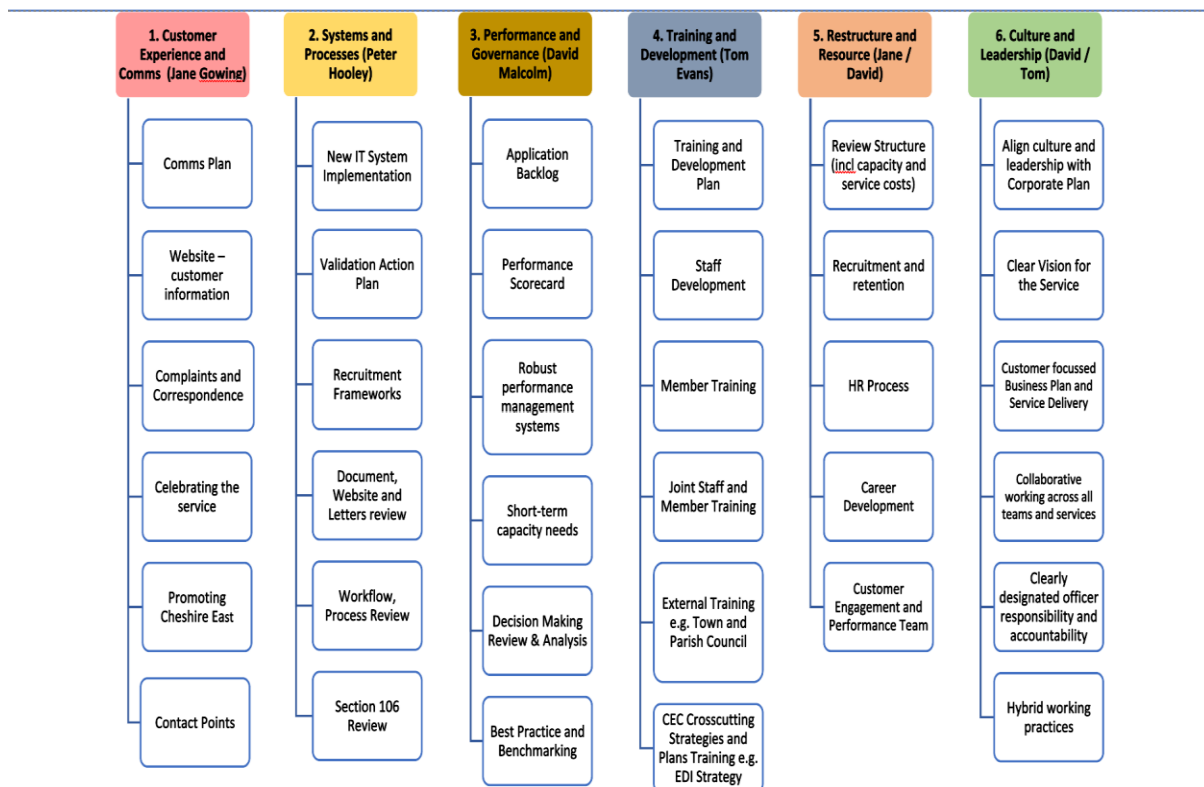
## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Environment and Communities Committee is recommended to:

1. Note the progress made implementing the actions of the modernisation plan.

### **Background**

- 6 Following completion of the service review a robust management system was put in place to ensure delivery against the approved Modernisation Plan. This was developed by the Interim Director of Planning Services, Head of Planning, and the Place Business Management Team.
- 7 Six workstreams identified from the Service Review were developed to provide a focus for the delivery of the Plan. Workstream lead officers were identified but due to the interconnecting nature of the issues across the service, managers are working together on the workplan as issues overlap and span across themes and teams. It is not possible for many of the actions to be progressed in isolation since impacts of one change made will usually have a number of other impacts across different parts of the service or application process. Also – due to the nature of the service and the planning application decision making cycle – there will usually be a delay in realising impacts ‘on the ground’ –as the impacts of change become apparent part way through application processes or once decisions have been made.
- 8 The workstream areas and key actions from each are highlighted in the illustration below. This table highlights the wide range of issues involved, the scale of change proposed and the interconnecting impacts of the recommendations across all parts of the service.



- 9 Regular review and progress meetings are held with the Interim Director, Head of Service and Team Leads / Managers to ensure progress continues to be made and any issues / risks mitigated or resolved.
- 10 Attached to this report are the latest Workstream Update Reports to provide more detail about progress made against the numerous recommendations from the review. These are completed and updated to ensure transparency of actions and progress made - so that all officers involved have sight of what others are doing within the Service to ensure that crosscutting issues are tackled together, and any issues identified are resolved effectively.
- 11 Four priority areas of work were identified and agreed with the Executive Director, all of which continue to be actively being worked on:
- Staffing & Restructure
  - Application Backlog
  - ICT System
  - Customer Experience & Communications
- 12 Whilst these four work areas have been prioritised, actions arising from this work have impacts that are wider ranging and touch on other recommendations from the review. One example is the Validation Officer Group that was established, and an action plan developed to focus on issues relating to this area. Whilst the changes made from this group impacted in the most part on the backlog, it is evident that this has resulted in more proactive training for the support team and improved co-ordination of workflow between the support officers who register and validate applications and the planning

officers who assess them. This in turn has seen improvements in customer service and staff morale. This also supports work related to the new ICT system with the cleansing of data/information.

- 13 Terms of Reference for a Transformation Board were approved, and membership of the Board includes senior officers from different departments of the Council. The Board is chaired by the Interim Director of Planning and the range of officers are from outside of the planning service to provide a broad oversight and support the review.
- 14 To support the Transformation Board an Officer Steering Group has also been established, chaired by the Head of Planning to support the Board with the preparation of update reports and information track ongoing progress.
- 15 Work has progressed on a draft restructure for the planning service. Following updated job descriptions and JDQs being finalised, a formal consultation with staff will shortly take place on the proposed new structure. This will take into account relevant recommendations from the review where appropriate to ensure the service is efficiently and appropriately structured to meet its various statutory requirements and customer expectations. Expectations set out in the review about achieving an 'exemplar planning service' will need to be balanced against the Councils current financial situation and any new structure will need to be affordable.
- 16 Regular update meetings have been held with all planning staff to keep them informed about progress delivering actions from the plan, and in addition, what changes they need to make to also contribute to and implement the workplan priorities. A collective and cohesive approach has been adopted with officers at all levels – this encourages buy in to the service changes required and also gives them an opportunity to offer other ways to improve service delivery which has been welcomed.
- 17 Regular meetings have also been held with a number of Council technical consultees. It should be noted that delays in receipt of consultation responses have contributed to the delays in planning decisions and have been an ongoing source of complaint from customers. The Interim Director with team managers has been working with the various consultees to resolve these issues and improve performance. Detailed actions were agreed including improved deadline management, reviewing resources available to undertake functions and improved prioritisation. Since these discussions started significant progress has been made to the extent that consultee backlogs have now all been addressed and the teams are working well delivering new, improved processes which have improved response times and customer service.

## Planning Review Recommendations

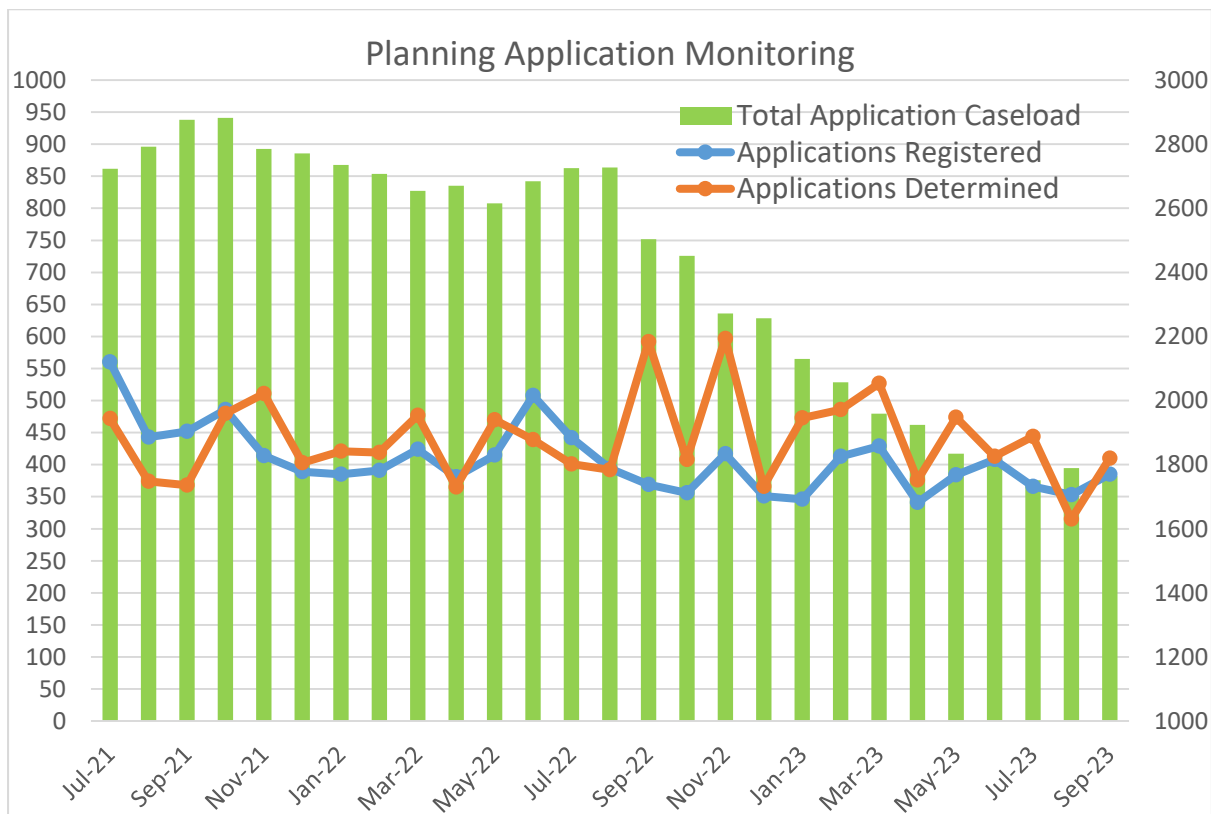
- 18 Significant progress has been made to date implementing many actions of the review and making changes to the service. There was a total of 115 recommendations in the Planning Review Report. 56 have either been completed or are nearing completion with progress made on a further 46 recommendations. Work on the remaining recommendations is to commence soon. It has been necessary to prioritise some actions above others due to the impacts of the change that would be realised in the service, but also importantly due to the resource that is available to manage and deliver a lot of change at the same time – whilst still delivering on the day job. Work is on track for completion of the Modernisation Plan which was expected to take approximately 18 months. Some recommendations involve huge pieces of work and resource - for example implementing the new IT system, whilst others are smaller in scale and impact. It is evident that major progress has been made implementing the wide-ranging actions of the review and benefits are being felt in the service and beyond. Detailed progress reports are included as an appendix to this report for each area of the review. These set out progress against individual recommendations.
- 19 Following the recent audit of S106 matters, recommendations arising from that audit will now form part of the wider modernisation work programme. Work has already commenced implementing actions arising from the audit. An officer workshop was held in early October focussing on S106 and delivered by Planning – including officers from finance, legal and the consultee services who deliver the mitigation schemes on the ground such as highways, education, and greenspace – this was a key piece of work to help progress joint working, improved processes and governance moving forward. This area of the review will also involve a Members Working Group to oversee and input into the review as per a previous decision of this committee.
- 20 A consistent approach is required to continue to drive improvements in the service and build on the excellent work already achieved. All recommendations are intrinsically linked so keeping up the momentum is key to ensuring that all are implemented in a structured way to see the most positive impacts and outcomes.

## Performance

- 21 A suite of performance indicators has been gathered from the various areas within the Service to more pro-actively track performance and service delivery.
- 22 The Application Monitoring Chart below shows application numbers from July 2021 to September 2023. Applications registered and determined are also highlighted across the same timeframe. The caseload – referred to as the backlog – has consistently reduced since the pandemic levels as a result of numerous proactive interventions by the service. These include successful use of fast-track days – clearly demonstrated by the spikes in applications determined in September and December last year and more recently in May this year. Further fast track days were also held in October – whilst not

included in the graph below these saw 150 applications determined over 2 days. These events have proven to be very successful and have made a significant difference to reducing the backlog. They do however require significant effort from the team leaders to organise and manage – involving not just all planning officers but also consultees and the support team to enable decisions to be made and issued quickly. The next fast track sessions will be held in December. In addition, sessions are also planned for statutory consultees to address their backlog of responses in a structured way. It should be noted that April performance in determining applications dipped due to Easter holidays and many officers using up annual leave.

23 Application numbers on hand continue to fall as the backlog is addressed, but still run at approximately 400 more than pre pandemic numbers. This however should be seen in the context of a peak of 2,876 in September 2022; 2,272 in November 2022 and 1,764 in September 2023 – before the most recent fast track days. It should also be noted that usual workloads of on hand undetermined applications would run in the region of approximately 1300. Work is progressing to determine the older applicants still on hand whilst making progress with new applications coming into the service for decision. New applications are now being progressed in a much more efficient and timely manner – resulting in a noticeable reduction in complaints into the service about delays. This is as a result of the introduction of new ways of working to tackle issues in the modernisation plan – and which are having positive impacts on service delivery and customer experience. Planning officers’ caseloads do however remain at very high levels and this will remain until the remaining backlog is addressed. This needs careful management oversight, and support with a view to officers’ wellbeing.



## **24 Key Successes**

- Robust systems in place to ensure delivery of the Modernisation Plan
- Backlog significantly reduced and progress continues to be made
- Improved Customer communication – website, letters
- Improved communication and workflow with services across the Council
- Staff now on board with service review and the need for change
- Complaints Pilot completed and implementing lessons learnt
- Reduced customer complaints about the service
- Regular emails and face to face sessions with staff on progress with the service review and restructure
- Planning Support Team relocated – now reporting to Planning and Enforcement Manager for improved ways of working, collaboration, and staff development.
- Cleansing of data / information carried out in readiness for new IT system
- Series of updated planning policy documents progressing through committee to better inform expectations and requirements for planning applications – these cover a range of issues including sustainable urban drainage, environmental protection, planning contributions.
- Some consultees have improved performance which is positively impacting upon decision making
- Integrity of decision making has remained and withstood challenge including at appeal
- Some limited recruitment has been completed to add much needed capacity into the service – example 2 enforcement officers, Planning Assistant post.
- All planning committee members have been trained on ‘Introduction to Planning’ as part of a mandatory training package recommended by the review.

## **25 Current Issues**

- Resource and retention issues continue
- New IT system –significant delays due to supplier issues
- Customer experience improving but more can be done
- Some technical consultee resources and performance issues causing delays in decision making
- Management resource/ capacity is very stretched responding to multiple and complex issues needing attention
- S106 audit report and actions needing implementation
- Continuity and consistency in resources to deliver change
- Proposed changes to 2 planning committees - current uncertainty about the solution

## Reasons for Recommendations

- 26 When the service review was reported to committee there was an undertaking that an update report would be brought back to committee to show progress made and to ensure we continue to commit to being an open council. This report provides that update for members information.
- 27 Other options considered at the time of undertaking the review are repeated below for committee information.

Option	Impact	Risk
Independent external review	A full external review would assess the issues however it could take some time to secure and appoint an appropriate external provider to do the review resulting in delays and potential additional cost.	Delays in commissioning the review could result in more issues and complaints for the service leading to reputational harm for the Council. Any alterations to the scope of the review would require further appointment and would result in more delay.
Objective and independent to the Service internal review led by Executive Director of Place	Would deliver earlier understanding of issues and solutions, would be agile to adapt to new circumstances and emerging issues. This also allows improvement measures to be implemented in parallel with the review.	Resources from elsewhere in the Council may be stretched due to other priorities, resulting in possible delays to completing the review.

## Implications and Comments

### *Monitoring Officer/Legal*

- 28 The determination of planning applications is a statutory process and delivery of the Service is set against prescribed requirements in terms of time limits and process (such as consultation and challenge).



- 29 The legal team will support the service with the planned modernisation process – including but not limited to advising on areas such as staffing and employment models, contract procurement and review and Member engagement and participating in the modernisation process as one of the teams involved in delivery of the service to customers.

#### *Section 151 Officer/Finance*

- 30 Financial planning takes place as part of the usual CEC financial processes. Budget provision has been made for the new IT system and to support additional resources in the short term. Costs associated with all temporary appointments are funded from existing Planning budgets.
- 31 As part of the 2022 - 2023 MTFs, a one-off budget of £500,000 was approved to support the planning review. As this funding will be utilised over more than one financial year, appropriate arrangements will be made each year end to facilitate this. Any additional financial pressures that arise will be reported through the MTFs process in future years.

#### *Policy*

- 32 The service contributes to the delivery of the Corporate Plan and Local plan as referenced in the original report of October 2022.

#### *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*

- 33 An Equality Impact Assessment had been completed to support the full Service review and Modernisation Action Plan.

#### *Human Resources*

- 34 Human Resources (HR) have been involved in the review and in the staffing restructure, as well as recruitment, retention and workforce development. Initial discussions have been held with Trade Unions regarding the intention to restructure the Service. This dialogue and consultation will continue as this work commences and is progressed.

#### *Risk Management*

- 35 For the reasons set out in the original report it is important to have an efficient and effective Planning Service. There are risks to service delivery that have been set out in the report if performance, when measured against Government standards, falls below required levels.
- 36 There are also reputational risks associated with the planning application backlog and complaints generated resulting from this.

### *Rural Communities*

- 37 The planning system helps protect the Green Belt from inappropriate development and helps facilitate business growth in rural areas, including some actions detailed in the Rural Action Plan.

### *Children and Young People including Cared for Children, care leavers and Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)*

- 38 There are no implications for children and young people / cared for children arising from this report.

### *Public Health*

- 39 There are no implications for public health arising from this report.

### *Climate Change*

- 40 The various functions of the Planning Service, through the application of policy, help to achieve our environmental sustainability agenda, reduce carbon consumption and provide opportunities for healthy lifestyles.

**Access to Information**

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Appendices:

Appendix –

Progress against Review Recommendations

Background  
Papers:[LPA Review and Service Transformation Report.](#)

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**Approvals trail: to be removed before Committee**

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Name	Title	Comments	Date
Contributors:			
Approvers:			