



Cabinet

14 October 2020

Report of: Councillor Leigh Higgins - Portfolio Holder for Growth and Prosperity (and Deputy Leader)

Planning Service Review- Implementation Plan

Corporate Priority:	<p>Priority 1: Excellent Services positively impacting on our communities</p> <p>Priority 3: Delivering sustainable and inclusive growth in Melton</p> <p>Priority 4: Protect our climate and enhance our rural, natural environment</p>
Relevant Ward Member(s):	All
Date of consultation with Ward Member(s):	N/A
Exempt Information:	No
Key Decision:	No
Subject to call-in:	<p>No</p> <p>Not key decision</p>

1 Summary

- 1.1 This report seeks the agreement of Cabinet to implement a series of changes to practice and approach to the delivery of the Development Management Service, following the findings of the Planning Services Review.
- 1.2 It recommends measures to strengthen outcomes delivered by the service by improving case management, applicant and stakeholder relationships, and ensuring the right skills and experience in the team through development, recruitment and retention of staff.

2 Recommendations

That Cabinet:

- 2.1 **Endorses the response to the Planning Services Review contained at paragraphs 5.2 to 5.6 of the report**
- 2.2 **Notes that the Chief Executive will use delegated authority to effect changes to the staffing establishment as outlined in the report resulting in an increased cost of £12k in 2021/22 rising to up to £48k in the future; provision to be made as part of the 2021/22 budget for this increased cost.**

3 Reason for Recommendations

- 3.1 The proposals within the report and recommendations seek to respond to the most significant aspects of the Planning Services Review in 2019 and make the most impact on the performance of the Development Management Service. The implementation of these recommendations will improve customer and stakeholder relationships and engagement and provide clarity of roles and responsibilities and an improved level of responsiveness.
- 3.2 It is formulated against the backdrop of increasing complexity of applications and the issues that they raise, and rising customer expectations. It is intended to radically change the manner in which the service is delivered so that the customer experience is more positive and rewarding.
- 3.3 The proposals designed to delivery tangible outcomes are underpinned by a suite of performance measures that are designed to address the staffing and resource issues that have hindered the service in recent years. A series to measures are proposed to assist in the recruitment and retention of staff, to enhance skill and experience levels within the planning team and to engage better with stakeholders and Members towards finding solutions to issues arising. Coupled with improved performance, these will lead to better outcomes and an improved customer journey displaying greater certainty and coherence.

4 Background

- 4.1 The Planning Services Review was undertaken in 2019 and looked at many aspects of the service. It identified those aspects of the service that needed improvement, the aspects that customers and other stakeholders most valued, and concluded with a series of recommendations for improvement. Of particular note were:
 - a) Engagement with applicants and experience through the planning application process and responsiveness of officers
 - b) Staff skill, experience and capacity
 - c) Achieving good outcomes with effective performance management
 - d) Business process re-engineering
 - e) The operation of the Planning Committee and engagement with Ward councillors
 - f) Recruitment, retention and staff development
- 4.2 Considerations have also been given to two key recent events:

- Government announcement on the changes to planning legislation through a white paper awaited this Autumn
- COVID-19 and its impact on the planning team's capacity, effectiveness, operation of planning committee, market conditions and the volume and flow of applications.

4.4 With the above in mind, a stepped approach is proposed for the implementation of recommendations. The paper below includes the prioritised actions that could have the most and immediate impact, with a view to take stock and review the effectiveness of these actions in 12 months' time.

4.5 Some changes to the application process have already started to be rolled out. All recommendations in this report are due to be completed this financial year, with the training programme to be a rolling one.

4.6 It is anticipated that the implementation of actions from the planning service review will achieve the following benefits:

- Easy to understand and more streamlined application process
- Case officers being involved from end to end process and taking full accountability of communication and decisions throughout the process
- Incentives and opportunities for the team members to perform at higher level and being rewarded with career progression
- Increased level of engagement with applicants, ward members and planning officers during the application process
- Improved responsiveness of the team
- Better distribution of the workload at all levels within the team
- Increased strategic and managerial oversight of workloads, process, communication and quality of decisions
- Efficient operation of the planning committee with satisfied applicants and engaged members.

5 Main Considerations

5.1 This report proposes the implementation plan which seeks to address the main themes identified within the original planning services review:

5.2 Business process re-engineering:

5.2.1 Working with the System Design Consultant, the Development Manager and a Planning Technician have undertaken a comprehensive review of the end to end process of planning applications. This has included an in-depth assessment of the initial contact, receipt of application, registration, validation, consultation and determination of planning applications with a view to identify the value of each step and to eradicate waste and inefficiency. Learning from the example of Blaby Council, a new process has been designed to streamline and simplify the process from customer's point of view. For example, through testing a new way of working it was found that a number of steps could be removed largely by the reduction in handovers and also more effective use of IT.

Stage of the application	Steps currently	Steps Proposed	Steps removed
Receipt and Registration	13	5	8
Validation	20	9	11
Processing	34	5	29

5.2.2 The changes proposed to the system can be converted into working practice and the revised process will become the new way of working. Key changes to the process include:

- a) A complete overhaul of the validation step whereby we would only make things invalid if they were fundamental to determination of the application, other items can be requested and either added when received or completed by the officer in agreement with the applicant. This will take into account local requirements, rather than following national guidance which may not be applicable. This would be the point where a direct and named contact officer is established from the outset, building understanding of the issues, needs and aspirations of the applicant and maintaining a consistent liaison throughout the process.
- b) Updated, simplified and smaller number of correspondence templates will be introduced and an informal introduction of area based approach with shared site visits to increase local knowledge.
- c) A flexible approach to contact with customers, site visits and timescales according to the customer needs.
- d) Reduction of number of hand-offs and consistency of ownership of the issues by the allocated case officer.
- e) Use of Enterprise software to increase transparency and visibility of details and issues by the whole team whilst also producing key performance information more easily.

5.2.3 Suitable IT infrastructure is key to the success of the new process. Our incumbent supplier provides a case management solution which is ideally suited to this arrangement and will assist with the performance monitoring and other issues described above.

5.3 **Achieving good outcomes:**

5.3.1 Key to this objective is the need to increase the level of skill and experience within our staff resource, and access to expert advice particularly in the key area of design and layout quality. Options have been explored of adding a new design post or sharing resources with other neighbouring councils. Melton's scale and the volume of work is not sufficient to justify an additional new post. No other Council in Leicestershire have a dedicated design resource that can be shared. As set out below there are other ways in which design capabilities within the team can be strengthened.

5.3.2 Early engagement with all stakeholders is important to achieving a good outcome of the application that does not then need to be rejected or deferred by the Planning Committee. Working practices on major and controversial applications have been pioneered to include stronger liaison between applicants, Chair and Vice Chair of Planning Committee, ward Councillors and Parish Councils, seeking to allow constructive engagement on the development schemes and aiming towards a consensus view. Given the success of these efforts over recent months it is proposed to further embed this approach. These

workshops can even be at the pre-application stage prior to an application being submitted if the opportunity arises.

- 5.3.3 The level of responsiveness of staff has been raised as a major issue by agents, applicants and Members. Addressing this is fundamental in achieving good customer service and engendering trust and constructive relationships. A culture of responsiveness and accountability needs to be developed within the team.
- 5.3.4 A focussed programme of improving communication and accountability is proposed to be introduced for the team with on going mentoring and coaching sessions from a relevant training/coaching service provider, beginning from January 2021.
- 5.3.5 It is proposed to arrange for training sessions to enhance the team's ability to review the quality of design and heritage projects by working with Design Council to cover areas such as: (January 2021 to December 2021)
- Building for life
 - Design parameters
 - Landscape and environment
 - Streets, traffic and car parking
 - Energy efficiency
 - Heritage and conservation

It is proposed to ensure refresher training on an annual basis.

- 5.3.6 In order to achieve high quality of design in major applications, it is proposed to encourage applicants for design reviews, specifically for large applications, preferably at pre-application stages.

5.4 **Recruitment and retention of staff:**

- 5.4.1 The recruitment and retention of planning staff is a major challenge across local government generally. Key to this improving this position is the review of progression opportunities, remuneration and incentives for working in the planning team at Melton. The key principles used to prepare proposals are:
- a) Creating capacity for the Service Manager to focus on strategic co-ordination of the team and administering the Planning Committee;
 - b) Creating progression opportunities for all levels of roles within the team with relevant career grading to provide incentives for career development;
 - c) Review of remuneration level, specifically for senior level in order to attract the right level of personnel for the difficult to recruit roles;
 - d) Create a culture of developing the team with opportunities put in place to progress to higher levels to generate home grown talent, increase competence and capability and invest in them as a person;
 - e) Encourage planning policy officers to be flexible and undertake applications workload to increase capacity and resilience within the wider planning team and also to enable policy officers to develop new skill sets;
 - f) Review these measures in a year's time to make further medium to long term changes if required.

- 5.4.2 The proposal includes more autonomy and accountability of case officers in managing the case load and communication with applicants and stakeholders.
- 5.4.3 In order to create an environment where staff have the ability to progress by meeting relevant criteria to the next grade and pay structure, it is proposed to create a more fluid job role of planning officers. This will be achieved by merging the existing job descriptions for the roles of Planning Technician and Planning Officer roles to allow career grading based on competence and achievement, in addition to experience and qualification. This will create opportunities for colleagues to progress and develop themselves within Melton, rather than having to explore opportunities elsewhere as can often happen.
- 5.4.4 For the smooth and stable operation of the service, it is important to have senior planning officers roles recruited and retained over an extended period of time. It is proposed for the two Senior Planner roles to include line management and mentoring responsibilities for planning officers. This will include career grading to achieve remuneration level at par with neighbouring authorities and help to fill the long term vacant posts. It is proposed to start the recruitment process for permanent roles in January 2021, to take effect on, or close to, the beginning of the next financial year.
- 5.4.5 As a general approach, it is desirable to support the home grown talent and the team will work with HR as well as other training providers to ensure that the current team is gaining the right level of skills and experience in order to progress and be able to operate at higher levels.
- 5.4.6 It is also proposed to provide similar opportunities for expanding experience and skill sets to the officers in the Planning Policy team. Establishment of clear pathways for policy planning officers to gain development management experience and expertise. This will be facilitated by undertaking sample applications and shadowing senior planning officers in development management team. This approach will help build resilience and flexibility in the teams and increase capacity and capability for colleagues.
- 5.5 People and performance management:**
- 5.5.1 Performance and people management is integral to the measures described above. The current structure includes a range of responsibilities for the service manager including Building Control and Land Charges. It is now necessary to formalise current temporary arrangements regarding the reallocation of these areas so that the Planning Development Manager can focus solely on the development management and implementing improvements to the planning service.
- 5.5.2 The Development Services Manager will also play a greater role in supporting the Assistant Director in supporting and administering the Planning Committee meetings.
- 5.5.3 As a way of creating area based expertise within the team, it is proposed to organise the workload on a geographical basis with each area led by a senior planning officer to create more focussed expertise around localities, increasing officer knowledge and awareness of local issues.
- 5.5.4 A series of service performance measures are being developed, with key measures being reported corporately and publically as part of the Council's broader corporate performance framework.

5.6 Operation of Planning Committee:

5.6.1 The operation of the Planning Committee was reviewed as part of the wider Constitutional Review in May 2019 and changes were made to the terms of reference and operation of the Committee.

5.6.2 Key changes included:

- Full refresh of the scheme of delegation
- Great involvement on the chair in workload of the committee
- Revisions to the public speaking arrangements
- An enhanced role for Legal Services in the preparation for, and participation in, meetings
- Programme of regular training for Members

5.6.3 Further to the changes made already for the working arrangements of the Committee, it is acknowledged that the planning officers need to engage with the Members well in advance of the Committee meetings and ensure that work to resolve issues with applications is undertaken prior to being presented to the Committee. This will reduce the time for debate at the Committee meeting and make the discussion more focussed. It will also make sure that more applications will be determined at the Committee meeting rather than deferred. This will help reducing frustration for applicants and instil more confidence in the planning system for observers, which is particularly important given the increase in publicity and transparency created by the move to remote meetings and online streaming.

5.6.4 The following actions are proposed:

- a) Manage the frequency of meetings and agenda items effectively to avoid additional meetings;
- b) Provide continuing development sessions for members;
- c) Provide training and support to planning officers to be able to present their own cases to Planning Committee;
- d) The Planning Development Manager to co-ordinate all information being presented to the Committee and provide quality assurance;
- e) The Assistant Director and Planning Development Manager to make sure that more issues associated with applications presented to the Committee are more effectively resolved prior to submission and accommodate the views of Ward councillors as well as other stakeholders.

6 Options Considered

6.1 Considerable consideration was given to the content of the recommendations and their timing.

6.2 Firstly, the independent Planning Review (February 2019) made some 100 recommendations which were wide ranging. These were considered and analysed against the need of the time and the changes in the context due to COVID-19 as well as planning legislation. Implementation of each recommendation in its own right was not considered appropriate as they are inter-related and inter-dependent for impact. The recommendations in this report cover most of the initial recommendations in a more

comprehensive and joined up way. The recommendations set out above have focussed on the aspects most valued by our customers and that are likely to have the greatest positive impacts on the things that matter most: customer expectations and quality of outcomes leading to reputational benefits.

- 6.3 Secondly it was questioned whether the recommendations should proceed now in view of the uncertain financial position of the Council owing to expenditure and on going expectations arising from the Covid 19 pandemic. For these reasons the recommendations are considered to be modest and manageable in financial terms.
- 6.4 Similarly, it was reflected that the timing of the Government's White Paper 'The Future of Planning' (August 2020) may undermine the proposals. However it is anticipated that those wide ranging changes – if carried forward – will take several years to implement in full and as such there remains great value in improving our service within the existing system despite the prospect of change. It is considered that the changes will provide sound foundation for the implementation of changes proposed in the White Paper.

7 Consultation

- 7.1 The initial Planning Services Review involved extensive consultation with a wide range of external and internal stakeholders including applicant and agents, consultees, Members (both with and without seats on Planning Committee), senior management and Leadership and staff both within and interfacing with the service.
- 7.2 Formal consultation is required for implementation of the measures devised, particularly where they relate to staff roles and practices. Feedback mechanisms are intended for key stakeholders to explain and promote the proposals contained within this report, with longer term liaison to establish their effectiveness in delivering the improvements sought and of course what further refinements may be explored.

8 Next Steps – Implementation and Communication

- 8.1 The following next steps are proposed
- Session with Planning Committee: End of October
 - New process roll out: October to December 2020
 - Training: January 2021 to March 2022
 - Changes to JD to be effective: From January 2021

9 Financial Implications

- 9.1 The principle impact of the proposals relate to the revised staffing structure (see section 5.4). These would result in an immediate impact of £1,000 per annum in relation to the merging of the Planning Technician posts with the Planning Officer posts but will rise over time as staff develop and meet the required standard to progress through career grades and/or in to more senior posts. Ultimately costs could be £28,000 greater than at present, though it may take several years to realise this effect.
- 9.2 The ambitions to re-evaluate the Senior Planning Officer posts is estimated as £11,000 based on the assumptions set out in paragraph 5.4.5. A longer term view of this change

would see an increase of £14,000 over 3 years and ultimately (if both posts occupied at the top of Band 12) approximately £20,000.

- 9.3 Other costs such as training can largely be met from existing budgets, though the intended case management/workload software would demand a £1,000 increase in budget for annual maintenance.
- 9.4 There will be a growth/capital bid for £15,000 for the purchase of the software as part of the budget setting process for 2021-22.
- 9.5 The above costs are summarised as follows:

No	Task	Cost £	Recurring/ one off	Budget source
1	Enterprise software	15,000	One off	Growth/capital bid for budget setting 2021-22
2	Software licence cost	1,000	recurring	To be incorporated into the budget for 2021-22
3	Staffing budgets	12,000	Recurring (up to £48k in the next 10 years)	To be incorporated into the budget for 2021-22
4	Technical training	8,000	One off	To be met from existing budget
5	Communication coaching	2,000	One off	To be met from existing budget

- 9.5 The Council's future financial position remains uncertain as a result of the immediate and longer term impact of Covid-19 as well as the future uncertainty relating to central government funding. For this reason the future financial sustainability of the council is one of the highest risk on the council's strategic risk register. As this decision is to be implemented prior to the budget has been set for 2021/22 the financial implications will need to be incorporated into the budget for the year and will not be evaluated against other council priorities put forward as part of the budget setting process. Should savings be required to balance the budget in 2021/22 this will need to be identified from other service areas.

Financial Implications reviewed by: Director for Corporate Services

10 Legal and Governance Implications

- 10.1 There are no direct legal and governance issues presented by this report. The Council's Planning function is defined by law and a key aspect of officers and the Committee's work is to ensure these parameters are not exceeded.
- 10.2 The service would continue to operate within the boundaries and authority provided by the Constitution, but a key motivation behind the changes is to seek closer compliance with the Corporate Objectives, particularly 'Delivering sustainable and inclusive growth in Melton' and to 'Protect our climate and enhance our rural, natural environment' through the outcomes it delivers, 'Excellent Services positively impacting on our communities' through the customer experience of engaging with our planning service.

11 Equality and Safeguarding Implications

- 11.1 No equality or safeguarding issues are identified arising from the proposals in this report.

12 Community Safety Implications

- 12.1 No community safety issues are identified arising from the proposals in this report.

13 Environmental and Climate Change Implications

- 13.1 Almost all of the work of our planning service has an impact on the environment, including the climate change/emergency agenda. It is anticipated that its contribution will be strengthened as we aim to produce improved outcomes.

14 Other Implications (where significant)

- 14.1 There are Human Resource implications arising from this report in relation to the staffing structure, roles and responsibilities. HR advisors have been engaged in the development of the proposals at each stage and are aware of the next steps required if the proposals are agreed

15 Risk & Mitigation

Risk No	Risk Description	Likelihood	Impact	Risk
1	Abandon, or postpone, changes in view of uncertainty about the future of planning : continued issues with customer satisfaction and internal issues such as recruitment and retention.	Very Low	Critical	Medium Risk
2	Inability to recruit (to senior roles in particular)	Significant	Critical	Medium Risk
3	Changes proposed do not have the desired effect on customer satisfaction and outcomes	Significant	Critical	Medium Risk

		Impact / Consequences			
		Negligible	Marginal	Critical	Catastrophic
Likelihood	Score/ definition	1	2	3	4
	6 Very High				
	5 High			3	
	4 Significant			2	
	3 Low				
	2 Very Low			1	
	1 Almost impossible				

Risk No	Mitigation
1	The core intention of the implementation is to overcome long standing issues of performance and customer/stakeholder dissatisfaction, and to build upon our strengths. The proposals are designed to impact on the aspects of the service most valued by customers and stakeholder and it would be a missed opportunity to decline or delay their implementation.
2	There remains a significant under supply of skilled and experienced professionals within the planning area. Whilst the proposals are intended to improve recruitment to senior posts and would position us 'on par' with competing employers.
3	It is important that all of the proposals in this report are progressed concurrently in order to provide a coherent and comprehensive package of improvements designed to secure these outcomes.

16 Background Papers

16.1 None

17 Appendices

17.1 None

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