



Scrutiny

20 April 2021

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

Planning Service Review

Corporate Priority:	Delivering sustainable and inclusive growth in Melton
Relevant Ward Member(s):	All
Date of consultation with Ward Member(s):	N/A
Exempt Information:	No

1 Summary

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is provide an update to the Scrutiny Committee on the progress made so far on a range of activities related to the Planning Service Review Implementation Plan as approved by the Cabinet in October 2020. This report outlines progress made against each key area of identified priorities.
- 1.2 The report also summarises the work being undertaken through the Planning Reference Group focussing on the review of policy application in planning applications process.
- 1.3 While the focus of the core of the planning service review is on process and people, the work being undertaken by the PRG focusses on application of policies.

2 Recommendation

That Scrutiny Committee:

- 1. Notes the update made so far and next steps planned for the planning service review**

3 Reason for Recommendations

- 3.1 Invest in planning services and deliver improvements identified in the planning service review is a key area of focus under priority 4 of the Corporate Strategy 2020-2024.
- 3.2 The Cabinet approved a comprehensive implementation plan in October 2020 with a range of actions including restructure of the services, new IT infrastructure, training programme and changes to processes and procedures in dealing with planning

applications with additional financial support of up to £48,000. Significant progress has been made against each activity that members would benefit from being aware of.

4 Background

4.1 Planning Service Review:

The Cabinet approved the Planning Service Review Implementation Plan in October 2020. The approved actions were categorised in the following areas:

- i) Business process re-engineering
- ii) Achieving good outcomes
- iii) Recruitment and retention of staff
- iv) People and performance management
- v) Operation of Planning committee

4.2 The detailed update on each of these key priority areas is outlined in Section 5 of this report.

4.3 A communication plan is being drawn up to ensure all stakeholders are kept informed and updated regarding the changes being made and how it would have an impact for their involvement in the process. A series of workshop sessions are being planned to update the Planning Committee, all members, Parish Councils, developers and agents. The information will be updated on the website and the customer service team will be provided with relevant training regarding the new system for processing applications.

4.4 Planning reference group:

In addition to the above and following concerns raised by councillors regarding the application of a range of planning policies in the determination of planning applications, it was agreed to set up a small group of councillors with politically balanced representation to focus on one issue at a time and agree a way forward for officers to implement. Independent advice is being sought from Planning Advisory Service (PAS), a public sector organisation whose primary function is to advise and support improvement in Local Government planning practice.

4.5 A work programme is agreed with the participant members for this group with focussed discussion sessions on the following subject areas:

- a) Planning Committee procedures and operation including officers support
- b) Governance process regarding delegated decisions and members call-in process
- c) Consideration of Neighbourhood plans and Heritage Duty of 'special attention'
- d) Policy SS3 (unallocated sites) and reserved sites
- e) Policy C4 and Affordable Housing SPD
- f) Policy EN9- low carbon and energy efficiency and flooding
- g) Members engagement in planning process (ward + parish councillors)
- h) Views of frequent users (developers and agents)
- i) Changes following implementation of planning service review and its effectiveness

4.6 An all members update session will be arranged toward the end of May 2021 to for the group members to provide an update on the group's work to all members.

5 Main Considerations

5.1 Business Process Re-engineering

5.1.1 Working with the System Design Consultant, the Development Manager has 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.

5.1.2 New Enterprise software is purchased to increase transparency and visibility of details and issues by the whole team whilst also producing key performance information more easily. With help and support and a lot of hours from the IT team as well as the corporate improvement team, new business rules have been written and the interface of the new software and the existing system has been made functional.

5.1.3 The technological changes combined with the work done over the last two years by Planning Development Manager for service design have resulted into the following outcomes:

- a) Handover at validation removed so that the officer is responsible for the application from day one.
- b) 8 steps removed in the registration process (62% waste removed)
- c) 7 steps removed in validation process (33% waste removed)
- d) 20 steps removed in processing the application (69% removed)
- e) 10 steps removed in the Decision process (59% removed)
- f) 61 out of 136 letter templates were not used and have been deleted (45% removed)
- g) 14 out of 36 existing officer codes were historic and have been deleted (39% removed)
- h) 12 out of 43 application types were historic and have been deleted and others were redefined to ensure correct category allocated (28% removed)
- i) 30 out of 46 decision codes were historic and have been deleted (65% removed)

5.1.4 The following changes are made within the IT system to improve functionality, ease of use and add layers of governance checks to the process for quality assurance and compliance to the Council's policies and procedures:

- a) Validation process is altered to accommodate checklists suitable for each type of application (the standard checklist is ditched) and new core set of delegated report templates created to suit the application type
- b) Governance checks are included within the delegated report template to ensure all consultation has expired and that the application can be delegated
- c) New set of standard conditions are being created for case officers to use that will save time and ensure that all conditions meet with the government guidance of being necessary, relevant to planning, relevant to the development to be permitted, enforceable, precise and reasonable in all other respects. Some current planning conditions are old and do not reflect changes that have been made with legislation.

d) Development Types (Named Q codes in Planning) are used to inform Government returns and categorise an application, to ensure all applications are coded correctly a help document has been created which sets out what code should be used for each application type, this will reduce errors in the PS1/2 returns that are submitted to Government quarterly.

5.1.5 The above mentioned measures, while not visible to applicants or members, have helped increased efficiency of the team by providing clarity, improving efficiency of the IT system and reducing frustration and delays caused by the IT system.

5.1.6 Changes that will be visible to the customers and applicants:

- a) The following changes are being made to improve the experience and interaction with the applicants in the process:
- b) Applications will be registered within 2 working days from receipt
- c) Validation of the applications will be completed within 5 working days from receipt
- d) As part of establishing end-to-end accountability, the new validation process will be carried out directly by the allocated case officer who will contact the applicant/ agents on the same day of validation
- e) Processing of the application will start within 8 working days from receipt and a site visit (where necessary) will be undertaken within 15 working days from receipt
- f) Initial assessment of the application will be undertaken within 25 days from receipt and applicants will be updated of the status of the application
- g) If an extension of time is required this will be agreed in writing within 30 days from receipt
- h) New core set of consultation letter templates created for the ease of customers' self-service
- i) Information that was previously sent out in letter form (the role of the planning system and how to comment on an application) has been uploaded to the internet and a link provided within the correspondence.

5.2 **Achieving Good Outcomes:**

5.2.1 To ensure the team is suitably informed and engaged in the process of transformation, a range of documents and support tools are being created:

- a) A validation handbook and user guide has been prepared that references requirements for applications to be made valid and processes which need to be undertaken by the officer, this ensures that the new process is being followed. This can also be given to new members of staff as a training booklet.
- b) A set of protocols is being introduced regarding the Planning Duty Officer that will assist with general enquiries and how they should be responded to.
- c) An introductory information document is produced for colleagues in Customer Service team to ensure consistency of information and messages.
- d) For communicating these changes to a wider audience of applicants, agents, developers and members, it is proposed to prepare an engagement plan by working with the communications team.

- 5.2.2 In accordance with the October 2020 report, the following training sessions are being arranged:
- a) Training programme is identified for Development Management Team as well as Members and a supplier is being sought for the same
 - b) Update sessions for Customer Service team is being put in place
 - c) A training session for Introduction to Development Management has been devised for Parish Councils (one session already delivered to Clawson, Harby and Hose parish council)
 - d) Full Uniform user training given to the Development Management Team
 - e) Super Users identified within Uniform and advanced training given to those Users
- 5.2.3 Further training is being arranged by the HR team for communication and responsiveness for the whole development management team.
- 5.2.4 Planning Reference Group (PRG) is due to have a focussed session on engagement with ward and parish councillors as well as agents and applicant during the planning application process. The following changes have been made to the current process which will be reviewed by the PRG before finalising:
- a) New principles introduced around consultation
 - b) Workshops introduced on Major Applications to involve Parish Council and Ward Councillors
 - c) Weekly Applications received list to be uploaded to internet not sent by email, only to Parish Council and Ward Councillors
 - d) Weekly Decision list to be created and uploaded to internet and sent to Parish Council and Ward Councillors
 - e) A proactive move to upload as much information as possible on the website and direct applicants, objectors and members to the online resource in order to increase transparency and accessibility of information, and reduce avoidable correspondence. This will include stopping decision notices, and weekly list to be posted manually.
 - f) Duty Officer Mailbox created so general enquiries are directed to one person who has the responsibility to respond not the whole team
 - g) Duty Officer Response principles set out so customers receive consistent advice (submit a request for pre-application advice, guidance available on line, etc)
 - h) Ward Councillor email groups set up so that Wards with multiple Councillors are easily identified and nobody is missed.
- 5.3 **Recruitment and Retention**
- 5.3.1 Key part of the work since October 2020 has involved implementing the changes approved by the Cabinet. With extensive support from HR team, the new structure for the team is now agreed with all roles reviewed and job descriptions revised. The following actions have been undertaken:
- a) Revised structure was established for Development Management Service and wider Growth & Regeneration directorate in February 2021.
 - b) Since December 2020, an additional consultancy role was procured for interim 6 months basis to provide support to the PDM for her to focus on PSR activities

- c) JDs revised and job evaluated for planning development officers, senior development officers and planning development manager.
- d) Planning Development Officer role created with career grading from 7 to 11, allowing officers to acquire new skills and capabilities and have the incentive to perform better for better reward. Helping with developing our own talent and retention of it.
- e) Lead Planning Officer role amended to Senior Planning Development Officer with career grading of 11 to 12. This includes direct line management for the Planning Development Officers and higher remuneration. This will provide opportunity for sharing line management responsibilities and reduce workload for Louise.
- f) Senior Planning Development Officer roles advertised and shortlisted for Interview (2 posts). Director for G&R to oversee the recruitment process with direct involvement.
- g) Planning Development Officer roles advertised and shortlisted for Interview (1 post).

5.3.2 As a result of the above actions, we have received a very positive response to our recruitment call for planners for the first time in the last five years. All vacant roles will be recruited to by the end of April 2021 and will replace the interim positions.

5.4 **People and performance management:**

5.4.1 In addition to creating new roles, over the last two years, a redistribution of services and line management responsibilities within the wider Growth and Regeneration department is carried out to reduce workload for Assistant Director for Planning and Delivery (AD) and Planning Development Manager (PDM) to create clear focus on planning development management. This includes:

- a) Regulatory services are now directly reporting to Director for Growth & Regeneration (previously managed by AD)
- b) Shared service arrangement agreed for building control service with Blaby Council (previously managed by AD)
- c) Climate Change Emergency agenda to be directly managed by Director for Growth and Regeneration (previously managed by AD)
- d) Land charges service to be directly managed by the AD for planning and delivery (previously managed by PDM)
- e) Planning enforcement to be led by enforcement team in regulatory services with support from legal and planning officers (previously managed entirely by PDM and the DM team)
- f) Licencing team moved to regulatory service (previously managed by PDM)
- g) Additional roles created for land charges, enforcement and climate change to reduce workload for planning officers and managers and increase capacity for development management
- h) All ADs (including Jim) to attend SLT on monthly basis rather than weekly to create capacity and avoid duplication
- i) PDM is given opportunity to lead planning committee proceedings, planning appeals and meetings to discuss major applications
- j) Officers from the team are encouraged to accompany the AD in meetings with developers to expand their experience

- k) Enterprise software is being configured to produce information for key service level performance measures on regular basis
- l) Coaching and mentoring support offered to AD and PDM for improving skills in delegation, prioritisation, clear communication, developing people and strategic leadership.

5.4.2 The above mentioned steps have helped creating additional capacity within the team at all levels, with direct impact on the workload for senior leadership of the team.

5.4.3 According to the Council's new performance framework, the following performance indicators are set up to provide a comprehensive understanding of performance of the service to members and also to increase visibility of performance levels for the team members on regular basis:

a) State of Melton indicator:

- Number of homes approved
- Number of affordable homes approved

b) Corporate level indicators:

- % Major planning decisions taken within 13 weeks, or agreed timetable
- % Non-major planning decisions taken within 8 weeks, or agreed timetable
- % applications that are invalid
- % applications that are approved first time
- Applicant satisfaction (from questionnaire)- % of total 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied'

c) Service level indicators:

- Appeal record (% dismissed)
- Income received from planning applications
- S106 contributions secured
- % of infrastructure ask for S106 contributions secured for LCC

5.5 **Operation of planning committee:**

5.5.1 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. Further to that, the following actions are being implemented:

- a) A Committee Forward Plan has been created on a shared drive so that as soon as an application has reached the trigger for a Committee determination (even on day of submission) that application is added to the forward plans, this is used to inform the Committee Agenda and also allows officers to feedback to customers on a likely determination date.
- b) Training Plan identified for Planning Committee members
- c) Site visit Document template created for members to undertake independent visits
- d) Tour of the Borough to be arranged post-Covid demonstrating the good the bad and the ugly
- e) Addition of relevant plans to the Committee Report

f) Addition of photographs of the application site added to the Committee Report

5.5.2 As part of the Planning Reference Group, PAS were asked to review planning committee procedures in Melton. Overall PAS were impressed with the function and operation of the planning committee, specifically during the COVID times.

6 Options Considered

6.1 The implementation actions for planning service review are in accordance with the Cabinet approval and therefore not delivering them is not an option considered.

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 The communication and engagement plan that is being prepared will include communication and engagement with a range of stakeholders.

8 Next Steps – Implementation and Communication

8.1 Next Steps:

- i) Complete all remaining process related actions- April 2021
- ii) Complete recruitment process for all vacant posts- April 2021
- iii) Complete work through PRG- May 2021
- iv) Prepare a communications plan for the launch of new process- April 2021
- v) Launch of the new process with a series of sessions with planning committee, members, parish councils, agents/ applicants/ developers- May/June 2021.

9 Financial Implications

9.1 As per approved by the Cabinet in October 2020.

Financial Implications reviewed by: Director for Corporate Services

10 Legal and Governance Implications

10.1 There are no legal implications arising directly from this report. Legal advice is sought where applicable on each priority.

Legal Implications reviewed by: Monitoring Officer

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 Risk & Mitigation

Risk No	Risk Description	Likelihood	Impact	Risk
1	The changes are not communicated properly to all involved and affected	Low	Critical	Medium Risk
2	Desired benefits are not realised	Low	Critical	Medium Risk
3	Changes to Government guidance for planning having an impact on what is agreed and implemented	Very Low	Critical	Medium Risk

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

Risk No	Mitigation
1	A communication and engagement plan is being prepared
2	Benefits realisation will be monitored through the Council's performance management system
3	No direct changes to application process are envisaged. But the guidance will be monitored on regular basis

15 Background Papers

- 15.1 Cabinet report October 2020-
<https://democracy.melton.gov.uk/documents/s10209/Item%207%20-%20Planning%20Services%20Review.pdf>

16 Appendices

16.1 None

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