

REVIEW OF IMPROVEMENTS WITHIN THE DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT TEAM

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To provide the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with details of the previous reviews to improve the service within the Development Management team conducted in 2019 and 2021, and for the committee to consider the recommendation for further actions to ensure the continued delivery of an effective and customer focussed service.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 Since October 2019 the Planning Department, have commissioned two reviews of the Development Management statutory function and its processes and procedures. The team predominantly deal with the processing of planning applications, discharging planning conditions, s.106 legal obligations, and defending planning appeals. The aim of the reviews was first to identify where improvements to the service could be made and a further review to consider resourcing capacity and delivery of the service to its customers.
- 2.2 Prior to October 2019 the team had endured a protracted period of lack of resource and increased workload with a consequence of increased complaints about the service. Quarterly performance figures (PS1 and PS2 returns) submitted to central government were unsatisfactory; and although not at a level to warrant government intervention, the performance was showing a downward trend. The Planning Advisory Service (PAS) were contacted to carry out a review of the DM service to identify where improvements could be made.
- 2.3 A further review of the Development Management service was carried out by Mondrem in April 2022 which focused specifically on workload level against resourcing capacity and service delivery.

3 REVIEW BY PLANNING ADVISORY SERVICE (PAS) OCTOBER 2019

The Development Management review was arranged by the Planning Advisory Service, having identified that the 8 and 13 week performance on planning applications was going to be close to the threshold for designation for poor performance by MCHLG (now DLUCH) at the end of September 2019. The support package provided an opportunity to review the likely causes of this and to consider solutions going forward. The support consisted of frank discussions with staff and the gathering of their ideas for change. At the time of the review, and with a full complement of staff, the performance of the team was improving, with 40% more applications being processed than in previous quarters. This was seen as a major improvement and testament to the staff's willingness to face and find their own solutions. To this end the

PAS review concentrated on how improvements to the application process could be made efficient. The full summary of the review is appended to this report at Appendix A.

Improvements Implemented

- Review of application backlog of undetermined applications.
- Address the delay in the validation of applications
- Update the Local Validation List
- Improve the process to produce the yellow Weekly List
- Ensure Line Managers monitor officer work demands, standards and performance
- Review of report templates
- Scheme of Delegated extended to senior officers
- Improve interaction between officers and members
- Improvements to the planning pages on the Council's website
- Production of several reports used for monitoring purposes.

- 3.1 Several other suggested actions were considered further but have not been implemented. The above list of improvements has been implemented and the cumulative effect has shown quarterly returns to government improve to a position where 100% of major applications and 90% of minor and other applications have been determined in time. (Government target 60% and 70% respectively). There has been a significant reduction in the number of undetermined applications through focused monitoring. The introduction of an updated Local Validation List on the website provides clarity for applicants when submitting applications and the previous 2 to 3 week delay in validations has been reduced to less than a week for the majority of applications.

4 REVIEW BY MONDREM APRIL 2022

- 4.1 The Mondrem review sought to provide an overview of the lived experience of working with the Development Management service and to assess the capacity to manage incoming workstreams against resource. To complete the review, the Mondrem team interviewed selected Members, officers, planning agents, developers and key stakeholders who regularly engaged with the Development Management team. The review highlighted there was an appetite to make things better for everyone and an optimism that things will improve. The team were invested in doing a great job, but there was a perception from some who were interviewed that the team were inaccessible due to work pressures. The metrics showed the level of work in progress and the level of resource available was not sustainable and supported a case for additional resource.

Improvements implemented following the review

- Commitment to improve the customer experience by providing a contact point within the Development Management Technical Admin team and commit to a better customer experience

- Encourage members to engaged with officers on planning application queries and to ask questions
- Explore opportunities with Brentwood that would be mutually beneficial.

4.2 Since the Mondrem review the team have actively worked on ways to improve the customer experience. There has been a reduction in the number of complaints relating to delays in the determination of applications and dissatisfaction with the service. Providing a contact point within the Technical Admin team has eased pressure on the Council's Customer Services team. Members are encouraged to engage with the team, officers regularly contact or meet with members where clarification on planning matters is requested. As part of the OneTeam both Development Management teams share experiences and opportunities to improve their service. Staffing requests for additional resource to reduce the reliance on external contractors have been submitted as growth items for 2023/24 to ensure service delivery is sustainable.

5 CONTINUED IMPROVEMENT

- 5.1 To build on the improvements to the service already implemented in the period since October 2019, the team are currently in the process of further reviewing and updating the planning pages on the website. In addition, the following improvements are also recommended.
- Arrange a follow up review of the Development Management service by PAS to assist with the #OneTeam service reviews
 - That further options are explored within the #OneTeam partnership to create additional capacity across both Councils
 - Continue work on improving the customer experience through online improvements and digital technology
 - Provide a full pre-application service from April 2023 as a discretionary service
 - Keep Members informed on planning application decisions in their wards
 - Implement quarterly performance and monitoring reporting to Members

6 RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Continuous improvement and sustaining performance to avoid government intervention is reliant on maintaining a fully resourced team. Any period where vacant posts exist will compromise the delivery of the statutory functions leading to service failures. The team is fully resourced at present which has enabled the reported service improvements. The introduction of a full pre application service, a non-statutory function, is reliant on sufficient resourcing being available. Funds for external contractors are not part of the salary

budget for the team and are funded entirely from unguaranteed income received through Planning Performance Agreements (PPAs).

7 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 It is considered there are no environmental implications as part of the decision.

8 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 The OneTeam partnership includes objectives to increase resilience and capacity in connection with service reviews, but there is also an over-arching assumption of budget savings, all of which will need to be factored into any proposals arising from the recommendations.

9 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 The provision of the service set out in this report shall be provided in accordance with relevant legal requirements including Government requirements and targets.

10 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed and found there to be no impacts (either positive or negative) on protected groups under the Equality Act 2010.

11 RECOMMENDATION

- 11.1 It is proposed that the Committee **RECOMMENDS TO THE EXECUTIVE** for the following actions to be implemented

- (1) Arrange a follow up review of the Development Management service by PAS, to assist with the #OneTeam service
- (2) That further options are explored within the #OneTeam partnership to create additional capacity across both Councils
- (3) Continue work on improving the customer experience through online improvements and digital technology
- (4) Provide a full pre-application service from April 2023 as a discretionary service
- (5) To provide Members with planning application decisions in their wards
- (6) Implement quarterly performance and monitoring reporting to Members



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Background Papers:-

Appendix A – Planning Advisory Service Review October 2019.

For further information please contact Planning Manager Yvonne Dunn on:-

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If you would like this report in large print, Braille or another language please contact 01702 318111.