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| Subject: | Development Management – update on lean systems experimentation |
| Date: | 18 April 2023 |
| Reporting Officer(s): | Kate Bentley, Director of Planning and Building Control |
| Contact Officer(s): | Ed Baker, Planning Manager (Development Management) |

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| Restricted Reports | |
| Is this report restricted? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted? | |
| After Committee Decision | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| After Council Decision | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Some time in the future | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Never | <input type="checkbox"/> |

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| Call-in | |
| Is the decision eligible for Call-in? | Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> |

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| 1.0 | Purpose of Report or Summary of Main Issues |
| 1.1 | The Council's Planning Service is currently experimenting with a new way of processing planning applications following lean systems principles. Officers gave the Planning Committee an overview of the experimentation at the Committee Workshop in December. Members asked that further quarterly updates are provided to the Committee. |
| 2.0 | Recommendation |
| 2.1 | That the Committee notes the report. |
| 3.0 | Main Report |
| | <u>Background</u> |
| 3.1 | The Council's Planning Service is currently experimenting with a new way of processing planning applications following lean systems principles. Officers gave the Planning Committee an overview of the experimentation at Committee Workshop in December. Members asked that further quarterly updates are provided to the Committee. |

Why experiment?

3.2

There is need to further improve delivery of the Council's planning application service having regard to the following context.

- **The NI planning system is not fit for purpose** – following the recommendations of the Public Accounts Committee and NI Audit Office reports, improvements to the regional planning system are only likely to be made in the medium and long term (see the update to the March Planning Committee on the regional improvement agenda). This places additional importance on the Council exploring ways to maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of its own Planning Service now.
- **Under performance by some statutory consultees** – this is having a significant adverse impact on overall performance and opportunities for improving how the Planning Service engages with both statutory and non-statutory consultees should be explored immediately.
- **The need to make more effective use of IT** – the Planning Service is still in the process of implementing the new Planning Portal. There are clear opportunities for improving how the Planning Service utilises information technology in the application process.
- **Increase in “live applications” in the system post COVID-19** – the total number of live applications had at once stage risen from around 850 pre-pandemic to 1,250 at its height (an increase of around 45%). Whilst this has recently fallen to around 1,000 applications, the Planning Service needs to ensure that total applications are kept down to manageable levels.
- **Some dated working practices** – whilst a range of substantial improvements have been made to the Planning Service since 2015, some working practices still date back to the former Department of Environment and initial transfer of planning to the council. There is opportunity for streamlining and improved efficiency.
- **Overall performance and customer satisfaction is not yet where we want to be** – the Council has not consistently met statutory targets for speed of decision on planning applications. There is also recognition that there should be greater consistency in its delivery of customer excellence.
- **Demanding and very pressurised environment for staff to work in** – the above factors have contributed to a challenging environment for staff to work in. There is opportunity to make the work environment more sustainable, to better support staff development and enable them to be more empowered.

What is lean systems redesign?

3.3

Lean systems redesign is a tried and tested approach to improving businesses, whether in the service or manufacturing sectors. The concept is to improve the system by focusing on “value” activities and eliminating “waste”. The approach is to consider delivery from a customer perspective rather than “this is the way we have always done things...”.

3.4

A significant number of Planning Authorities have adopted this approach in GB and it is also advocated by the Planning Advisory Service, a government agency in England, which advises councils on how to improve the delivery of their planning services.

3.5

The Council's Planning Service has therefore been experimenting with the way in which it processes applications following lean systems principles.

Methodology

3.6 The Council's Planning Service is being mentored through this experimentation process by Wolverhampton Council which implemented a lean systems intervention approximately 10 years ago to great effect. Wolverhampton Council has significant experience of mentoring, having worked with a large number of Planning Authorities in GB. It has also worked closely with the Planning Advisory Service and UK government on improving local authority planning processes.

3.7 The Council's Planning Service began the experimentation process in summer 2022, establishing a small "experimentation team" comprising the Planning Manager (Development Management), then Principal Planning Officer, Business Support Manager, Business Support Officer and Assistant Planning Officer.

The experimentation methodology is following three stages:

Stage 1 "Check" – reviewing the Planning Service's historic processes to better understand why we do things the way we currently do and the resulting outcome.

The experimentation team began by assessing 20 random applications, looking at contact points, and understanding each customer's story and their experiences. The team found that the average processing time for those applications was 17.9 weeks – above the statutory target of 15 weeks for Local applications. 90% of customer contact was due to "failure demand", i.e. the result of the Planning Service failing to do something that could have avoided the need for the contact in the first place.

Stage 2 "Experimentation" – experimenting with a small number of applications by starting from scratch and redesigning processes. The focus is on only doing what is required by the legislation and activities that add "value" to the process.

The experimentation team also reflected on the purpose of the planning application service and agreed that it should be to say "*Yes, quickly, to good development*". This is very similar to the Planning Service's current mission statement of "helping our customers get a timely planning decision that benefits the city." It recognises that the following factors are important to service delivery:

- Taking a positive approach and helping our customers through the process
- Timely decision making
- Quality outcomes on the ground.

The project team initially considered one application at a time. The focus was on the individual customer (applicant), understanding who they were and why they had submitted the application. A core principle was to take action straightaway – contacting the applicant as soon as possible with the team's initial thoughts on the planning application including whether the application was valid (i.e. that sufficient information was provided with the application, as well as whether it was acceptable).

The project team recognised that it is the "end to end time" that is important, rather than the current statutory measure of the date that the application is valid to the date of decision. When considering the process from the customer perspective, the important measure is from when the customers "first asks whether they can build", which might even be at the Pre-Application Discussion stage, to when "they can build" (i.e. they have a "clean", implementable planning permission with no pre-commencement conditions to discharge).

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| 3.8 | <p>For each application, a record is kept of the key actions required to determine the application as well as learning points around process for future reference.</p> <p>Stage 3 “Make normal” – following refinement of the experimentation, the next stage is to roll out the new way of working to the whole of the Planning Service. The process can then be repeated, moving back to Stage 1 Check, to ensure continuous improvement of the service.</p> <p><u>Update on the Experimentation</u></p> |
| 3.9 | <p>The project team has expanded and currently includes two Assistant Planning Officers who are working in this new way. Due to the challenges around the implementation of the new Planning Portal and key vacancies in the Development Management service, further expansion of the experimentation is currently on hold. However, once the experimentation picks up again, it is envisaged that one or two officers will be able to move across to the new way of working each month. It could therefore take some time until the whole of the Planning Service is working in this way.</p> |
| 3.10 | <p>The experimentation has extended to 106 applications since August 2022. Of these, 53 (50%) have been determined.</p> |
| 3.11 | <p>Unfortunately, due to current issues around extracting accurate information from the Planning Portal, it is not possible at this time to update the Committee on current performance. When performance was last reported to the Committee in December 2022, the average processing time from valid to decision was 5 weeks and 2 days – well inside the statutory target of 15 weeks. The average time from receipt of application to decision was 7 weeks, again well within the target. Due to challenges around implementation of the new Planning Portal, performance will have inevitably fallen. Officers are considering how to best present performance to the Committee in the future having regard to this “dip”.</p> <p><u>Learning to date</u></p> |
| 3.12 | <p>In terms of learning, the team has so far recorded 61 learning points across 106 applications. Headline learning points include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment of applications on “Day 1” allows the project team to make decisions much more quickly and effectively • Prompt, direct customer contact builds relationships and saves time • There is significant scope to reduce hand-overs and inefficiencies in the process • Marked reduction in the number of consultations that have been issued, thereby reducing pressure on statutory and non-statutory consultees • The team continues to find areas where simple changes to the legislation could make huge differences to the efficiency and effectiveness of the service overall • The Assistant Planning Officers are dealing with a wider range of applications, making the work more interesting and helping their professional development <p><u>Next Steps</u></p> |
| 3.13 | <p>The next key step is to expand the experimentation by rolling in more officers to the project team. This process is currently on pause pending the bedding down of the new Planning Portal, implementation of the new Belfast LDP Plan Strategy and recruitment to current key vacancies within Development Management.</p> |

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| 3.14 | The Planning Service is planning to hold a customer event in the near future, which will give opportunity to communicate the experimentation to a wider audience. |
| 3.15 | The Planning Service continues to advocate the lean systems methodology to the Department for Infrastructure and new Interim Regional Planning Commission, the latter tasked with overseeing the implementation of the recommendations of the Public Accounts Committee and NI Audit Office reports for improving NI planning system. |
| 4.0 | Financial & Resource Implications |
| 4.1 | The full roll out of the lean systems experimentation will result in a more effective and efficient Planning Service which will provide better value for money. |
| 5.0 | Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment |
| 5.1 | No adverse impacts identified. |
| 6.0 | Appendices – Documents Attached |
| | None |