



<b>Subject:</b>	Planning Service Performance and Service Improvement Plan 2016 -18
<b>Date:</b>	9 November 2016
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	Phil Williams, Director of Planning and Place
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	Ed Baker, Development Engagement Manager

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

<b>1.0</b>	<b>Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues</b>
1.1	This report provides an update on current performance in the planning service. Also attached at Appendix 1 is a copy of the 2016-18 Service Improvement Plan which identifies areas for further service improvement and indicates what actions are proposed to undertake these improvements.
<b>2.0</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
2.1	The Committee is asked to note: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• the current processing performance; and</li><li>• Service improvement actions for 2016 - 18</li></ul>
<b>3.0</b>	<b>Main Report</b>
3.1	<b>Planning Performance</b> Members will recall from previous reports that a number of changes were introduced by the service to respond to the requirements of the new planning legislation and to make our decision making processes more accessible. This includes the restructuring of the Development Management functions to provide greater flexibility to respond proportionately to the development pressures across the city and manage performance.

3.2	<p>Monitoring and regularly reporting on processing performance is essential for ensuring that the Council's priorities are being achieved and that the information informs decision-making and business planning. Work continues in the planning service through the Improvement Plan on developing a proactive culture of monitoring business intelligence and customer insight information as well as completing policy reviews, business critical process audits, service reviews and self-assessments. This includes taking account of recommendations within the recent Internal Audit Report.</p>
3.3	<p>The Council inherited a substantial legacy of planning applications (780). It was recognised in 2015/16 that it would be difficult for the planning service to achieve the two statutory performance indicators in relation to the processing of Major and Local planning applications given the volume of "legacy" applications. These statutory targets are to achieve an average processing time of 30 weeks on Major applications and 15 weeks on Local applications. It was therefore agreed that this year there would be a sustained approach towards eliminating this backlog. Agreement was secured from elected members that for those non-delegated legacy applications that were not required by law to be determined by the Planning Committee, the Director of Planning &amp; Place in consultation with the Town Solicitor and chair and vice chair of the Planning Committee, was authorised to make the decision. As a result of these actions there are now less than 45 legacy applications remaining.</p>
3.4	<p>The planning service also remains focused on achieving the performance target for those applications processed entirely by Council. In this financial year, up to 30 September 2016, 1,102 planning applications have been received, which is 25% more than the same period last year. Additional temporary agency staff were employed to assist with this increase and the number of decisions issued is up 53% on the same period last year. (603 up to 30 Sept 2015 to 1,127 up to Sept 2016).</p>
3.5	<p>Furthermore, in line with the recent Audit recommendations, new administrative processes are in place which means cases are prioritised to ensure, that where possible, target dates are achieved. Ongoing performance is monitored by the Senior Management Team and performance updates are also provided to the Planning Committee on a monthly basis.</p>
3.6	<p>Performance against statutory targets is continuing to improve for local applications, which form the majority of planning applications and we are currently exceeding the target set by the Department. (14.4 weeks against the target of 15 weeks)</p>

3.7	<p>Processing times for major applications is not within the statutory target of an average of 30 weeks but our ability to achieve this target has been impacted both by elimination of the legacy applications as typically these are the more complicated cases and with negotiation of the newly introduced Section 76 Agreements, which on average adds an extra 10 weeks processing time to those applications. ( See paragraphs 3.11 for further information)</p>
	<p><b>Service Improvement Plan 2016 -18</b></p>
3.8	<p>Belfast is facing an unprecedented level of growth where the development pipeline includes very significant commercial and employment generating developments. The City Council is committed to encouraging quality developments in the capital city of NI. To support applicants investing in such developments, the planning service needs to provide certainty and sufficient resources to ensure that planning applications for large scale or complex proposals are dealt with in a timely manner.</p>
3.9	<p>The attached Improvement Plan reflects the City Council's corporate priorities and objectives with a clear focus on an efficient and effective development management service. It is a continuation of previous improvements and covers both 'internal' and 'external' measures to bring about the necessary changes to the way business is conducted and how the public can enjoy an enhanced service. Some of the key aspects of the Improvement Plan are highlighted below.</p>
3.10	<p><b>Processing of planning applications</b></p> <p>The planning service is currently undertaking a review of internal processes and systems in accordance with lean system thinking and best practice on performance management. The planning service has largely inherited processes and procedures from the Department of Environment and it is anticipated that marked efficiency gains can be achieved. The focus will be on front loading the process whereby the right information required to determine an application will be secured at an earlier stage; and a view can be formed earlier in the process as to whether an application is acceptable; and if is not, what needs to be done to make it acceptable.</p>
3.11	<p>In tandem with this work, a new performance management and monitoring framework will be established to better track the handling of applications through the system. This work will be informed by emerging guidance and support from DFI on how Councils in NI can best apply a performance management culture.</p>

<p>3.12</p> <p>3.13</p>	<p><b>Section 76 Planning Agreements (Developer Contributions)</b></p> <p>The Council's introduction of Section 76 planning agreements to secure developer contributions is unique in NI and is already playing a meaningful role in the development management process in the City by providing additional funding sources beyond that of Council and ensuring that infrastructure constraints do not inhibit sustainable economic growth. To date approx. £2.5 million has been secured through Planning Agreements towards public infrastructure.</p> <p>As a next step, the planning service is currently finalising a Developer Contributions Framework. The Council wants to ensure development and growth of the city is aligned to the social, economic and environmental well-being of its citizens. The Framework will provide clarity and transparency for developers by setting out the way in which Council will secure developer contributions through the planning system and to contribute to the Council's corporate objectives. It is expected that the Framework will be issued for public consultation by the end of 2016.</p>
<p>3.14</p>	<p><b>Planning Performance Agreements</b></p> <p>The planning service has recently secured the agreement of the planning committee to enter into Planning Performance Agreements (PPAs) with applicants. PPAs are a project management tool and help to improve the quality of planning applications and the decision making process, through collaboration, for managing large scale or complex planning applications. PPAs will, inter alia, assist in delivering improved performance in determination timescales. For some applications, the Council may secure additional funding from applicants to help meet applicant's timescales for the handling and determination of those applications.</p>
<p>3.15</p>	<p><b>Pre Application Discussions</b></p> <p>The planning service is investigating a scale of charges for pre-application advice to establish a formal charging framework, similar with other Core Cities in the UK, for significant development proposals and project work. The planning service welcomes and encourages discussions before a developer submits a planning application. These discussions can result in better quality applications which stand a better chance of a successful outcome and help speed up the decision making process after submission. As a consequence they can help to minimise subsequent costs and avoid abortive applications.</p> <p>To enable the Council to provide this service to a consistent and high standard, the</p>

3.16	<p>planning service needs to allocate significant resources to this service. It is considered that the cost of providing the service should be recovered directly from the applicant and not fall as a general cost to the council ratepayer. It should be noted that the current statutory planning fees do not cover the cost of any pre application advice given by the Council.</p>
3.17	<p><b>Enforcement</b></p> <p>Work is continuing on embracing a proactive approach to enforcement. A key project currently underway is a proposal to remove deemed consent for the erection of estate agent signage in the university area of South Belfast. A public consultation exercise on the proposals has commenced and a stakeholder workshop is scheduled for later this month.</p>
3.18	<p><b>Member/Staff/Customer Engagement</b></p> <p>A team has been set up to consider the current customer engagement within the planning service, focusing on member engagement. Key priorities over the next few months are to finalise an engagement protocol with members, reviewing the scheme of delegation, finalising guidance on levels of interaction and service standards with the public and industry, and to further improve linkages across the Council including key internal stakeholders.</p>
3.19	<p>For example, reception processes are currently being reviewed in anticipation of the establishment of a joint reception with Building Control next month. Additionally as part of our aim to improve accessibility/understanding of the planning process to all users of the planning system, we will be reviewing the NI Direct call handling system.</p>
3.20	<p><b>ICT Solutions</b></p> <p>Work is also continuing on improving the short term operation of the Planning Portal and considering the longer term options for its planned replacement including the retrieval of reliable and relevant information to proactively contribute to effective rates forecasting for the Council.</p>
3.21	<p>The planning service is continuing to proactively look at a number of options open to the Council in terms of how it approaches the replacement of the Planning Portal. These include Belfast City Council procuring a replacement Planning system based on its own requirements and working with the Department for Infrastructure on the Discovery Phase of its project (subject to BCC not committing to accepting any recommendations arising out of this work.)</p>

<p>3.22</p> <p>3.23</p>	<p><u>Financial and Resource Implications</u></p> <p>This work is included within existing budgets.</p> <p><u>Equality and Good Relations Implications</u></p> <p>None</p>
<p><b>4.0</b></p>	<p><b>Appendices – Documents Attached</b></p>
<p>4.1</p>	<p><b>Appendix 1 - Service Improvement Plan 2016 – 18</b></p>