



<b>Subject:</b>	Development Management Improvement Plan
<b>Date:</b>	17 January 2017
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	Phil Williams, Director of Planning and Place
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<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	The purpose of this report is to advise the Committee of the Development Management Improvement Plan for 2016-2018.
<b>2.0</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
2.1	The Committee is advised to note the Development Management Improvement Plan provided at <b>Appendix 1</b> .
<b>3.0</b>	<b>Main report</b>
3.1	<u>Background</u> <p>A new Improvement Plan has been prepared for the Development Management (planning applications) part of the Planning Service. The Improvement Plan covers the period 2016 to 2018. The purpose of the Improvement Plan is to identify and set actions against various areas of the service that need enhancing so as to improve the customer experience.</p> <p>The Improvement Plan has already been considered by the Strategic Policy &amp; Resources Committee and Audit Panel, and has been updated (in terms of a progress report) for the Planning Committee. The intention is to give Members a clear overview of the direction of travel of the Development Management part of the Planning Service.</p>

3.2	<p><u>Overview</u></p> <p>The Improvement Plan is divided into seven broad areas:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Processing planning applications</li> <li>2. Enforcement</li> <li>3. Corporate working</li> <li>4. ICT Solutions</li> <li>5. Member engagement</li> <li>6. Staff engagement</li> <li>7. Customer engagement</li> </ol> <p>The Improvement Plan incorporates the recommendations of an internal audit of Development Management carried out in August 2016.</p> <p>A number of key issues for the Improvement Plan are set out below. Members are invited to ask any questions that they may have about the Improvement Plan at the meeting.</p>
3.3	<p><u>Processing planning applications</u></p> <p>The Planning Service is currently undertaking a number of areas of work to improve the planning application process. These include an exploration of a “Local Validation List” to ensure that the right documentation and information is received with an application at the outset; a lean review of processes to improve efficiency in application handling; a move to more concise and focused officer reports; and new model planning conditions.</p> <p>As Members will be aware, the Scheme of Delegation that determines which matters are heard by the Planning Committee and which are delegated to officers is currently under review. The intention is to streamline the Scheme of Delegation to ensure that the Committee deals with the applications that it is best placed to deal with, whilst increasing the levels of delegation to improve overall performance.</p> <p>The Planning Service has made great strides in reducing the number of “Legacy” applications that it inherited from the Department of Environment. The number has been reduced from approximately 800 applications to less than forty. Work continues to eliminate the Legacy backlog.</p> <p>It continues to be critical that the Planning Service is supported by sufficient staff at the right level. The Planning Service has recently secured permission to advertise two new</p>

	<p>Senior Planning Officers to boost capacity in the Majors, Strategic and City Centre team. A growth bid has also been made to secure two Assistant Planning Officer posts in the Locals team – that resource gap is currently being filled by agency staff.</p>
3.4	<p><u>Performance management</u></p> <p>Allied to a review of internal processes, it is essential that a strong performance management framework is put in place. The Planning Service is meeting statutory targets set by the Department for Infrastructure (DFI) in relation to the processing of Local applications and closure of enforcement cases. However, it is not currently meeting targets for the processing of Major applications. The statutory target for Major applications is an average processing time of 30 weeks. Current performance is 67 weeks, largely because of a number of older Legacy applications that the Council inherited. Excluding Legacy applications, and referring only to applications submitted to the Council, the average processing time is a much more respectable 37 weeks (or 53 weeks for those that require a Section 76 planning agreement). A significant improvement in Major application performance is expected following the recruitment of the two additional Senior Planning Officers (see par. 3.3, above) and the introduction of new internal processes such as a Local Validation List.</p> <p>Members are advised that the statutory targets set by DFI are relatively crude and their use somewhat limited in the terms of the information that they reveal. For Major applications, they do not separate those developments that require a Section 76 planning agreement (which are adding, on average, 16 weeks to the determination process). Nor do the statutory targets allow for an applicant to agree “an extension of time” to the determination period, as is otherwise the case in other jurisdictions such as in England and Wales. This means that performance is not measured “like with like” in relation to other parts of the UK. DFI acknowledges the limitations of the existing statutory targets and is supporting the introduction of a range of new Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). Further developments on this are expected in the coming months. In the meantime, it is important for the Council to develop its own KPIs where possible. Unfortunately, a significant limitation to this is the existing Planning Portal, which is specialist back office planning software shared with the other 10 councils in Northern Ireland and the DFI. Despite this, the Planning Service is continuing to develop a performance management framework within existing constraints.</p>

3.5	<p><u>Charging for Pre-Application Discussions</u></p> <p>Members will be aware from recent meetings that the Planning Service is investigating charging for Pre-Application Discussions (PADS). A PAD is a discretionary and currently free service that “front loads” the planning application process and allows applicants to discuss their proposals with officers before they lodge their application. This helps to identify issues at an early stage, smoothing the application process and leading to better quality applications and development outcomes. It is expected that a workshop will be held with agents and developers to informally consult on the draft charging schedule endorsed by the Committee at the December meeting.</p>
3.6	<p><u>Planning Performance Agreements</u></p> <p>The Committee has also given approval for Planning Performance Agreements (PPAs) to be operated on strategic and largescale Major applications. These applications can be incredibly resource intensive and some require a dedicated officer to deal with them in a timely manner. Therefore, as part of a PPA, there is a scope for an applicant to fund a dedicated officer if necessary and they are willing to so. The Planning Service is currently in discussion with a number of developers about entering into a PPA.</p>
3.7	<p><u>Developer Contributions Framework</u></p> <p>The Planning Service has been very successful in negotiating developer contributions from a number of city centre Major development schemes. So far, approximately £2.5 million has been secured for the city, mostly in relation to public realm improvement works, as well as 60 apprenticeships for the construction phases. However, it is necessarily to formalise these negotiations and a Developer Contributions Framework is currently being prepared to provide clarity and certainty around the process. Members were afforded an update on this at the last committee meeting and a further update is expected in February.</p>
3.8	<p><u>Enforcement</u></p> <p>The enforcement service continues to exceed statutory targets for the closure of enforcement complaints (exceeding the minimum target of closing down 70% of cases within 39 weeks).</p> <p>The Council’s Enforcement Charter was published in 2016 which sets out how the Council operates its enforcement service and what customers can expect from it.</p> <p>Work continues on embracing a proactive approach to enforcement. A key project currently underway is the proposal to remove deemed consent rights for the erection of “To Let” boards in the university area of South Belfast. A public consultation exercise and</p>

	<p>stakeholder workshop has recently taken place, the results of which will be fed back to the Committee in the near future.</p>
<p>3.9</p>	<p><u>Review of NI Direct for call-handling</u></p> <p>The Planning Service is aware of the weaknesses of the existing call-handling system, NI Direct. NI Direct handles approximately 1,000 calls to the Planning Service each month. About 60% of those calls (600) are dealt with directly by NI Direct. Of the 40% (400) of calls received directly by the Planning Service, approximately 90% of these are requesting a status update on an application. The Planning Service will therefore be investigating ways to reduce this customer demand such as improving the availability of application status information on the Council’s website.</p> <p>Whilst NI Direct is not especially customer friendly in not providing direct access to the Planning Service itself, it does provide a very valuable service in handling a significant number of telephone calls to the Council. It also allows the Planning Service to capture management information around the number of calls and types of query. It is also relatively cost effective. There is no viable corporate alternative to NI Direct at the moment.</p>
<p>3.10</p>	<p><u>Replacement of the Planning Portal</u></p> <p>As set out at paragraph 3.4, the Planning Service currently operates the “Planning Portal”, which is specialist back office planning software shared with the other 10 councils and DFI. The software has a number of significant weaknesses, both technical and governance-related, and there is a current on-going project to replace it. This project, known as “Discovery” is a joint venture with the other 10 councils and DFI and is to explore all options for replacing the Planning Portal. These options include all 11 councils and DFI procuring another shared system; groups of councils procuring the same system but different from the rest; each council going their own way; or a “hybrid” solution whereby there is a common public interface (website) but different back office software. The Discovery project is not likely to make any recommendations until June 2017. DFI has advised that if a replacement shared system is the chosen option then it will likely not be available until the end of 2019 – some three years from now.</p> <p>Members are advised that the existing Planning Portal is far from fit for purpose. The system is technically limited; inflexible; any changes require agreement from all the other parties; and there are challenges around governance with the system overseen by a Planning Portal Board. Ideally, the Planning Portal should be replaced as soon as possible because it is a significant obstacle to application performance and performance management. For example, it is difficult or not possible for the Council to introduce its own</p>

	<p>KPIs and introduce a similar system to that used in England and Wales whereby applicants may agree to an extension of the determination period on an application. The ability to extend the determination period has a significant benefit to application performance.</p>
3.11	<p><u>Customer Charter</u></p> <p>It is considered vital that the Planning Service publishes a Customer Charter for planning applications, which clearly sets out to customers how applications will be handled by the Council and what customers can expect from the service. The Planning Service will need to be focused about how it deals with planning applications as it moves forward if performance is to be improved. The Customer Charter will set out how this is to be achieved and will be informed by the customer workshops that have already taken place, feedback from customers elsewhere, as well as good practice from GB. It is expected that a draft Customer Charter will be brought before the Planning Committee in the near future.</p>
3.12	<p><u>Improvements to the planning website</u></p> <p>The planning pages on the Council's website are considered to be relatively basic and need enhancing in line with other UK Core cities. A project is underway to improve the planning website to make it more intuitive and helpful to customers, and to significantly improve the levels of self service (i.e. whereby customers are able to find the information they need themselves rather than having to contact staff, which causes delays).</p>
3.13	<p><u>Financial &amp; Resource Implications</u></p> <p>A number of the actions set out in the Improvement Plan, such as work around the planning application process, improvements to the planning website and publication of a Customer Charter, are intended to improve the efficiency of the service and enable the Council to make better use of its resources.</p> <p>The procurement of new software to replace the existing Planning Portal will have financial consequences which will need to be managed at a corporate and service level. The Council has procured consultants to help put together the economic information required to underpin the Developer Contributions Framework.</p>
3.14	<p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications</u></p> <p>None</p>
<b>4.0</b>	<b>Appendices – Documents Attached</b>
4.1	Appendix 1 – Development Management Improvement Plan (with updated progress)