

# Planning Committee

## Planning Performance Report 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020



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# Summary Planning Statistics

## Introduction

This Performance Report provides an overview of planning activity and includes performance information from 01 April to 31 March 2020. It provides an outline of Development Management performance and summary statistical information on council progress across the 3 statutory targets for major development applications, local development applications and enforcement cases. It also provides information relating to performance against corporate targets.

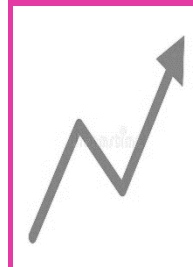
Decisions issued up



**13%**



**95%**  
approval rate



Improved  
performance  
across all  
areas

5 new hotels approved



519

householder  
applications  
approved



>1,300 new  
Residential units  
approved



**New Children's  
Hospital approved**



**103**  
Committee  
applications  
approved  
this year

51% of enforcement cases  
resolved



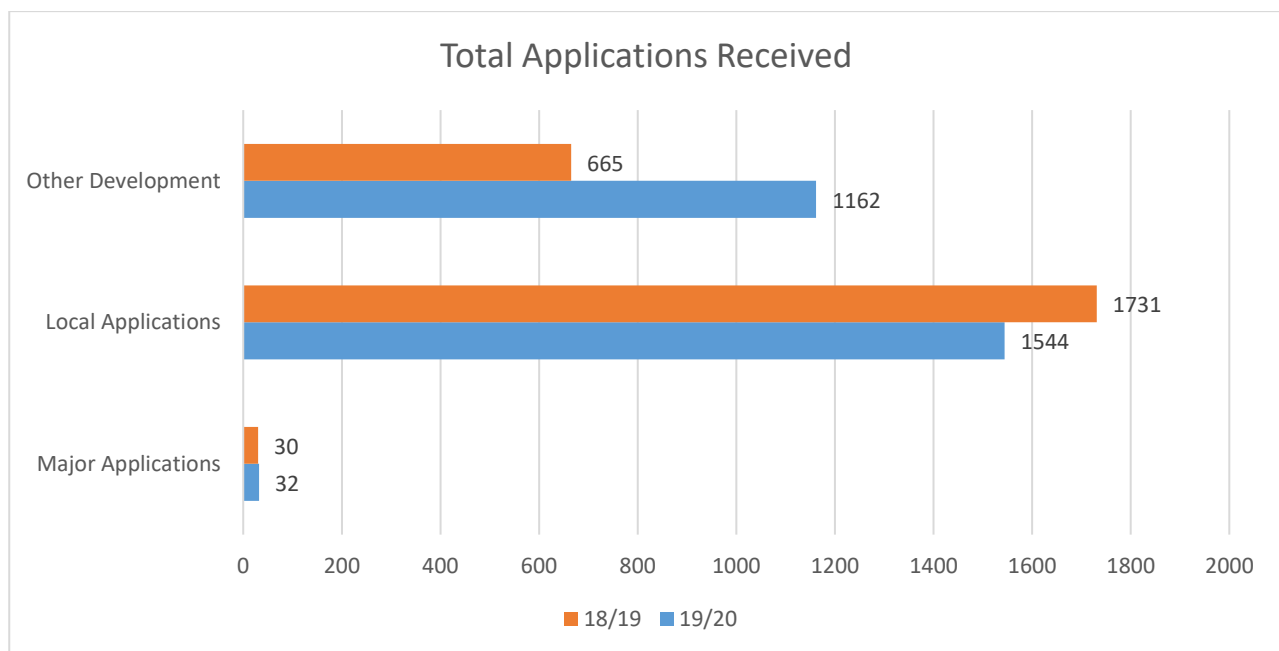
Enforcement

**Targets exceeded  
by 23%**

# Overall Planning Activity

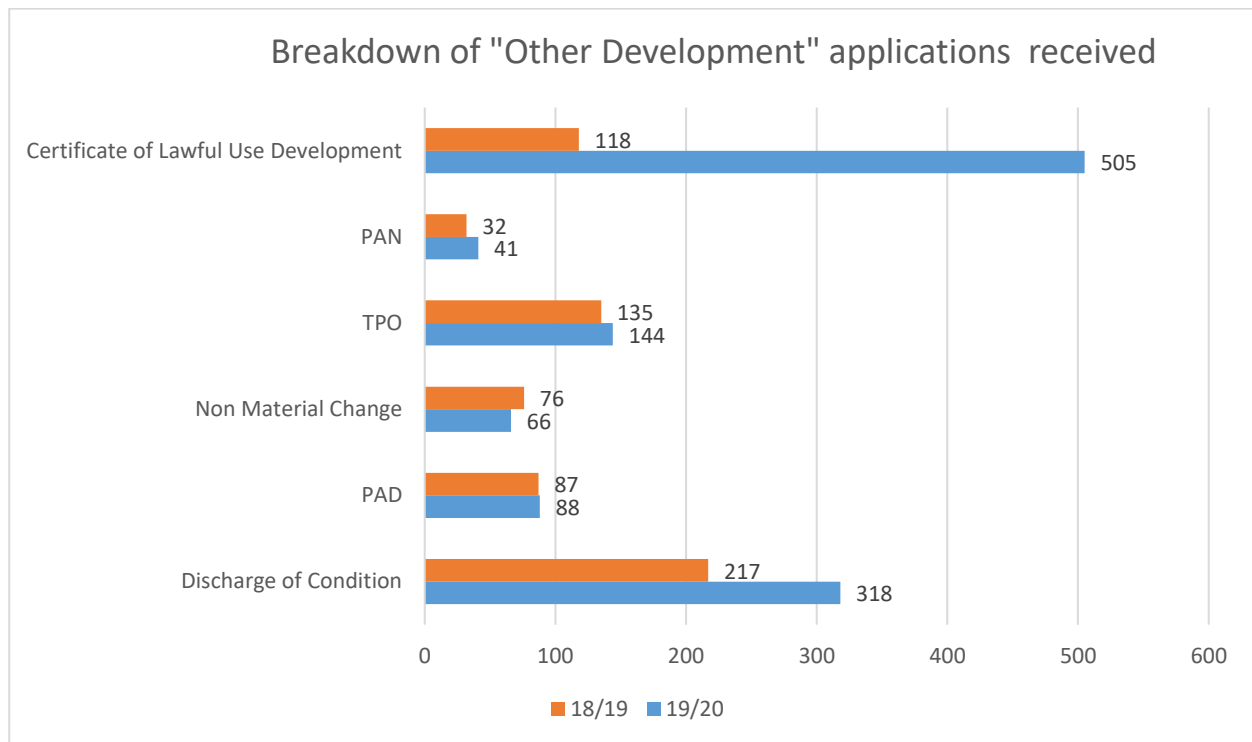
## Applications Received

The total number of applications (Locals, Major and Other Development) received between 1 April and 31 March 2020 was 2,738, which excluding invalid submissions is almost a 12% increase over the same period last year (2,426).



Compared to the same period last year the number of **Local** Applications received has decreased by 11% (- 187) while the number of **Major** applications is up 7% (+2).

**Other Development\*** which is excluded from the statutory performance targets makes up over 42% of applications/consents received. This is 75% more than last year and can mainly be attributed to an increase in applications for Certificates of Lawful Use Development relating to Houses of Multiple Occupancy which show a 4 fold increase year on year (118 in 18/19; 505 in 19/20), and Discharge of Condition (DoC) applications which have increased by 46% (217 in 18/19; 318 in 19/20). The DoC applications do not attract a fee.



\***Other Developments** include applications for: Certificates of Lawful Development, works to trees, Non-Material Changes, Discharge of Conditions, Proposal of Application Notices (PANs) and Pre Application Discussions (PADs). Many of these application types do not attract a fee.

## Pre Application Discussions

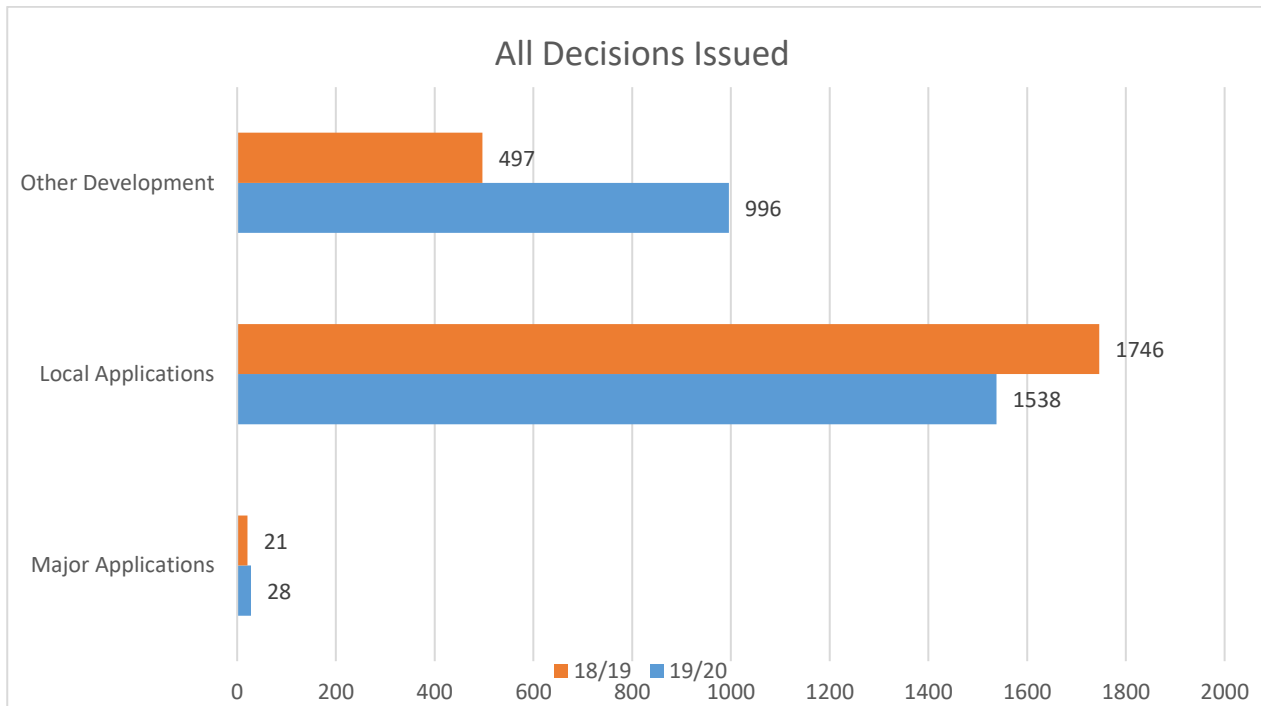
Pre Application Discussions (PADs) are a very important part of the planning application process. PADs provide an opportunity for the applicant to discuss their proposals with a Planning Officer before they make their application. This allows issues to be identified early and the quality of proposals to be improved. In turn, this results in more timely decision making and better outcomes on the ground. This "frontloading" of the application process contributes significantly to the performance and effectiveness of the Planning Service.

In 2019/20 the Planning Service received 59 PADs, including 29 PADs for Local development and 30 PADs for Major development. There were 30 PADs concluded, 21 for Local development and 9 PADs for Major development.

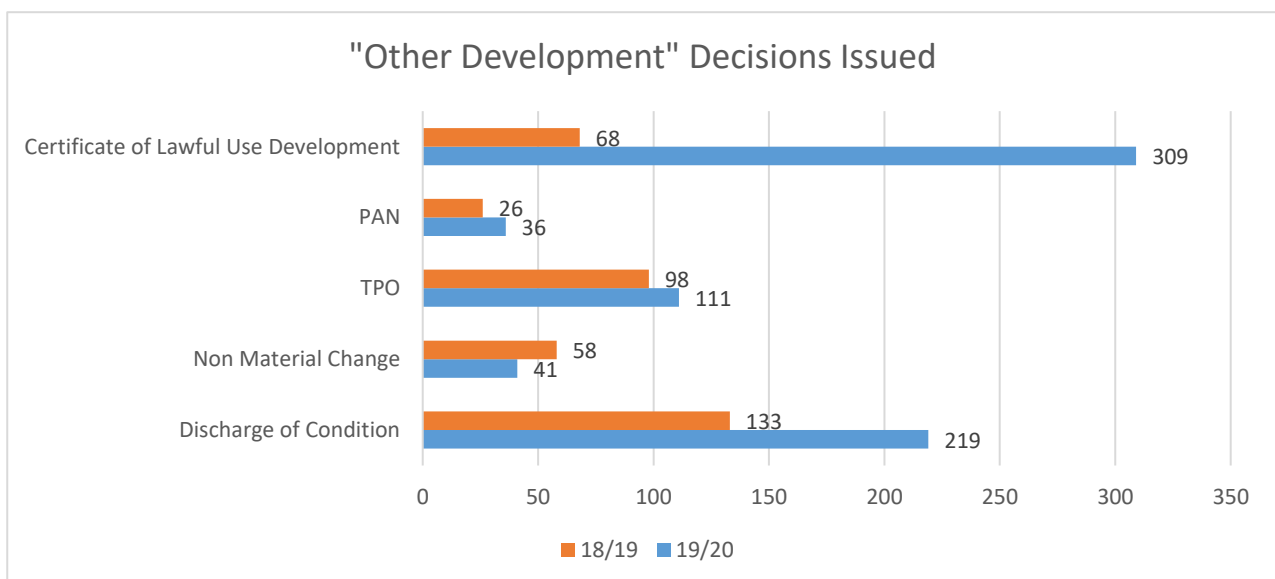
# Overall Planning Activity (continued)

## Decisions Issued

A total of 2,562 decisions were issued between 1 April and 31 March 2020, which is 13% more than the same period in 2018 when 2,264 decisions issued.



The overall % of "Other Development" decisions doubled in the past year again mainly attributable to decisions on CLUD and Discharge of Conditions applications.



95% of applications were approved in 2019-20. The approval rate is 1% higher than the same period last year.

# Major Applications

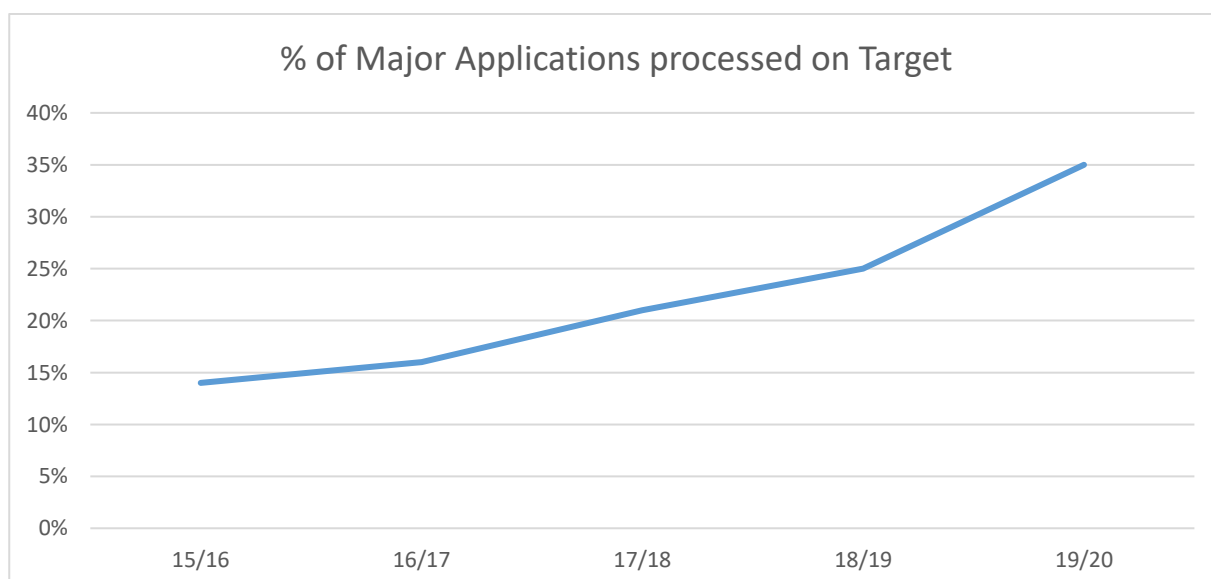
**The Statutory target is that major planning applications will be processed from the date valid to decision issued or withdrawal date within an average of 30 weeks.**

Major applications have important economic, social and environmental implications. Most major applications are multiple housing, office block developments, hotels and civic types of development.

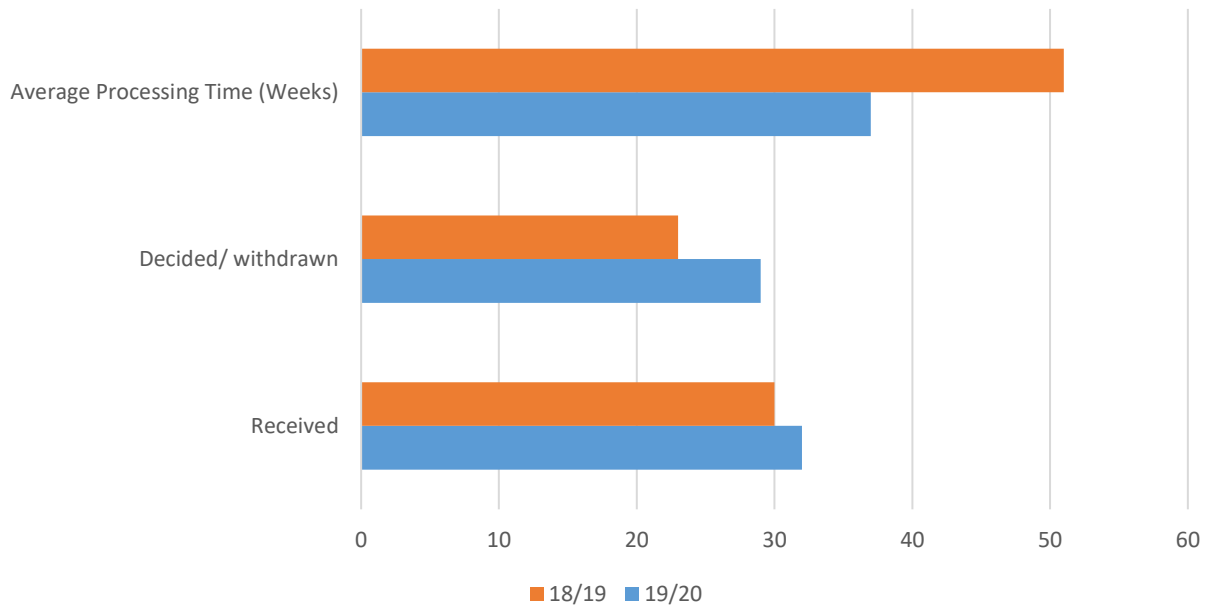
The number of major applications received up to 31 March 2020 is 32. There were 30 major applications received up to 31 March 2019. 29 major applications were processed during the period which is a third more than in the same period last year (23). Last year the average processing time was 41.4 weeks, this year performance has improved by 4.4 weeks to 37 weeks. This compares to a regional average of 52.8 weeks.

## Major Application Performance over last 5 years

Major applications	Received	Decided/withdrawn	Average Processing Time (Weeks)	Target Processing Time (Weeks)	% of cases processed within Target
19/20	32	29	37	30	35%
18/19	30	23	41.4	30	25%
17/18	21	30	52	30	21%
16/17	27	38	57.6	30	16%
15/16	35	56	54.4	30	14%



### Major Planning Applications



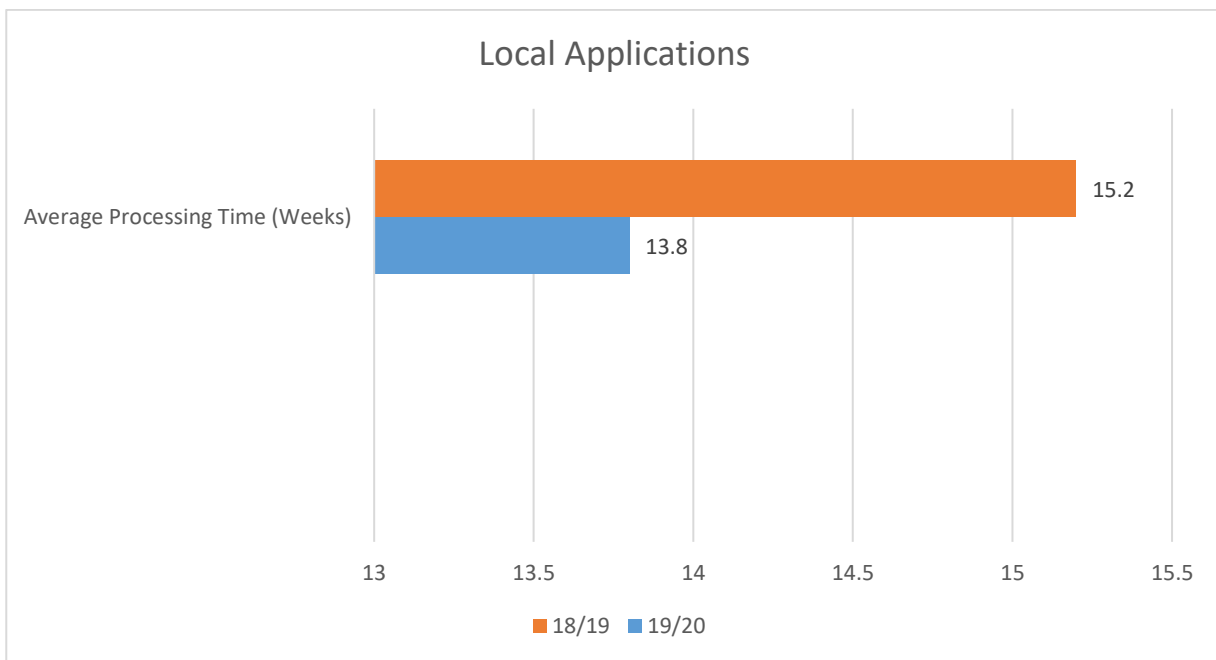


# Local Applications

**The Statutory target is that local planning applications will be processed from the date valid to decision issued or withdrawal date within an average of 15 weeks.**

Local Planning applications are mostly householder, residential and minor commercial applications and make up the vast bulk of measurable applications received (a total of 99%).

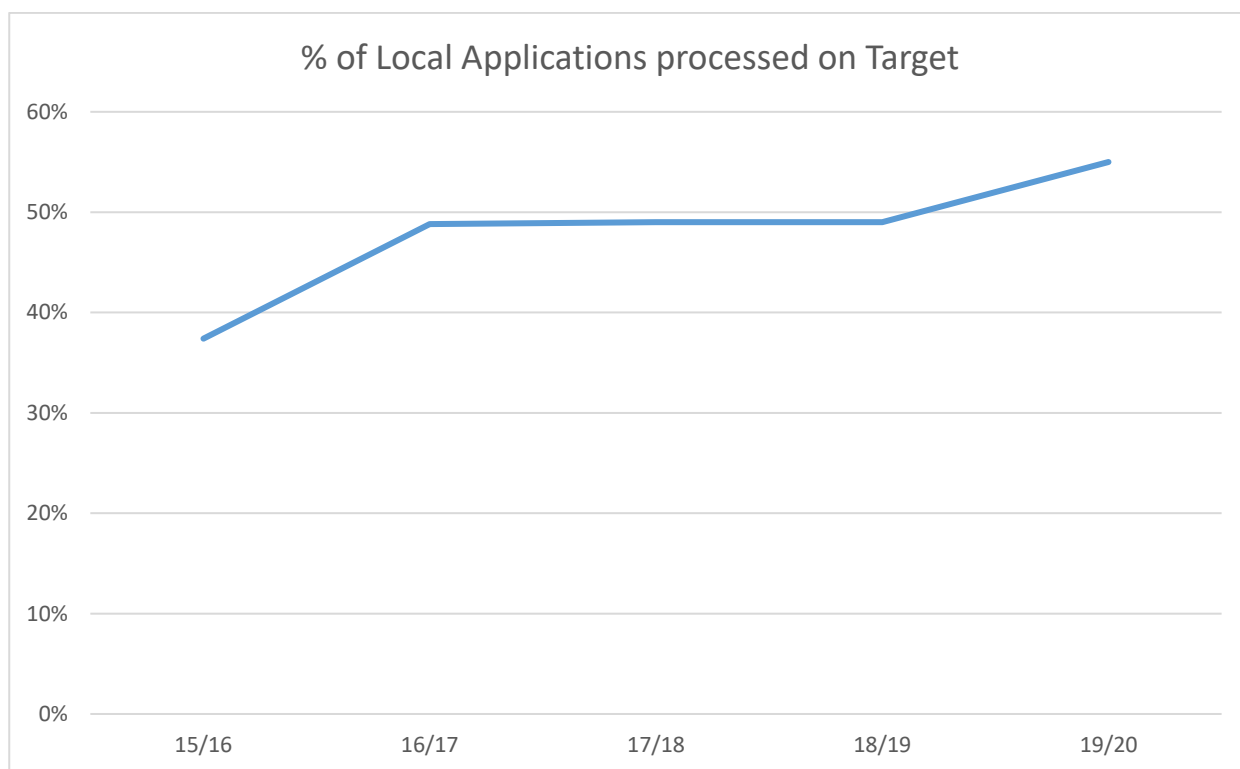
The number of local applications received is 1,544 which is an 11% decrease on the same period last year (1,731).



Local applications account for 65% of decisions issued which is 17% less than this period last year. (81%). This is attributable to the rise in the number of Other applications. 1,132 applications were decided/withdrawn in the period, 248 less than the same period last year. Last year the average processing time was 15.2 weeks whereas this year the average processing time is 14 weeks, which is 1 week under the target of 15 weeks. This is the same as the regional average of 14 weeks.

### Local Application Performance over last 5 years

Local Applications	Received	Decided/ withdrawn	Average Processing Time (Weeks)	Target Processing Time (Weeks)	% of cases processed within Target
19/20	1,544	1,602	14	15	55%
18/19	1,731	1,850	15.2	15	49%
17/18	1,557	1,850	15.3	15	49%
16/17	1,759	1,727	15.6	15	48.8%
15/16	1,788	1,313	19.6	15	37.4%



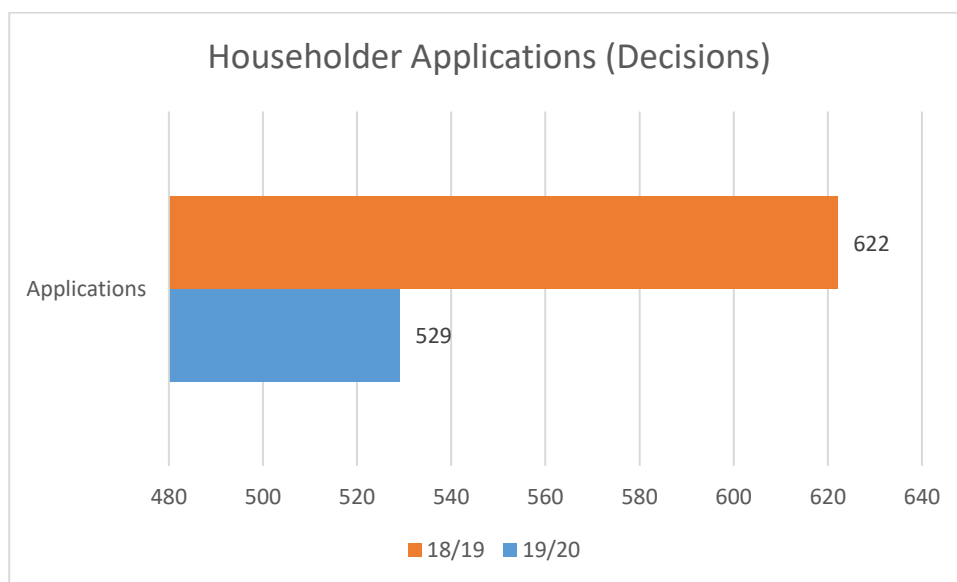
## Performance Indicators for Householder applications

The largest number of local applications processed relate to householder applications. These include extensions, conservatories, loft conversions, dormer windows, garages, car ports and outbuildings.

In 2019-20 there were 535 householder applications received, this is 5% less than the previous year (564).

The number of householder decisions has decreased by 15% from 622 in 2018- 19 to 529 in 2019-20.

Our internal Key Performance Indicator for processing Householder applications is 12 weeks. Performance up to 31 March 2020 is 10.4 weeks. In the same period last year performance was 13 weeks, representing an improvement of 2.6 weeks.



# Processing

## **Time Taken to Validate**

Validation is the process of checking whether all the information which is legally required to be submitted with an application has been provided. The time taken to validate a planning application is a vital part of the planning process. The quicker an application can be validated the quicker the application is allocated to a case officer for processing. Delays with validation can have an impact on the ability to achieve statutory and corporate targets.

The internal target for validating a planning application is 10 days depending on its complexity. In 2019-20 the average time taken to validate a planning application is 12 days.

## **Site Visits**

The time taken to carry out site visits is also an important element of the application processing – the sooner we visit the site the sooner we can form a view as to whether a proposal may be acceptable or not. As part of our operating principles we have introduced a target for this to be carried out within 21 days. The average for 2019 -20 is 23 days.

## **Statutory Consultee Performance**

Statutory consultees are organisations and bodies, defined by statute, who must be consulted on relevant planning applications (these include the majority of the Government Departments).

Available figures indicate that up to 31 March 2020 33% of all consultation responses were returned outside the 21-day statutory deadline.

## Planning Committee

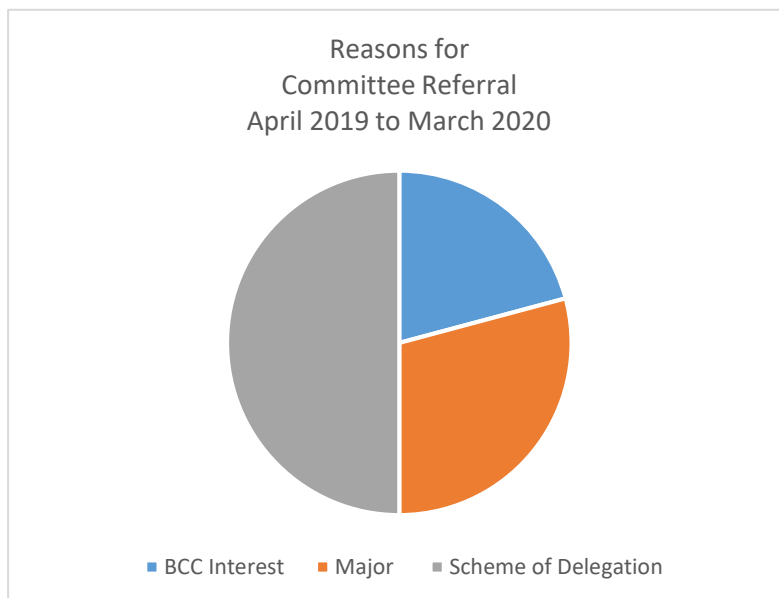
Between 1 April and 31 March 2020 the Committee considered a total of 134 applications, including 9 applications brought back to committee for reconsideration and 46 Major applications.

There were three Pre determination Hearings during the period.

Committee has 95% approval rate.

In this period, the Committee decided against the officer recommendation (refusal) on 2 occasions.

In 2019-20 the Committee hosted 89 deputations to speak.



# Appeals

Appeals	New	Dismissed	Allowed	Split Decision	withdrawn
1 Apr to 31 March 2020	57	22	21	0	7

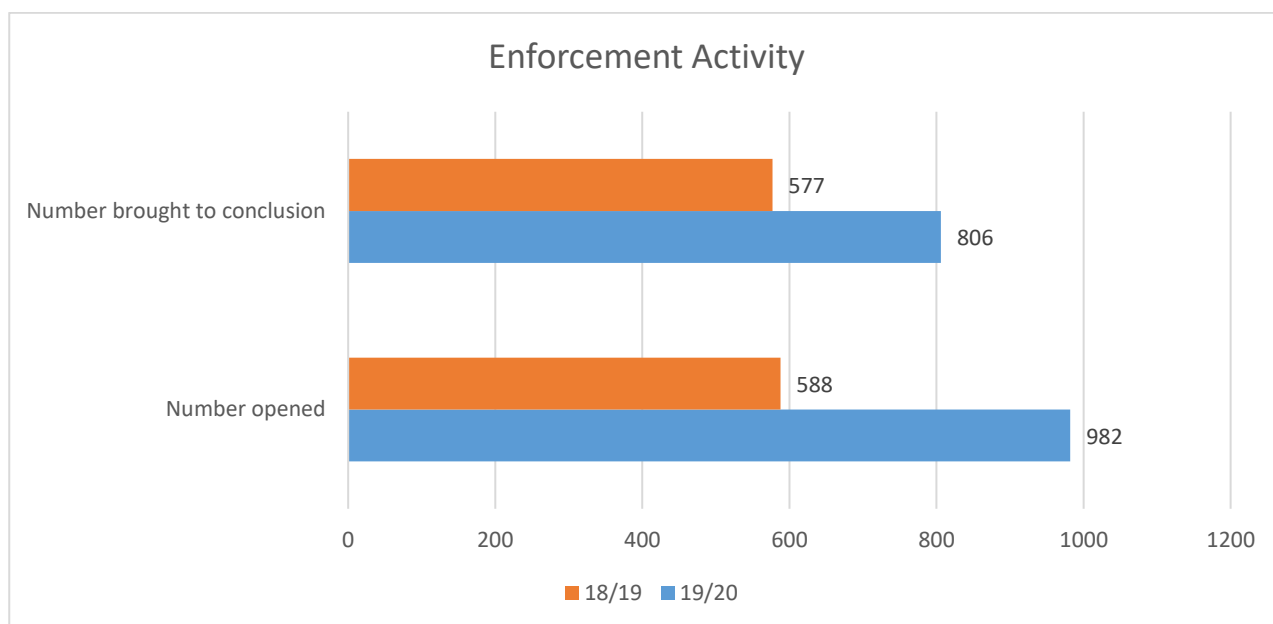
Applicants have the right to appeal refusal of planning permission or the imposition of a planning condition within 4 months of the date of the decision. Appeals are made to the Planning Appeals Commission.

Up to 31 March 2020, 123 applications/consents were refused permission, this is 5% of all applications decided. 57 new appeals were submitted to the Planning Appeals Commission although it should be noted that as there is up to 4 months to submit an appeal the figures cannot be directly correlated. The number of appeals submitted is 10 more than the same period last year.

Up to 31 March 2020 there was almost a 50/50 split between appeal decisions allowed and dismissed. This is a higher than usual where it is expected that approximately 30% of appeals would be allowed. In accordance with the recommendations of the 2019 internal audit of the Planning Service, processes have been introduced to better understand appeal decisions so that lessons can be learned.

# Compliance and Enforcement Activity

**The Statutory target is that 70% of all enforcement cases are progressed to conclusion within 39 weeks of receipt of complaint.**



The number of enforcement cases opened up to 31 March 2020 was 982 – an increase of 67% over the previous year. The reason for the rise in enforcement cases includes an increase in the number of complaints about estate agent signs, A board signs, pavement cafes and Air B&Bs. The Enforcement team has also been more proactive in monitoring conditions with breaches of conditions identified.

The number of enforcement cases concluded during the period was 806, almost 40% more than the previous year.

Of the cases closed the two main reasons for closure were that no breach had occurred (23%) and that cases had been remedied or resolved. (50%). Twenty cases were immune from enforcement action, 110 cases subsequently granted planning permission, 1 was allowed on Appeal and in 83 cases it was not considered expedient to pursue enforcement action as the breaches were considered minor in nature. There were 5 prosecutions initiated with 2 convictions relating to unauthorised advertisements that were not removed.

The number of live enforcement cases at the end of 2019/20 was 485 compared to 322 at the end of 2018/19.

Up to 31 March 2020, 93% of enforcement cases reached conclusion within 39 weeks. This is 23% above statutory target.

## Conclusion

Overall performance during this period is extremely positive with improvement across all areas. We are exceeding the statutory processing targets for both local applications and enforcement and while we are not yet meeting the performance target for processing major applications, overall performance has improved by 4.4 weeks in the past year, and by 14 weeks since the year before that. It is pleasing to note the continued upward improvement trend for the overall % of applications decided on target too.

Another important point to note is the 75% increase in the number of "Other Development" applications submitted and subsequent increase in "Other Development" decisions. This work falls outside the statutory performance targets but currently make up over 42% of applications received. This is primarily due to the HMO Licensing regime which requires confirmation that the use of any new HMO house is lawful in planning terms (CLUD). This trend is expected to continue over the next 2 -3 years.

There has also been a significant increase in applications to discharge conditions. This is viewed as a positive trend as developers move to implement planning approvals. It should be noted Discharge of Condition applications, and many forms of "Other Development" applications, do not attract a fee yet they cumulatively involve significant work. The Council alongside other local councils is lobbying the Department for Infrastructure to introduce fees for those types of application as there is substantial cost to the Council in processing these applications.

Performance by statutory consultees remains a concern and we continue to engage locally and work with our consultees to ensure that all application but particularly major applications are not delayed because of this. In addition, and following a Departmental review into the planning system in Northern Ireland with particular focus on the role of statutory, a cross-government Planning Forum of senior leaders has now been established.

The Council has seen a significant rise in new enforcement complaints (up 48% over last year). The Council's planning enforcement function has recently been subject to an internal audit. The Planning Service is working through its recommendations during the coming year with the aim of improving processes, communication with complainants and quality of customer service.

The role of a Planning Committee in Belfast City Council is a crucial one, as it is responsible for making considered decisions on significant, sometimes contentious applications. During the past year these have included 1,200 residential units, 2 warehouse buildings, sport pitches, a 6 lane swimming pool, 3 public realm improvements, student accommodation, restaurants, a primary school, primary healthcare centre and telecommunication masts to name but a few.

The Planning Service continues to work through and evolve its Improvement Plan, with many actions completed and new areas of work identified. An update will be reported to the Planning Committee in the near future. One of the recommendations is to undertake a review of the Council's Planning Application Checklist, first published in November 2018, to understand what impact it has had on the quality of application submissions and processing times.



## Recommendations

Recommendations arising from this performance report and ongoing improvement works are to:-

- Continue to monitor and report on performance to the Planning Committee;
- Continue to implement and update the Planning Service's Improvement Plan;
- Support the implementation of the replacement NI Planning Portal (expected to go live end of 2021/early 2022);
- Review the Application Checklist to understand the impact it has had on the quality of planning applications and processing times and share these findings with the Department and other councils;
- Continue to implement the recommendations of the internal audit of planning enforcement; and
- Participate in the newly established regional forums to improve the role of statutory consultees in the planning application process and improve the effectiveness of the development management process.