



CAI.51 16/17

Committee: Challenge and Improvement

Date 4 April 2017

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Subject: Development Management Team update covering performance improvements, staffing, income and duty planner arrangements.

Report by:

Chief Operating Officer

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Purpose / Summary:

To provide members with an update on performance, staffing and fee income in the Development Management Team.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1) That members note the contents of this report and support the continued changes within the Development Management section to sustain an improved service delivery.
- 2) That following this report members agree that performance of the Development Management Service is to be reported in line with other services via Progress and Delivery Reports (as agreed by Members of Challenge and Improvement Committee at their meeting on 11 October 2016).

IMPLICATIONS

Legal: none arising from this report.

Financial : Fee income from planning application fees has exceeded budget targets, as forecast throughout the year and reported to C&I Committee on 11 October 2016

Staffing: As outlined within this report additional staffing has been a core focus and a number of appointments have been made.

Equality and Diversity including Human Rights : n/a

Risk Assessment : n/a

Climate Related Risks and Opportunities : n/a

Title and Location of any Background Papers used in the preparation of this report:

DM Performance Update – October 2016 <https://www.west-lindsey.gov.uk/easysiteweb/getresource.axd?assetid=23086&type=0&servicetype=1>

Call in and Urgency:

Is the decision one which Rule 14.7 of the Scrutiny Procedure Rules apply?

i.e. is the report exempt from being called in due to urgency (in consultation with C&I chairman)

Yes

No

Key Decision:

A matter which affects two or more wards, or has significant financial implications

Yes

No

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The last six months have been an exceptionally busy period for the Development Management Team and wider planning services within the Council. This report demonstrates that the significant improvements that were last reported to members of the Challenge and Improvement Committee in October 2016 have not only been sustained, but have been improved further. During this time a number of other important service improvements have been implemented to collectively provide a sound and reliable Development Management team that is at the heart of delivering the district's ambitious growth agenda.
- 1.2 Members will recall that in 2015 the Council identified that it was not meeting national targets in respect of determining non-major planning applications.
- 1.3 An improvement plan was implemented to address the weaknesses that had caused the poor performance, predominantly these included; a lack of capacity to deal with major applications, the loss of experienced staff and a leadership-void in the service.
- 1.4 Government funded sector support provided by the Planning Advisory Service led to the "Planning Improvement – Peer Challenge" in October 2015. The service positively responded to this additional support and embraced the improvement plan, and as a result have surpassed all targets for determining both non-major and major planning applications throughout 2016.
- 1.5 Maintaining a high performing planning service is an essential component of the Council being able to credibly champion and deliver on it's the commitment to housing and economic growth across the district. Members will be familiar with how the Council is employing a broad range of tools that the Government has provided to encourage accelerated growth, including:
- Local Development Orders (of which it has two);
 - Enterprise Zones (it has a Food Enterprise Zone);
 - Housing Zone (to help delivery housing in areas of market failure);
 - Support for Neighbourhood Planning (33 designated neighbourhood planning areas and 6 made neighbourhood plans promoting housing growth);
 - Levels of New Homes Bonus significantly above the national average
 - A Self-build pilot
- 1.6 In addition to the above measures, and in parallel to developing an improved Development Management service, the Council have made significant progress towards the adoption of the new Central Lincolnshire Local Plan (anticipated to be in place by the end of April 2017) that will deliver significant housing and employment growth throughout the period to 2036.
- 1.7 The Council has also recently completed the public examination stage of a Community Infrastructure Levy (held on 2 March 2017). This is an important component for delivering the infrastructure that will underpin future growth, and represents the final stages of nearly three years of work by a number of officers.
- 1.8 This report reflects on the above success, provides an update on fee income, explores the current position with regards to staff resources and the duty planner service and looks ahead to some of the important changes to come.

2.0 Performance in Development Management

2.1 As reported to Members in October 2016, performance for determining planning applications within the timescales set out by Government had substantially improved during 2016, compared to the period of underperformance in late 2014 and 2015.

2.2 The targets set by Government are for an average of 50% of Major planning applications, and 65% of non-major planning applications to be determined 'in time'. ('In time' refers to either the 8 weeks determination period for non-major applications, the 13 week determination period for major applications, or within an extended determination period agreed in writing by the applicant.)

2.3 The Government use a two-year rolling assessment period to calculate whether each Local Planning Authority's performance is meeting these targets. For the 2014-2016 period the Council identified in mid-2015 that it was at serious risk of missing the target in respect of non-major applications. As a result, the Council undertook a number of significant steps, including;

- Adopting an improvement plan, developed with the assistance of external challenge provided by the Planning Advisory Service
- Resourcing the improvement plan with permanent staff, additional management and leadership.
- Improving corporate oversight and governance of the service with regular reports to the Governance Leadership Team and the Council's Challenge and Improvement Committee (Overview and Scrutiny).

2.4 Members will recall that these issues were explored in greater detail in the report presented in October 2016. Having built on these further during the past 4 months, the Development Management service have continued to achieve a level of performance that significantly exceeded the national targets in every quarter of 2016, as set out below.

2.5 In terms of non-major planning applications, against a target of 65%, the Council achieved:

- **Qtr 1** of the calendar year 2016 **80%** of non-majors determined on time;
- **Qtr. 2** of the calendar year 2016 **93%** of non-majors determined on time;
- **Qtr. 3** of the calendar year 2016 **93%** of non-majors determined on time;
- **Qtr. 4** of the calendar year 2016 **92%** of non-majors determined on time.

The average determination time for non-major planning applications in WLDC for the 2016 calendar year was therefore **89.5%**, **against a national target of 65%**.

2.6 The Development Management Service has also continued to perform strongly in its determination of Major applications. Over the two year assessment period, the figure for applications determined in time is 68% (the Government target is 50%). This 2 year average figure reflects the slower performance in late 2014 and early 2015, and is not representative of how the team has worked during the past 12 months. For example, since April 2016, the section have determined **88%** of all major applications on time (and for the last four months of 2016 the section achieved 100% of major applications determined on time).

2.7 The performance issues previously identified have therefore been positively and proactively responded to and as a result of the changes embedded in the team, Development Management are now consistently exceeding all performance targets each month.

3.0 Staffing Update

3.1 Members will recall that the last report explained how the two key priorities in respect of staffing had been met, namely the appointment of a permanent manager for the team and then to address the resourcing needs going forward by implementing sustainable solutions.

3.2 As reported to members in October, a number of vacancies had already been filled during the summer and autumn of 2016, and since that time a number of further appointments have been successfully completed to conclude the recruitment process in the team.

3.3 It has been a priority for the new Planning Services Manager to maintain a suitable level of resources within the team, and with this in mind the reliance on interim agency staff that was present in March 2016 has now been entirely eliminated.

3.4 Recruitment in late 2016 has resulted in permanent appointments to the three remaining vacant positions of Assistant Team Manager, Senior Development Management Officer and Development Management Officer. By mid-February 2017 all of these post-holders had commenced their new roles.

3.5 Securing experienced permanent staff not only creates an ability to increase the quality of decisions, build continuity and enhance local understanding (certainly when compared to the use of agency staff from outside the local area), but it is also far more cost effective. All of the recruitment described above has been achieved within the scope of existing budgets and as a result the section has maintained an extremely healthy budget position – in fact overall service costs have been reduced.

3.6 Maintaining an appropriate level of resources remains a core focus for managing the team effectively and this will continue to be monitored and adjusted accordingly.

3.7 **Duty Planner Service** – The team continue to operate a duty planner service to provide general planning advice. This is delivered in a flexible way according to customer preference; normally advice is provided in the form of telephone advice, but can also be in the form of face to face meetings at the Guildhall by prior appointment, or written advice by letter or email.

3.8 Members will be aware that since 2011 the Council have operated a very successful pre-application advice service (see also fee income at para 5.5 of this report). That service remains the appropriate referral route for any potential applicants that want detailed planning advice or wish to discuss a particular scheme in any detail, and offers very good value to the customer in comparison to professional planning advice from a private consultant. The duty planner service is provided in addition to the pre-application service, for the purposes of providing high-level guidance to customers with more generic planning enquiries.

3.9 Typical general enquiries may include advice on how to make an application, or how to make a consultation response and, frequently, to report possible enforcement

matters (the latter are immediately referred to the separate enforcement section). The Duty Planner service is the appropriate mechanism for responding to general enquiries, whereas any questions relating to live planning applications are normally referred to the relevant case officer unless a member of the customer care team is able to provide an immediate answer (or another officer in their absence).

3.10 The duty planner service operates all day on every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, with a different planning officer providing dedicated support on each of these days. In reality it is often the case that officers or members of the planning customer care team will seek to provide responses outside of these set days if possible, however where that is not possible the team operate the same customer call-back service that is place for all services throughout the Council. Customers wishing to email enquiries to the team are encouraged to use the Planning Customer Care address, and these emails are now monitored throughout every working day.

3.11 In light of current resources and the substantial shift in the way that customers choose to contact the Development management service (with the majority of enquiries now arriving electronically via the website or by email) this service is considered to be working very effectively, but will be reviewed if service demands continue to change. As part of this continuous review, during the past six months the team have worked with the Customer First Strategic Lead, who identified that the number of people choosing to telephone the team is reducing over time, in favour of alternative electronic means. Evidence also shows that in direct response to previous concerns raised by Members, during the past year the team has demonstrated an improved track record of answering phone calls that is comparable to, or in some cases better than, any other part of the Council.

4.0 Looking ahead

4.1 During the next few months there are a number of very significant events taking place that will directly affect both the Development Management team, the wider Council and are also of district-wide importance, including;

- a number of major appeal hearings and public inquiries
- adoption of the Central Lincolnshire Local Plan (note; upon adoption by the Central Lincolnshire Joint Strategic Planning Committee this will formally replace the existing West Lindsey Local Plan with immediate effect).
- introduction of the West Lindsey Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)
- introduction of a new software system to enhance efficiency and extend the online service provision for customers
- an increasing number of all application types are expected once the new local plan is formally adopted
- further applications relating to the development of Gainsborough's Urban Extensions and Housing Zone sites

4.2 In addition to the above, and being considered under the appropriate governance arrangements according to each process, officers have worked with members to;

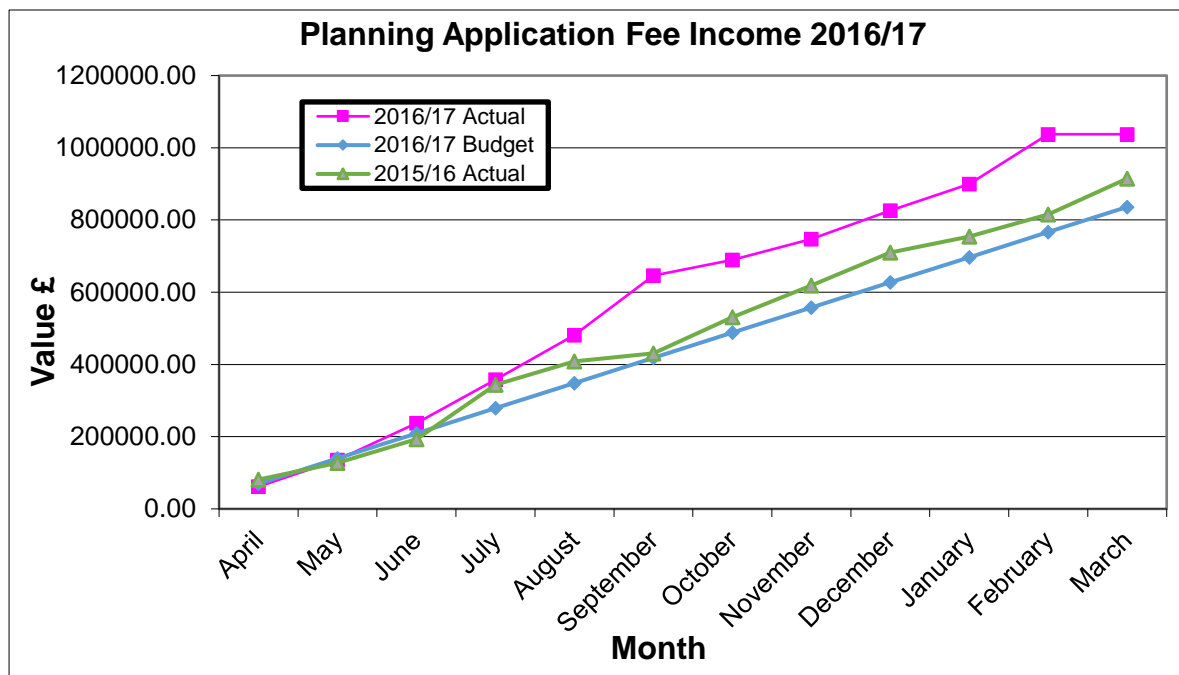
- 1) Agree the scope of an audit of Development Management that is due to take place in May/June 2017
- 2) Review and update the Constitution and Protocols that set out how the Development Management team operates and the way that decisions are made.

5.0 Planning Fees

5.1 As outlined in earlier reports to members, the increase in the quantum and form of applications received during the year has been positively reflected in fee income.

5.2 As shown in Table 1 income this year has been consistently higher than the same period last year and has exceeded the annual budget target (despite the significant investment in enhancing staff resources). At the end of February 2017 actual income from fees had exceeded £1.03m against a budget forecast target of £766,545

5.3 **Table 1 – Planning Application Fee Income 1st April 2016 to 28th February 2017**



Source: WLDC Finance Team February 2017

5.4 Whilst income cannot be directly controlled by the Council, the wider regeneration and spatial planning agendas are promoting the district for growth and this, coupled with the additional confidence of a newly adopted local plan, is likely to ensure that the current workload and additional income will continue well into the next financial year. In turn this will ensure that any additional resources required to keep up with these growing service demands are covered on a cost-neutral basis to the authority.

5.5 In addition to planning application fees, the pre-application service continues to be well received and well-used by customers. In the year to date, income from this service continues to exceed the budget profile by around 20%, with income for 2016/17 already exceeding £55k.

5.6 On 7 February 2017 The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) published the White Paper *“Fixing our broken housing market”*. The paper set out a broad range of reforms that government plans to introduce to help reform the housing market and increase the supply of new homes.

5.7 One of the proposals includes the opportunity for local planning authorities (LPA’s) to increase planning application fees by 20%. Members will recall that at present fees are set centrally by Government (LPA’s have no powers to adjust fees locally) and a number of nation-wide assessments have consistently found that the current

fees do not fully cover the costs of delivering a professional planning service. The White Paper proposes to address that situation by enabling LPA's to increase fees provided that additional sums raised are reinvested into the planning service. There is very limited time to register interest in this proposal with DCLG, and the matter will therefore be reported in more detail to Council at their meeting on 10 April 2017.

6.0 Summary

6.1 The evidence set out in this report reflects that a stable and consistently well-performing Development Management service is now firmly established in the Council. The changes that have been embedded in the section ensure that customers benefit from a reliable and efficient service that is delivered in a way that is becoming better suited to their needs and expectations.

6.2 Achieving and sustaining this substantial improvement has been an essential component of restoring confidence in the planning service and this will be extremely important going forward as the Council seeks to support and deliver the ambitious growth targets set out in the new local plan. Month on month, the team have consistently performed significantly above the national targets set by Government.

6.3 Income from planning fees has been positively reinvested to the benefit of the planning team and by establishing a properly planned and permanent workforce the cost of delivering the service has improved, in addition to the other consequential benefits such as embedding a more resilient planning service, improving staff morale and providing much improved business continuity to customers.

6.4 Opportunities to development the team further and raise income have been presented by Government and these could be used to ensure that the section continues to strengthen and grow further.

6.5 Customer care is at the heart of the way that the team operates and the professional service provided is attracting positive feedback from developers and agents. Service delivery continues to be developed so that resources are focused on delivering a planning service that fits with its customer's needs, and this has meant shifting away from some of the traditional ways of working in the past. Customers expect more contact and functions to be available electronically. The team have positively responded to this and this area will be benefitted further from the investment in a new software system due to be launched later this year.

6.0 Recommendations:

6.1 1) That members note the contents of this report and support the continued changes within the Development Management section to sustain an improved service delivery.

6.2 2) That following this report members agree that performance of the Development Management Service is to be reported in line with other services via Progress and Delivery Reports (as agreed by Members of Challenge and Improvement Committee at their meeting on 11 October 2016).