

PLACE SCRUTINY BOARD, Thursday, 17th August, 2023

PRESENT: Councillor Dickenson (Chair)

Councillors: Clarke, Ahmed, Atkinson, Brundell, Caffrey, Foster, Holdsworth, Kimber and Wood

13 SUBSTITUTES NOMINATED FOR THIS MEETING AND APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies for absence were received.

(Councillor Caffrey arrived at 18.09.)

(Councillor Wood arrived at 18.15.)

(The meeting closed at 20.14.)

14 MINUTES OF THE MEETINGS HELD ON 27TH JUNE AND 13TH JULY 2023

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meetings of the Place Scrutiny Board held on 27th June and 13th July 2023, be approved as a correct record, and signed by the Chair.

15 DEPUTATIONS

There were no deputations received.

16 REVIEW OF PROGRESS MADE ON IMPLEMENTING IMPROVEMENTS TO PLANNING PERFORMANCE.

The Corporate Lead, Planning submitted a written report providing an update on the progress that had been made improving the performance of the Planning Service. The report set out some of the challenges and opportunities going forward, and next steps. In April 2023, the Secretary of State wrote to the Council advising that despite recent data showing improvement, he was minded to 'designate' the Council for its performance on the determination of non-major planning applications. However, before formally designating the Council, we were given the opportunity to demonstrate improved performance by June 2023.

Since April 2023 performance had continued to improve and consistently exceeded the statutory target by a significant margin. Progress on performance was reported back to the Secretary of State in mid-July, and a response was currently awaited. Significant progress had been made over the past six months in the following areas:

- Staffing/Recruitment.
- Performance.
- Communication and Customer Service.
- Exploring and Investing in New Technologies.
- Ongoing preparation of Planning documents following the adoption of the Local Plan.

Going forward there were significant changes and reforms to the Planning system expected with improved resourcing to Planning teams via increased application fees and other Government initiatives and Mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain. There were challenges and opportunities on the horizon linked to Government reforms to the Planning system and Officers were developing next steps in the light of these. Work was required to scope out the future involvement of the Place Scrutiny Board in the development of the Planning Service.

Councillor Hutchinson attended the meeting as Chair of the Planning Committee and addressed the Board. He advised that the Planning Committee only approved a minority of applications, as most were approved by Officers without reference to the Committee and he was grateful to Officers for their training and the newly adopted Local Plan. Planning Officers were in the process of producing a design code for buildings and there was a Community Review Panel involved to ensure the document was as good as it could be. He drew attention to the master planning design code proposed for the garden suburbs and encouraged Members to participate in the public consultation due to start.

During discussions Members commented on the following issues:

- Would Officers be overseeing the Artificial Intelligence (AI) apps? In response, Officers advised that the AI was just a tool, and they would be overseeing the apps.
- With regards to the “extension of time” on applications, what were the reasons for the extensions? In response, Officers advised that Government had introduced the power to extend time on applications and explained the process and some of the reasons why an extension may be required. Going forward Officers would look at a wider range of performance measures and would manage down the use of “extensions of time”.
- Was there an end-date to the agile app package trial? In response, Officers advised that the software was operational, but was in the phase of being tested and was close to being finalised.
- The list of Officers in three different teams, were they all carrying out similar roles? In response, Officers explained the team structure and the roles within each team and agreed to make a revision of the chart to make this clearer.
- The main complaint Members received was about not receiving a response to an enquiry. Could there be a central hub/portal contact for Members so that enquiries could be forwarded to the correct Officer? In response, Officers advised that they were looking at customer service to reset the approach and at the web presence and the information it provided.
- Had Officers managed to stave off the Secretary of State and when would a response be received? In response, Officers advised that they were still awaiting the response, but they had done all that they had been asked to do.

- The department had been firefighting for some time, how long would this carry on for? In response, Officers advised that they had now moved out of the firefighting position and were achieving compliant performance. They had not yet reached a situation where they were doing everything they would like to do, with regards to customer service and the use of “extensions of time” but were doing all they could to improve these areas.
- How was team morale? In response, Officers advised that team morale was much better than it was 12 months ago. There were many new staff that were enthusiastic and keen to learn. There was a need to achieve more consistency with caseloads.
- Was there sufficient opportunity for personal reviews and supervision in teams to ensure all the team had a chance to share their concerns and give feedback? In response, Officers advised that this was a key consideration in the structure. With the given number of team leaders with oversight and mentoring, and with regular team meetings now embedded.
- With regards to futureproofing, were there processes in place to develop systems to ensure the department did not regress? In response, Officers advised that a key aspect was to keep performance on the corporate radar. There would be corporate visibility around key indicators to ensure things were going well with corrective actions if not.

IT WAS AGREED that the:

(a) progress made, and next steps be noted; and

(b) Corporate Lead, Planning, Director, Regeneration and Strategy and Scrutiny Support Officers be requested to meet to consider future reports on new planning policy, such as biodiversity and reducing the frequency of performance reporting.

17 CLIMATE CHANGE - SERVICE PLANS AND PRIORITIES

The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Climate Action, Active Travel and Housing and the Director, Public Health gave a presentation which provided an update on the Climate Emergency, Climate Change, Service Plans and Priorities which outlined some of the things the team were working on to achieve the Council’s ambition of Net Zero in Calderdale. The Climate Action Partnership, Chaired by Councillor Patient, brought together Councillors, voluntary sector organisations and the private sector. By building partnerships with a wide range of people and organisations the Council had developed a Climate Action Plan for the whole of Calderdale. Working together, it would go beyond what the Council could do alone.

The presentation provided details of the following themed groups that had been working hard to develop a range of activities for the Climate Action Plan:

- The Community Climate Action themed group were working on green community advice hubs, neighbourhood climate action plans and Climate justice.

- The Warm and Resilient Buildings themed group were working on improving energy efficiency, new home standards and impact of flooding.
- The Green Economy themed group were working on business practices, supply chains and skills development.
- The Transport and Getting Around themed group were working on walking, cycling, public transport, electric vehicles, and clean air strategy.
- The Land and Nature themed group were working on conservation and carbon storage, ecological emergency, and landscape scale interventions.

Since February 2023 the Council had been working on its Local Energy Area Plan (LEAP). A LEAP recognised that local areas were different in their people, geography, building stock, energy networks and priorities. Using data to model energy use and options for decarbonisation helped plan interventions and infrastructure needs and Stakeholder engagement to understand barriers and opportunities. Other projects included:

- Climate Leadership Academy.
- £518k distributed via our Climate Emergency Fund.
- Community Grants for Climate Action.
- Solar PV for Schools & Community Buildings.

During discussions Members commented on the following issues:

- With regards to retrofitting, what was being done about future planning and new housing being built? In response, Councillor Patient advised that more sustainable models were being delivered and developers were thinking more about real energy efficiency measures. Market conditions were changing, and the supplementary planning documents would enhance that. Officers advised that they had to work within the framework the Government sets and with planning policies. They were working with developers and landlords trying to set a higher ambition for new builds, but this needed to be balanced with housing needing to be more affordable. There were concerns with existing stock and attention needed to be about what could be done with the existing stock.
- It was important to optimise the use of heat pump technology. There were concerns that under the current building standards new housing would require retrofitting in about 15 years. In response, Officers advised that there needed to be a balance of costs and outlined an example of the Cow Green site and all the work with development and the cost ratio where it had taken months of effort to keep the scheme at level 1. There were no easy solutions. Councillor Patient advised that there was a wider conversation re place, marketing and creating places in Calderdale and there was a need to try and do things in a holistic way.
- The public transport funding for a £2 cap fare was coming to an end in October and bus providers may look to reduce services. How would Officers tackle the

problem of constant pressures on bus services? In response, Officers advised that the transition to different ways of travel when public service did not meet need was problematic. The Council were feeding into the rail travel consultation in West Yorkshire. Conversations with colleagues in West Yorkshire were looking at public transport in a holistic way.

- Decent public transport was needed for the public that needed to commute. In response, Councillor Patient advised that it was about choices and giving people the opportunity to live and work in Calderdale. This had got to be balanced with the choices in place.
- There had been some good progress with climate change but could there be more research on lithium and its impact more widely. In response, Councillor Patient advised that he was prepared to look at all and every option.
- Where would the policy direction take us going forward with the LEAP schemes, low traffic neighbourhoods (LTN), air quality and clean air zones? In response, Councillor Patient advised that there could be several LTNs. The air quality in Calderdale was better than surrounding areas but every option to look to mitigate air quality would be considered.
- There was an increasing tendency to pave front gardens to make parking spaces, which could cause extra run-off. What could be done to encourage householders that if they must pave their garden, it should be in a manner that benefited the environment. In response, Officers advised that this was a good example of why the “influencing strategy (IS)” was important in communities to help them think how to raise issues around the impacts of flooding etc. Influencing reminds people that their land may impact on a neighbour. Councillor Patient highlighted the “Slow the Flow” links that would be helpful and advised that sustainable urban drainage systems would be part of the planning process.
- Members were advised that there was a “Climate Emergency Newsletter” and all were encouraged to sign up for the newsletter.

IT WAS AGREED that the Climate Change, Service Plans and Priorities be noted.

18 WORK PROGRAMME 2023/24

The Senior Scrutiny Officer submitted a written report which gave Members an opportunity to discuss potential items to be included in the work programme for 2023/24 and suggestions were welcomed. The Senior Scrutiny Officer advised that Members could suggest any items they wished to be raised within the year.

The Chair referred to the “Review of progress made on implementing improvements to Planning Performance” that was on the Work Programme every 3 months and suggested that this could be moved to every 6 months.

The Senior Scrutiny Officer introduced Libby Whiley, the new Assistant Scrutiny Support Officer who would be responsible for supporting this Board.

Members discussed whether the “Bio Diversity” report scheduled to be considered by the Board in the new year, could include Enforcement and Conservation.

Members also discussed a petition received regarding a “playground at Bailiff Bridge” due to be considered at the Board meeting to be held in September, be considered as an in-person meeting in the community of Bailiff Bridge or in the Town Hall, Halifax.

IT WAS AGREED that the:

- (a) Board welcomed the new Assistant Scrutiny Support Officer, Libby Whiley;
- (b) Director, Regeneration and Strategy and the Senior Scrutiny Officer be requested to investigate whether “Bio Diversity”, “Planning Enforcement” and “Conservation” could be incorporated into one report to be included on the Work Programme;
- (c) report on “Bereavement Services” scheduled to be considered by the Board on the 4th January 2024, be scheduled to be considered at the meeting to be held on 7th March 2024, and that the Board consider whether this meeting should be held at Park Wood Crematorium; and
- (d) Board meeting scheduled to be held on 14th September 2023 be a “in-person” meeting in the Town Hall, Halifax.