Report to Place Scrutiny Board

Meeting Date	Thursday 16 June 2022
Subject	Planning Service Improvement Plan
Wards Affected	All
Report of	Richard Seaman – Corporate Lead – Planning Regeneration & Strategy

Why is it coming here?

To update and seek feedback from Members of the Board following consideration of a report relating to this subject on 20 January 2022, when it was agreed that an Improvement Plan should be prepared by June 2022 and adopted by Cabinet.

What are the key points?

- In January 2022 Place Scrutiny Board consider the findings of a peer review of the Planning Service that reported in November 2021. Since the January meeting an Improvement Plan has been prepared.
- The Plan has been discussed informally with staff and key Elected Members and the Planning Advisory Service.
- A number of key staff appointments have been completed since January; however, the staffing situation is not yet stable and there remains an important risk factor
- A number of work streams identified in the Improvement Plan are progressing at the present time; however, implementation will extend into 2023
- The Council's budget for 2022/23 onwards includes investment in the Planning Service
- A key priority for the Development Management team is to reduce the number of applications on hand (i.e., the number live applications awaiting a decision) to a level that is sustainable because this is a precursor to improved performance and customer satisfaction. The direction of travel for applications on hand is a gradual reduction
- Ongoing ownership and governance of the improvement process will be important.

Possible courses of action

The Board are requested to provide their observations on the Improvement Plan for consideration by Cabinet at a future meeting.

Contact Officer

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Should this report be exempt?

No

Report to Scrutiny Board

1. Background

In January 2022 Place Scrutiny Board considered the findings of a peer review of the Planning Service that reported in November 2021. Since the January meeting an Improvement Plan has been prepared (The Plan is attached as Appendix 1). The iteration of the Plan that is before the Board has been discussed informally with Planning Service staff and key Elected Members. The Plan has also been discussed with the Planning Advisory Service (PAS are part of the Local Government Association), who provided helpful feedback. PAS has also offered to assist with other activities including Member training.

Careful consideration has been given to the structure of the Improvement Plan in an effort to create a golden thread from the Council's priorities through to individual actions. The Plan is broken down into the areas of staffing & development; performance management; customer service; and governance. The links to the peer review recommendations are identified in the Plan.

The Plan aims to be as comprehensive as possible and as such it is expected that implementation will continue through 2022 into 2023. It is also likely that the Plan will need to evolve further to take account of the changing landscape – for example the Levelling Up Bill has signalled significant changes to the Planning system.

A number of work streams identified in the Improvement Plan are progressing at the present time. For example:

- The Service has made a number of key staff appointments, at service manager, team leader and principal officer levels. Unfortunately, though, the staffing situation is not yet stable and therefore remains an important risk factor. The Service needs to reduce its reliance on agency staff because this does not provide the resilience and continuity that we require.

- A performance management dashboard is currently being built to support the Development Management team. The dashboard will provide key performance indicator data and also background data to support officers managing caseloads;

- The new Development Manager is implementing changes to the organisation and working practices of Development Management. These changes focus on end-to-end management of cases, with an emphasis on taking decisions earlier and making case officers and managers more accountable for the progress of individual applications;

- A workforce analysis has been undertaken in order to provide more objective evidence about where the gaps in skills and experience lie. In response to this we will be implementing a programme of training and development tailored to the needs of the Service. This is important because we want to raise the capacity of existing staff as well as bringing in new blood.

The Council's budget for 2022/23 onwards includes budget investment in the Planning Service. In the current year there is £300,000 investment in Planning together with a one-off £311,000 to complete the examination and adoption of the Local Plan. In future years the £300,000 rises to £435,000 (reflecting the greater staffing costs in later years). This investment is supporting recruitment and development of staff.

A key priority for the Development Management team is to reduce the number of applications on hand (open cases) to a level that is sustainable. Applications on hand peaked at 838 in September 2021. Since then, the figure has gradually reduced to about 660, and the aim is to reduce this by another 200 cases over the next 6 months.

Although applications on hand is not a formal measure of performance in the sense of being a statutory performance indicator, it provides an indication of workload turnover and the size of any backlog of old cases, and therefore by extension, the effectiveness of casework management and customer satisfaction levels. Reducing the application backlog will in the short term reduce performance against the statutory speed of determination targets (8 weeks for minor/13 weeks for major applications); however, in the medium to long term it creates a foundation for consistent high performance and customer satisfaction.

Ongoing ownership and governance of the improvement process will be important going forward, in particular there is a need to continue engagement with key Elected Members who have a role in the Planning process – across Cabinet, Place Scrutiny Board, and Planning Committee. On the horizon are the anticipated adoption of the Local Plan, and major changes to the Planning system signalled through the Levelling Up Bill. The Improvement Plan will need to respond to these factors as we move forward in the coming months.

2. Main Issues for Scrutiny

The main issues for scrutiny are:

i. The contents of the Planning Service Improvement Plan;
ii. The next steps that need to be taken in the light of the Plan.

3. Further Action/Timescales

It is proposed that the Plan will be taken to Cabinet with the resolution of Place Scrutiny Board on 11 July 2022.

4. Options Appraisal

It is considered that the most appropriate response to the peer review was to prepare an Improvement Plan. Such Plans can be approached differently in terms of both their structure and content. The Plan appended to this report aims to reconcile being clear and logical, and also comprehensive and ambitious. The Plan has been drafted mindful of the need for objectives to be SMART – *Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound*.

5. Climate Change

An effective Planning Service will be in a stronger position to respond to the challenge presented by climate change.

6. Conclusion

An Improvement Plan has been prepared in the light of the Planning Service peer review and previous consideration of this issue by the Place Scrutiny Board in January 2022.
The Board is asked to discuss the Plan and provide feedback to accompany a future report to Cabinet.

7. Appendices & Background Documents

Appendix 1 – Planning Service Improvement Plan