

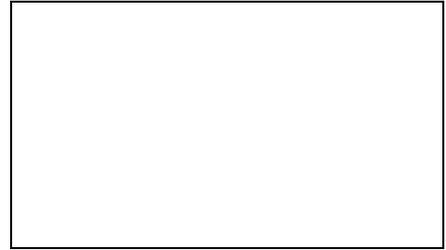
Calderdale MBC

Wards Affected
All

Cabinet

11 July 2022

Place Scrutiny Board – Recommendations on the Planning Service Improvement Plan



Report of Senior Scrutiny Officer, on behalf of Place Scrutiny Board

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 Place Scrutiny Board considered a report including the draft Planning Service Improvement Plan at a meeting on 16 June 2022. The report considered by Place Scrutiny Board, which includes the Planning Service Improvement Plan is attached as Appendix 1.
- 1.2 The Scrutiny Board received a detailed presentation of the report and asked a number of questions.
- 1.3 The Scrutiny Board decided to prepare a report to Cabinet setting out the issues raised and making recommendations to Cabinet.
- 1.4 The Scrutiny Board asked the Senior Scrutiny Officer to prepare a draft report and empowered the chair and deputy chair of the Scrutiny Board to sign off the report, given the short timescales.

2. Need for a decision

- 2.1 Place Scrutiny Board considers that the Planning Service Improvement Plan is a key part of the process for bringing about the improvements in the Planning Service identified in the peer review considered by Place Scrutiny Board in January 2022. Place Scrutiny Board welcomes the decision of Cabinet to consider the Planning Service Improvement Plan in line with the recommendation of the Board in January 2022 and recommends that Cabinet adopts the Planning Service Improvement Plan.
- 2.2 Place Scrutiny Board believes that there is a major risk to the implementation of the improvements in Planning services required following the peer review if there is not a strong and consistent focus on bringing sustainable improvements to the Planning Service at pace. The Scrutiny Board asks Cabinet to give the focus and support required to implement these improvements successfully. Place Scrutiny Board will contribute by scrutinising progress quarterly.
- 2.3 Place Scrutiny Board has made a number of recommendations that the Board considers will both add to the Improvement Plan and facilitate its implementation.

3. Recommendation

- 3.1 Cabinet and senior management need to clearly set out the scale of their ambition to improve the service and that that ambition should be quantifiable and should seek to implement improvements to the Planning service at pace.
- 3.2 Place Scrutiny Board welcomes the production of the Planning Service Improvement Plan and recommends that Cabinet should adopt the plan.
- 3.3 The Director of Regeneration and Strategy is asked to prepare a document tracking implementation of the actions set out in the Planning Service Improvement Plan. This needs to record when an action has been completed, but also any outcomes that arise from completing those actions.
- 3.4 Place Scrutiny Board supports the initiative of Regeneration and Strategy Directorate to prepare a performance management “dashboard” with the support of the Business Change and Performance Management team. This should help bring a clear focus to a complex and wide-ranging programme of activity. The Board would like to consider the dashboard when it meets on 20 October 2022.
- 3.5 Place Scrutiny Board welcomes the review of communication with customers of the service included in the Customer Service section of the Improvement Plan. This should include introducing or enhancing customer satisfaction measures. The Board would like to consider customer satisfaction when it meets on 5 January 2023.
- 3.6 Place Scrutiny Board recognises the challenges that the Council faces in the recruitment and retention of skilled and qualified staff and in reducing the use of agency staff. The Board recognises that recruitment and retention is a challenge in a number of Council departments, as is the use of agency staff. The Board asks Strategy and Performance Scrutiny Board to consider undertaking a Council-wide review of actions that can be taken to better promote Calderdale as a great place to work. The Board would like to receive an update on recruitment and retention issues when it meets on 20 October 2022.
- 3.7 Place Scrutiny Board supports the review of the approach to enforcement set out in the Improvement Plan. The Board would like to review Planning enforcement when it meets on 5 January 2023.

4. Background and/or details

- 4.1 The Planning Service commissioned a peer review from the Planning Officers Society (POS). The peer review was undertaken in 2021 and reported to Place Scrutiny Board in January 2022.
- 4.2 Place Scrutiny Board made the following recommendations when it discussed the peer review on 20 January 2022:
- (a) the Board welcomes the decision of the Corporate Lead -Planning to commission a peer review;
 - (b) the Board acknowledges the efforts and professionalism of staff in the Planning department and thanks them for their efforts;
 - (c) the Board finds the report of the peer review very helpful and recommends that the Planning Service accept all the recommendations of the report and takes immediate steps to implement all the recommendations of the report;
 - (d) the peer review recommends that reports should be submitted to the Place Scrutiny Board on a quarterly basis. The Board welcomes the recommendation and will schedule items into the work programme for March 2022, July 2022, October 2022, and January 2023. The Scrutiny Board will decide in January 2023 whether quarterly reporting needs to continue. In March 2022 [this discussion did not in fact take place]the Scrutiny Board will consider progress on those items identified by the peer review team as requiring immediate action. In July 2022 the Scrutiny Board will consider the Improvement Plan in response to all the recommendations that will have been prepared and adopted by Cabinet;
 - (e) in addition the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Regeneration and Strategy and the Director, Regeneration and Strategy are asked to meet informally with the Chair and Deputy Chair of the Scrutiny Board every two months so that the Chair and Deputy Chair can be given timely information about progress of the implementation plan. This will help them decide the content of regular updates to the Board at its formal meetings. It may be helpful for the Chair of Planning Committee to be invited to join these discussions;
 - (f) the Board agrees with the proposal that an Improvement Plan should be prepared by June 2022. Given its importance, the Scrutiny Board recommends that the Improvement Plan should be adopted by Cabinet in June 2022;
 - (g) the Board believes that the public have a right to read the peer review report and so requests that it be published on the Council's website immediately; (h) the Board recommends that the Governance and Business Committee review the terms of reference of Planning Committee with a view to explicitly including consideration of regular monitoring reports on performance, enforcement and appeal decisions and on the performance and operation of the Council's Planning service; and
 - (i) the Board will also monitor the use of additional budget if that increase is approved by Council.

- 4.3 The Scrutiny Board is pleased that an improvement plan has been prepared by the Planning Service within the timescales recommended by the Scrutiny Board and welcomed the offer from the Planning Service to bring the draft Improvement Plan to the Scrutiny Board on its way to Cabinet so that the Scrutiny Board could make recommendations to Cabinet if it wished to do so. The Scrutiny Board has the following comments to make on the Improvement Plan.
- 4.4 The Improvement Plan appears comprehensive and is cross referenced to the recommendations of the peer review, which the Board welcomes.
- 4.5 The Improvement Plan is set in the context of Cabinet priorities and sets out a number of behaviours, such as *understanding and responding to the needs of all customers – reducing uncertainty for customers and maintaining the reputation of the Council*. The Scrutiny Board supports this approach. Board Members asked about the ambition of the service, in the context of the previously stated ambition of the Council to become “the best Borough in the North”. Members understand that to be “top of the league” may require further additional resources to be allocated to the Planning Service and that the Council need to decide “what type of planning service it wants”. The Board considers that Cabinet and senior management need to set out clearly the scale of their ambition to improve the service and that that ambition should be quantifiable. This is the basis for the first recommendation of the Scrutiny Board.
- 4.6 Place Scrutiny Board welcomes the production of the Planning Service Improvement Plan, and the second recommendation of the Scrutiny Board is that Cabinet should adopt the Planning Service Improvement Plan.
- 4.7 The Improvement Plan sets out a large number of actions with a timescale stretching into next year. This is appropriate given the scale of the challenge. The Board is pleased that the service intends to prepare a tracking document to record progress against those actions. This needs to record when an action has been completed, but also any outcomes from completing those tasks. For example, the first action, “benchmark salaries” is marked as having been completed in February 2022. But the results of that benchmarking and actions flowing from the benchmark are not clear. The tracker needs to be far more than a yes/no record. This forms the basis of the third recommendation.
- 4.8 The Board was pleased to learn that the service is working with the Business Change and Performance Management team to design a dashboard, which will facilitate improving performance management in the service and the Board spent some time at the meeting discussing the necessity for robust key performance indicators. Members indicated that they would wish to see indicators of performance on; percentage of applications completed within 8 / week timescales; the use of agency staff; completion of 106 agreements; staff morale; and Planning Officer caseloads.
- 4.9 This should help bring a clear focus to a complex and wide-ranging range of activities. The Board would like to consider the dashboard when it meets on 20 October 2022. This is the fourth recommendation.

- 4.10 The importance of communication with the public was stressed by Members of the Board. The Board welcomes the review of communication with customers of the service included in the Customer Service section of the Improvement Plan and elsewhere. We hope that this will include introducing or enhancing customer satisfaction measures, which are not explicitly included in this section. The Board would like to consider customer satisfaction when it meets on 5 January 2023. This is the fifth recommendation.
- 4.11 The Board recognises the challenges that the Council faces in the recruitment and retention of skilled and qualified staff. The Board recognises that employing agency staff is often an expensive option and that agency staff may sometimes have less commitment to the area and the Council. The Board is pleased that the posts of Development Manager and Planning Strategy Manager have been filled. The Board would like to receive an update on recruitment and retention issues when it meets on 20 October 2022. The Board recognises that recruitment and retention is a challenge in a number of Council departments, as is the use of agency staff. The Board asks Strategy and Performance Scrutiny Board to consider undertaking a Council-wide review of actions that can be taken to better promote Calderdale as a great place to work. This is the sixth recommendation.
- 4.12 The Board is pleased to see that reviewing the approach to enforcement features in the Improvement Plan in several places. The Board would like to review Planning enforcement when it meets on 5 January 2023. This is the seventh recommendation.
- 4.13 The Board is pleased to see the Improvement Plan trail exploring the potential use of artificial intelligence (Agile) software to support validation processes. The Board hopes that this will sit alongside a wider review of processes so that efficiency is improved and hence freeing Planning Officer time from administration and contributing to speeding up the application process.
- 4.14 Councillor Porritt, chair of Planning Committee, joined the discussion and talked to the Board about her desire to see all Members more involved in Planning issues and, in particular, at an earlier stage, in larger developments. The Board completely supports this ambition and will ask Cllr Porritt to discuss progress with us later in the year.

5. Options considered

- 5.1 This report summarises the views of the Place Scrutiny Board so does not include options for Cabinet to take a decision. The recommendations arose from the discussion between the Scrutiny Board and the Corporate Lead - Planning at a meeting on 16 June 2022.

6. Financial implications

- 6.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from the recommendations in this report. However, Planning is an income generating service and Scrutiny Board considers that improvement to the delivery of Planning services will enhance income generating opportunities. Effective Planning is also important to overall economic health of Calderdale.

7. Legal Implications

7.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from this report; however, Planning operates within a complex legal framework, and as such it is important to ensure that appropriately skilled and knowledgeable staff are recruited and retained.

8. Human Resources and Organisation Development Implications

8.1 The report asks for further scrutiny work to be undertaken on the recruitment and retention of staff and on reducing the use of agency staff.

9. Consultation

9.1 No consultation has taken place. The recommendations in this report arose from a discussion at Place Scrutiny Board on 16 June 2022 held in public.

10. Environment, Health and Economic Implications

10.1 There are no direct environment, health and economic implications. The peer review identifies improvements in the Planning service that should be made and Place Scrutiny Board has a role to play in monitoring progress on implementing those improvements. An effective Planning service has a key role to play in place-making, which should bring environmental, health and economic benefits to Calderdale.

11. Equality and Diversity

11.1 No direct equality or diversity implications. However, effective Planning contributes to the Council's objective to reduce inequality.

12. Summary and Recommendations

12.1 Place Scrutiny Board welcomes the production of the Planning Service Improvement Plan and the opportunity to comment on it before it is considered by Cabinet in July 2022.

12.2 It will require a strong and consistent focus by Cabinet and management in the Regeneration and Strategy Directorate to bring about the improvements in the service that the Planning Officers Society peer review identified and the Improvement Plan addresses.

12.3 The Planning Officers Society peer review recommended that Place Scrutiny Board should consider the Planning service on a quarterly basis. The recommendations in this report start to build a programme of items for Place Scrutiny Board to consider.

For further information on this report, contact:

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The documents used in the preparation of this report are:

1. Report to Place Scrutiny Board including the draft Planning Service Improvement Plan, 16 June 2022
2. Planning Advisory Service peer review, published January 2022

The documents are available for inspection at:

Town Hall, Halifax, Crossley Street, HX1 1UJ