



Council name	COTSWOLD DISTRICT COUNCIL
Name and date of Committee	OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 1 MARCH 2022
Report Number	AGENDA ITEM 13
Subject	DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT IMPROVEMENT UPDATE
Wards affected	All
Accountable member	Councillor Juliet Layton and Councillor Tony Dale
Accountable officer	Jon Dearing, Group Manager for Resident Services Email: jon.dearing@publicagroup.uk
Summary/Purpose	To provide an update on progress on the Council's progress against the Development Management Improvement Programme
Annexes	Annex A – Development Management Data Dashboard, Annex B - Recruitment Update, Annex C – Revised Structure Chart, and Annex D – Improvement Action Plan.
Recommendation(s)	<i>That the Committee reviews overall progress against the Improvement Programme.</i>
Corporate priorities	Delivering our services to the highest standards.
Key Decision	No
Exempt	No
Consultees/ Consultation	None



I. BACKGROUND

- I.1. During 2020/21 there were legitimate concerns raised around the performance and quality of service in relation to the Council's Development Management Service.
- I.2. At the time that concerns were raised there was already a developing improvement action plan for the Service. It should be noted, however, that the Development Management Service has been performing in line with the Local Authority averages. All Councils have experienced increased demand and difficulties in recruiting (in relation to permanent and agency officers). To exacerbate this, again nationally, the homeworking arrangements that were necessary in response to the Coronavirus hit the Development Management Service particularly hard. Determining Planning Applications is often a collaborative process, an informal process of sharing of knowledge and experience, and not being in the office with colleagues inevitably slowed the Service down. In October 2021 the Local Government Association reported that they had collected data showing that Planning Application processing times had increased by an average of 40% across the country; as a result of the Pandemic. Despite these difficulties, the data over the last three years (i.e. 2019/20, 2020/21 and 2021/22) shows the following:
- Performance levels (around time taken to determine applications) have been just below the national target of 80% of Minor and Other Applications being determined within 8 weeks of registration,
 - The average level of **appeals dismissed** ran at **78%** (comparing favourably to the National average of 67%). It is always the intention of the Service to avoid Appeal processes through negotiation but, where the Appeal was pursued, it is positive that almost 4 out of 5 Appeal outcomes support the Council's original decision,
 - The Council received a total of 11 **Ombudsman Complaints** over the three year period (3 in 2019 and 4 in each of the last two years). Only 2 of those 11 were upheld (**18% upheld**), and
 - In terms of **Formal Internal Complaints**, logged corporately, over the last three years, the Service has received a total of 26 with 6 being upheld (i.e. **23% upheld**).
- I.3. However, as acknowledged above, there were areas where improvement action was required and it was clear that, where applications were taking longer to determine, communication with customers was poor. None of the stakeholders should be satisfied with an *average* Service and a formal Improvement Programme was initiated in February 2021. The priority areas for improvement were identified by Members and Officers as being:
- a) Clarity around structure and responsibility,
 - b) Recruitment and Retention,



- c) Resources and Resilience,
- d) Customer Service/Communication, and
- e) Member Communications.

These priority areas have been grouped, in the Action Plan (detailed in paragraph 2.2 of this report), within three themes: (1) Resources, (2) Processes and (3) Customers & Communication.

1.4. In order to update Members on the progress made against the Development Management Improvement Programme, this report sets out:

- How the Service went about the improvement process; and what the actions and outcomes were,
- An update on where the Service is now, and
- What the next steps will be.

2. IMPROVEMENT METHODOLOGY, ACTIONS & OUTCOMES

2.1 In terms of the approach to delivering improvements within the Service, this can be summarised as being dependant on:

- Member involvement – The Portfolio Holder for Development Management and Licensing (Cllr Layton), the Portfolio Holder for Economy and Council Transformation (Cllr Dale) and the Chair of the Planning and Licensing Committee (Cllr Brassington) were all active members of the Review Board. Member involvement in Service Reviews is a model that has been utilised before; however, the positive challenge and support given by the Members involved in this review resulted in very focussed approach to the improvement programme,
- The Review Board also includes the Chief Executive, Publica's Managing Director and Executive Director (Finance), the Group and Business Managers with responsibility for Development Management, as well as colleagues from ICT and the Data Management Team,
- The development of a Data Dashboard that allowed active management of the Improvement Actions and the resultant impact on Service Performance, Quality of Service, Individual Performance etc.,
- An acknowledgement of the need for a formal approach to Shared Service delivery, where appropriate,
- A formal 'Service Design' approach in the areas where this was deemed appropriate (Validation being the most significant example),
- The development of a detailed Action Plan.

2.2 The Development Management Improvement Action Plan is included at Annex D. The following table provides an update of progress against the actions across the three themes (Resources, Processes and Customers & Communication):



ACTION	PROGRESS
RESOURCES	
Administration Resilience	This was a small Team but with a vital role in terms of supporting the Planning Officers. The Service has formed a shared service team with FoDDC and WODC and moved the management to the Resident Services Resource Team. This has dramatically improved resilience but also relieved the DM Managers of the management of this function.
Officer Recruitment & Retention	Since September 2021 the Service has been undertaking a significant recruitment drive. The Service has added additional Planner and Support post; as well as introducing Career Grades to recognise experience and qualification and therefore aid retention. A detailed summary of progress, including what has been done to aid retention, is included at Annex B.
Performance Support	A new post of 'Performance Support Officer' has been introduced. While the Officer's remit is Resident Services wide, one of the two initial areas of focus is Development Management. Their role is to provide advice and resources to Managers around improving performance and process management.
Management Structure	The Business Manager has introduced some much needed clarity around the Management structure. There is now one single (local) DM Manager, supported by three Principal Officers. The new structure diagram is included at Annex C.
Validation Team	The Service has formed a shared service Validation Team, with a newly appointed dedicated Manager. This was formed several months ago and the increased focus and resilience has resulted in the impressive improvement in Validation times; in turn giving Planners much more time to make quality decisions. Again, the management responsibility sits within the Resident Services Resource Team, improving the DM Manager's capacity.
Officer Development	The Service is utilising the Apprenticeship Levy to put Officers through their professional qualifications and the addition of two new Principal Officer posts means that the Service is now capable of providing much more Mentoring support. The new Career Grades reward Officers as they attain qualifications and experience, which will aid retention.
PROCESSES	
Continuous Improvement	The Resident Services Customer Experience Improvement Team continue to work closely with the DM Team to improve processes and systems; with a strong customer focus.
Performance Management	The datasets that have been developed to inform the Improvement Programme have become invaluable tools in managing workloads and performance (on a Team and an individual level).
Invalidation	The Service is still receiving high levels of applications that are invalid (because they have detail or supporting information missing).



	Officers continue to work on better communicating application requirement, so that the volume of invalid applications continuously reduces. Further information on this issue is included in paragraph 4 (d) of this report.
Pre-Application Service	The customer facing aspect of this Service has now been built and officers are currently working on the 'back office' systems and processes, as well as the charging structure. Delivery of this service is one of the Team's current priorities.
System Enhancement	The use of the 'Enterprise' (workflow and document imaging) system has been enhanced. This allows greatly improved management of caseloads and reporting around customer contact. The planned upgrade of the Case Management system (IDox Cloud, due in Sept 2022) will facilitate better digital access for customers and mobile working technology for Officers.
CUSTOMERS & COMMUNICATION	
Portfolio Holder Communication	Monthly meetings are now held between the Portfolio Holder for Development Management and Licensing and the Group and Business Managers responsible for delivery of the DM Service.
Customer Contact/Service	As well as customer notification at the Registration and Validation stages, the Service now has in place a Planner Communication Process. Within one week of successful Validation of an application, the assigned Planning Officer makes contact with the Applicant/Agent to set out the process and timeline expectations. This is an important opportunity to build strong (and early) relationships with our customers.
Data Dashboard	The Service has developed a Data Dashboard that will be sent to all Members on a monthly bases. This will show performance against the key indicators but will also come with a commentary from the Business Manager and an update on progress against improvement activity. The latest Dashboard is included at Annex A.
Town & Parish Council Training/Engagement	The new training/engagement sessions are now written and delivery dates will soon be set. This will be much more of an interactive conversation than a traditionally delivered training session. An initial session has been designed to be an introductory session with more detailed training available where required/requested.
Service Standards	The Resident Services Group is working on publishing our Customer Service Standards so that customers have clarity around what levels of service to expect. This will include DM specific Standards but also more general items such as the timeframe in which the Council will respond to enquiries.

3. CURRENT POSITION

- 3.1 The Service's performance has improved since the beginning of the Service Review, which commenced in February 2021:

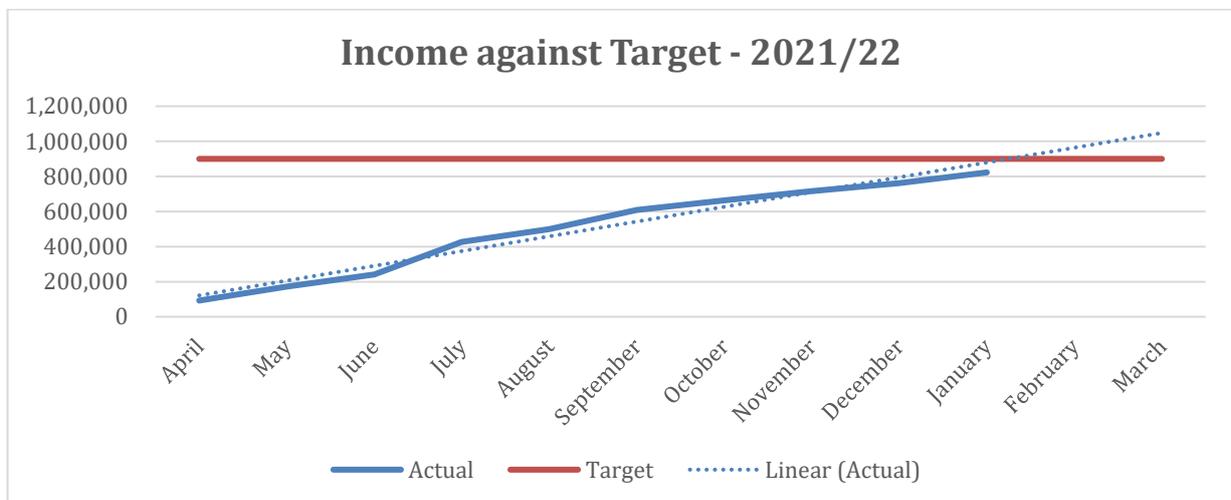


- Significant improvement in the average time from application to Validation. This has reduced from an average of 19 days to an average of 7 days. This dramatically improves the time Planners have to make their determination,
- Improvement in the percentage of cases determined within the 8 week target or agreed Extension of Time; despite the increased demand. The performance against this target (at the end of January 2022) was back up to 70% and has improved (month on month) since September 2021,
- Officers have stabilised their Application Caseloads. They are still higher than we would like (at an average of 71 cases per officer for Minor and Other Applications) but levels have fallen from an average of 92 cases (in February 2021) and continue to fall, and
- Increases (at all Officer Levels) in terms of the average number of cases being completed per month.

Note: In relation to Data presentation and Performance reporting the Service focusses (largely) on 'Minor' and 'Other' Applications. This is because Minor and Other Applications account for more than 98% of total Applications.

Major Applications are those that involve: provision of 10 or more dwellings or a site area in excess of 0.5 Hectares (5,000 square meters).

3.2 The pre-Covid demand was around the level of 150 Applications per month. This did spike in summer 2020 but has now plateaued at circa 220 Applications per month. While the increased demand has resulted in the need for more resource, it also means that income receipts have increased. The graph shows income receipts this year (2021/22) up to the end of January 2022; so with a further two months to add (based on average monthly receipts this year) it is projected that the Service will have its best income performance in five years:



3.3 The introduction of the new Career Grade system, and the salary opportunities linked to experience and qualification, put the Service in a good position in relation to other Local



Planning Authorities. CDC Principal Officer Posts are £3,000 per annum above average and Senior Officer Posts are circa £2,000 above average (according to a January 2022 study). In addition to the competitive salaries and the Career Progression opportunities, the Agile working offer and the diversity of the work in the Cotswolds means that the Service now has a strong 'total package' offer.

4. NEXT STEPS

While The Service has made good progress; with the Data Dashboard (Annex A) showing:

- Significant improvement in the average time from Application to Validation,
- Improvement in percentage of cases determined with the 8 week target or agreed Extension of Time; despite increasing demand,
- Stabilisation of Officer caseloads, and
- Increases (at all Officer Levels) in terms of the average number of cases being completed per month.

It is recognised that more work needs to be done if the Council is to deliver an 'excellent' service. The future priorities (that are either already initiated or are planned to be initiated over the next six months) are:

- a) A review of the other Services impacted by the increased demand in Development Management. Priority areas being the 'Heritage, Design and Sustainability Service', the 'Environmental Health Service' and the 'Flooding and Drainage Service',
- b) Further performance and service design development work; focussing primarily on the introduction of a Pre-Application Service,
- c) Expanding Customer Satisfaction (User Research) mechanisms, to inform future service development,
- d) Reducing the percentage of Applications that are determined to be 'Invalid'. When overhauling the Validation process the Team discovered that almost 40% of Applications received were Invalid. Analysis of these Applications shows that there are 22 reasons that an application is classed as Invalid. The top three reasons, accounting for almost 40% of the total, are:
 1. Plans missing (20% of total Invalids),
 2. Block Plan inaccurate (9%), and
 3. Location Plan inaccurate (9%).

Work is therefore currently underway to reduce the percentage of Invalid Applications. This is a priority area of improvement for the Team as Invalid Applications create delays for customers and additional work for the Validation and Planning Teams,

- e) Introduction of a monthly All Member update and Data Dashboard. The current Data Dashboard is included at Annex A,



- f) Engaging the services of the Planning Advisory Service (PAS). Now that we have delivered improvement around resource, process and customer service; PAS will be able to provide some objective advice to assist the Service in moving to the next level,
- g) Analysis around where the Service sits in terms of value for money. Officers will put in place dynamic mechanisms to ensure that the Service costs/resourcing stay in sync with demand/income,
- h) Development of Customer Service Standards. Resident Services will be publishing the Service Standards so that customers have clarity around what levels of service to expect. This piece of work is well underway and has expanded to include all services,
- i) In order to improve the `total service` (and market other income generating services), Building Control officers will now be invited to Agent Forum and PreApplication meetings for larger developments, and
- j) A review of the Enforcement Service. This will incorporate a review of the current caseload but also how the Team triage cases and whether a more collaborative approach to investigation can be established with the Corporate Fraud Unit.

Progress against these projects will be communicated within the new Monthly Member Updates.

6. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1 There are no legal implications arising directly from this report

7. RISK ASSESSMENT

7.1 Contained in this report

8. EQUALITIES IMPACT

8.1 None

9. CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES IMPLICATIONS

9.1 None

10. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

10.1 None

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

11.1 None.



COTSWOLD
DISTRICT COUNCIL

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