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| Report subject             | <b>The Future of Planning in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole</b>  |
| Meeting date               | 14 April 2021   |
| Status                     | Public Report   |
| Executive summary          | This report provides an update on current planning application performance and ongoing initiatives underway to re-shape the BCP planning service in order to support delivery of the Big Plan and other corporate priorities.   |
| Recommendations            | <p><b>It is RECOMMENDED that:</b></p> <p><b>(a) Cabinet note and endorse the measures underway to improve and transform the planning service as part of a programme approach governed by the Planning Improvement Board; and</b></p> <p><b>(b) Cabinet agree the spend profile for the £250,000 2021/21 budget allocation to provide interim support to deal with current demand in the system.</b></p> |
| Reason for recommendations | To support the ongoing demands on the BCP Planning service.   |
| Portfolio Holder(s):       | Councillor Philip Broadhead, Regeneration, Economy and Strategic Planning   |
| Corporate Director         | Kate Ryan, Corporate Director – Environment and Community   |
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| Wards                      | Council-wide  |
| Classification             | For Decision  |

## Background

1. BCP Council has significant development and growth needs to meet, which will require delivery through its own initiatives as well as facilitating private sector investment. The Council's ambition is set out in the 'Big Plan', which sets out the five big projects that will be delivered to deliver the vision and ambition for the area.
2. In view of the ambition and scale of sustainable growth needed, it is essential for the Council to have an efficient and proactive planning service that achieves the right balance between supporting growth with timely and decisive decision making as well as safeguarding environmental and community interests through placemaking and enforcement services.
3. At present, the service remains in transition post-local government reorganisation and still operates as three legacy departments. The effect of this is that there are several barriers and issues to achieving optimum performance and operation for the delivery of the planning service. These are:
  - Three different planning systems. This impacts on efficiency and resilience preventing staff from being flexible to address demands across the area;
  - Carrying of vacant posts in all areas across the service and delay in recruitment adds pressure to remaining staff to service the on-hand and increasing demand;
  - Volumes of works and enquiries are high and increasing. Combined with vacancies, this affects the ability to maintain standards of performance in line with expectations and leading to some delays and resultant complaints. The complaints then creates more work to deal with at the same time as needing to process an increasing workload;
  - Team set up and structures still largely based on the legacy teams. This prevents the fostering of a 'single local planning authority' ethos and use of resources, as well as there often being different ways of doing similar processes;
  - The combination of workload pressures, process and vacancies across the service (and external partners) is impacting on the ability for making timely decisions with determinations moving to the end of the statutory timeframes or beyond. This creates both financial and reputational risks with the prospect of having to refund some planning fees, as well as standards not being met;
  - Applications can sometimes be incomplete or include substandard information that adds time to officer workloads to resolve further hindering the ability to make timely decisions;
  - Significant major applications are complex and due to staff shortages can be subject to delay due to the volume of other work that comes in also needing to be serviced;
  - Related resource pressures with other departments and agencies that result in slowing down of application process with hand offs;

- There is a reliance on use of extensions of time as a pragmatic way to maintain performance standards whilst the service deals with the various barriers. Whilst a nationally accepted approach, it masks true performance;
  - The added complications arising from dealing with the operational effects of the pandemic such as working from home, home school, reduced back office functions in the office;
  - The highly experienced and dedicated staff see their morale adversely affected by the above pressures with many working additional hours to help maintain service.
4. It is acknowledged that the impact from the various barriers to optimum service delivery have resulted in a situation where service performance standards are not at the level where all stakeholders would want it to be. This report acknowledges this position but also sets out ongoing activities underway to address the issues and move forward to creating a modern, accessible, and progressive planning service set up to deliver the Council and wider area's ambitions.

#### Update on Planning Application Performance

5. The issues and barriers identified are relevant when looking at planning application performance. The statutory timeframes are 13 weeks for 'major' applications (or 16 weeks where an Environmental Impact Assessment is needed) and 8 weeks for 'minor' and 'other' applications.
6. The Government places strong emphasis on making planning decisions in a timely manner to support the economy and provide certainty within the process to interested parties. Accordingly, the Government has introduced thresholds for monitoring performance that need to be met otherwise an authority can be designated to allow applicants to submit direct to the Planning Inspectorate for decision rather than the council. The Government thresholds are as follows:
- Major applications – designation can be applied where less than 60% of decisions are within the statutory or agreed timeframe over a two-year period; or
  - Non-Major applications (this comprises 'minor' and 'other' applications) – designation can be applied where less than 70% of decisions are within the statutory or agreed timeframe over a two-year period;
7. The BCP performance data for 2020/21 by quarter is as follows:

|        | <b>Q1</b> | <b>Q2</b> | <b>Q3</b> | <b>Q4</b> | <b>BCP<br/>year to<br/>date</b> |
|--------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|---------------------------------|
| Major  | 86%       | 72%       | 63%       | 89%       | 77%                             |
| Minor  | 73%       | 67%       | 75%       | 79%       | 74%                             |
| Others | 80%       | 60%       | 71%       | 79%       | 71%                             |

8. It is evident that performance in non-major applications fell below the Government threshold for the quarter 2 period June to September 2020. The reasons for this relate to a combination of responding to the impacts of the global pandemic (such as home-schooling for many), resources issues and unexpected increase in volume of

work. There was also the issue of the dealing with the lag of applications from quarter 1 that were delayed due to the initial lockdown where new practices needed to be introduced including moving office-based staff and practices to remote working and pause in notification of applications. This was not a situation unique to BCP with the majority of local planning authorities and wider industry dealing with similar issues with some departments closing operations altogether.

9. At the same time as Covid, the Council experienced an unexpected surge in demand during quarter 2, largely in the smaller scale applications for home extensions. Data released from the Planning Portal confirms that BCP Council had the 13<sup>th</sup> highest increase in online application submissions in the Country during the first lockdown period. This surge in demand at the same time as normal operations were disrupted impacted on performance in quarter 2.
10. The staff response to the issues faced by lockdown has been excellent and has ensured that the drop in performance in quarter 2 has been addressed with a sustained upward recovery in planning application performance in quarters 3 and 4.
11. It is clearly positive therefore that the overall position at the end of the monitoring year will ensure the Council's decision making is above the Government thresholds. However, it is also evident that further resilience measures are needed to continue to increase performance outputs within timescales to ensure the service is aligned to corporate expectations and programmes to support growth and the required economic response to the pandemic.

### **The Future of the Planning Service**

12. In supporting the 'Big Plan' and overall Covid recovery it is essential that the Council's planning service is resourced and organised in a way to deliver the scale of ambition required, whilst at the same time preserving the unique and special character of our area. The ambition is to address the identified issues and transform the service to create one of the best planning departments in the country in terms of its speed and quality of outputs, and that:
  - Achieves high and consistent standards of performance delivering a service that meets the expectations of customers. The service will be responsive and maintain strong working relationships with applicants and other key stakeholders that engage in the service.
  - Creates a positive environment for staff to have job satisfaction and develop their careers within a service that is known for delivering positive outcomes and has a strong reputation. The staff are one of the main assets of the service with dedicated officers with high levels of qualifications and experience and it is essential that the service is transformed to retain and develop staff and become an employer of choice.
  - Delivers the Local Plan within the required timeframe to set out the framework for growth meeting the area's sustainable development needs.
  - Utilises modern ways of working and new technology to optimise the efficiency of working practices. This will ensure that the capacity of staff is used effectively and support the enhancement of the customer experience.
13. It is recognised that to deliver the transformation required there will need to be investment in resources and continue harmonisation of processes including greater use of digital technology to create a truly unified BCP planning department that

delivers the best possible service to our residents and customers. An overview of some of the key improvement workstreams currently underway is as follows:

### **Planning Improvement Board**

14. In response to achieving the ambition and addressing the barriers to optimum performance within the service and to continue to drive innovation and enhancement, a Planning Improvement Board has been set up chaired by the Chief Executive. The Board will govern the implementation of a programmed range of activities to re-shape the service to ensure sufficient resources are in place to deliver the existing and future demand in a way that meets customer expectations and enhances the local planning authority's reputation.

### **Resources and strategic direction**

15. With the number of vacancies at present the planning service is under resourced in terms of available staff, which needs to be addressed to support the transformation of the service. This will start to be addressed during 2021/22 through a combination of the additional £250,000 of financial support made available in the Council's budget and completion of the corporate smarter structures project.
16. The £250,000 additional financial support will provide a significant in-year boost to enable the service to bring in short term capacity to deal with the current on hand demand in advance of the smarter structures project being completed. The broad spend profile for the £250,000 is proposed to be spent as follows:
  - £100,000 on additional and extended agency staff support to address demands in more complex cases;
  - £70,000 to support further transformation initiatives to harmonise processes. This will include funding a Planning Transformation Lead post for a temporary period to provide additional capacity to deliver the transformation required;
  - £50,000 to address the backlog in applications through use of batching up of applications to external providers in order to ease pressure on existing staff workloads and reduce on hand demand;
  - £30,000 to provide support to progress key development briefs to help unlock investment on strategic sites;
17. Agreement is sought from cabinet for the above spend breakdown to ensure the service can procure the required additional resource at pace.
18. There is also a need to seek approval to recruit permanent planning staff to fill vacancies to ensure the service can operate within the establishment and avoid long term reliance on external resourcing. This will be addressed as part of smarter structures project and be progressed as soon as possible once the project is moved forward through spring / summer 2021.
19. The smarter structures project also provides the opportunity for the planning service to be organised, within the financial envelope available, in a way to deal with the various demands across planning applications, tree applications, enforcement, place and policy making. It is envisaged as part of this that smarter structures will include provision for a dedicated focus on major projects. Having a focus on major projects within the service will enable the most strategically important projects to be afforded

the time and expertise required to process them through the system as efficiently as possible. This is considered an integral component of delivering the Council's ambitions as well as supporting wider private sector investment in strategic development and related projects.

### **Engagement**

20. It is recognised that the way the service engages with customers and other key stakeholders is a crucial to operating a modern and accessible planning department, which in turns helps to raise the reputation of the department and reduce complaints by creating a space for sharing issues and solutions.
21. In response, the service started an Agents and Developers Planning Liaison Group in November 2020. The purpose of the group is to ensure there is two-way dialogue with frequent users of the planning service to update on improvement projects underway but also to have feedback on the ongoing issues that need to be resolved. There have been three meetings since its launch and the initial view is that it is helping to improve communications and creating a collaborative environment between service leads and frequent users.
22. In addition to the Agents and Developers Liaison Group, a review is underway to introduce a new and improved engagement forum for members, including those on planning committee, to improve Councillor input on major emerging development proposals. It is envisaged that this new forum will be ready to launch later in Spring / early Summer 2021.
23. To support the engagement work, the service will make better use of technology to communicate performance and other information is needed. The team are currently testing Microsoft Power BI capabilities to better present data with links through to updated webpages. Having better access to data is anticipated to help with customer queries and manage expectations through the ongoing transition of the service.

### **Development Briefs**

24. It is recognised that the planning service has a key role in fostering an environment to encourage investment in the BCP area. This is not only by having an efficient planning application process, but also with providing refreshed and up to date policy and development guidance. A key part of the £250,000 financial support will therefore be used to move forward development briefs for key opportunity areas as an important way to unlock investment and provide further clarity on policy matters. The funding identified will provide initial support with the intention being that a programme of future development briefs is developed to support the delivery of key strategic areas and sites alongside implementation of the Big Plan.

### **Investment in process and infrastructure**

25. A major step forward has been achieved by the Council's Transformation Board approving the in-principle move to a single administrative ICT system with full implementation envisaged by the end of 2021/22 financial year. This is a significant milestone and will be transformational in supporting new and more efficient ways of working across the service. The single system will also incorporate Building Control and Land Charges to further enhance harmonised and smarter working across related disciplines.
26. linked in with the single administrative system project, the planning service is working directly with the Project Management Office to undertake a process review

of planning related activity during 2021/22 to create harmonised and efficient processes across each area of the service. Workshops will be undertaken with staff to engage the teams to identify current issues and build the best possible single process going forward, which will be supported by the new single administrative system.

### **Other planning service updates**

27. It is understandable that there is focus on planning applications at the present time to ensure there is a corporate response to dealing with the on-hand increased demand. However, the planning service also includes planning policy, urban design and conservation, trees, planning enforcement and research and information. These other integral parts of the service are experiencing the same pressures in terms of resourcing and demands that will also need to be addressed and supported by the wider corporate transformation work.
28. A key project outside of planning applications is the BCP Local Plan. Having a single BCP Local Plan in place is essential for the Council to support the Big Plan but also the wider area needs with a single city region vision. A single Local Plan also supports greater efficiencies in the planning applications teams with a consolidated set of policies.
29. The Local Plan has been subject to a major Issues and Options consultation in 2019 and evidence preparation in 2020. The Overview & Scrutiny committee have established a working group to act as a sounding board for the emerging local plan ideas and option work. The working group is meeting regularly and helping officers to discuss key issues before the next stage of consultation.
30. The Government has recently reaffirmed the aim for all LPAs to have an up to date Local Plan in place by the end of 2023. The BCP Local Plan is on track to meet this deadline but clearly needs to maintain progress through 2021 with the next stage consultation and subsequent preparation of the draft plan.

### **Conclusions**

31. This paper provides an overview of the issues the planning service is experiencing at the present time, which along with the pandemic has impacted on delivery of optimum performance. These issues are acknowledged, and it is understood that they need to be addressed to create the planning service that members, staff, residents and customers all want to see.
32. Whilst this is acknowledged, this paper sets out the Council's ambition for the service to transform it to being one of the best in the country in terms of the quality and speed of its outputs. Achieving this ambition will require investment in resources and infrastructure as part of the Council's transformation agenda.
33. This paper reports that a series of enhancements are underway, and which are already achieving tangible improvements in service delivery. More transformation work will be required over and above those set out in this report, but the foundations are being put in place for creating an exemplar planning department fit to deliver the Council's ambitions and representative of the Council's status as the 14<sup>th</sup> largest council (by population) in the country.

**Summary of financial implications**

34. None other than the proposed use of the £250,000 in-year funding support to address current demands.

**Summary of legal implications**

35. None identified

**Summary of human resources implications**

36. None identified

**Summary of sustainability impact**

37. None identified

**Summary of public health implications**

38. The planning service has maintained operations through the pandemic, which as involved staff continuing to go to office where necessary and out on site where required. This has been managed through use of risk assessments that will need to be maintained and regularly reviewed for as long as restrictions continue.

**Summary of risk assessment**

39. There are risks associated with a planning service not meeting Government thresholds for decision making. If performance falls below these thresholds, then the Council can be designated by Government and have local decision making powers directed to the Planning Inspectorate. BCP Council are not close to this position but highlights the importance of maintaining a high standard of performance.

**Summary of Equalities Impacts**

40. No specific impacts identified. Maintaining an open, accessible and efficient planning system will enable all members of the community to engage and be offered the same levels of service.