

## PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE



Report subject	<b>Planning Service Improvement Update</b>
Meeting date	24 May 2022
Status	Public Report
Executive summary	<p>This report provides an update on measures being implemented to deliver a step change in the reputation and performance of the BCP Planning Service and in order to support the delivery of the Big Plan and other corporate priorities.</p> <p>It follows a previous report to the Overview and Scrutiny Board in November 21 and provides a 6-month update on progress since and actions for the next 6 months.</p>
Recommendations	<p><b>It is RECOMMENDED that the Board:</b></p> <p><b>Note and endorse the measures underway to improve and transform the planning service.</b></p>
Reason for recommendations	<p>Significant progress has been made towards the completion of the Planning Improvement Journey. The overall performance continues to improve with specific focus now being applied to further reduce backlog and establish the service as one that operates predominantly in time.</p> <p>The ongoing work demands and interest in the Planning Improvement journey has presented a challenging environment within which to operate. The staff, however, have dealt with the pressures positively and admirably and have been the driving force behind the increase in performance.</p>
Portfolio Holder(s):	<p>Councillor Drew Mellor, Leader and Portfolio Holder for Finance &amp; Transformation</p> <p>Councillor Philip Broadhead, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Development, Growth &amp; Regeneration</p>

	Councillor Bobbie Dove, Portfolio Holder for Community Safety & Regulatory Services
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Wards	Council-wide
Classification	For Information

## Background

1. This paper follows earlier reports on the BCP Council planning service received by this Board in April and November 2021. The April 2021 report set out the background for the need to deliver a significant improvement in the BCP Planning Service to create an exemplar planning department fit to deliver the Council's ambitions and representative of BCP's status as the 10th largest urban authority in the country. It provided context for the various challenges the service has been dealing with that have impacted on performance and reputation; in summary these comprise of high and increasing volumes of work to process, complexities with working within a pandemic environment, holding vacancies and operating largely legacy systems and processes. These issues are well understood and form the context for the various actions that have formed the Planning Improvement Plan to re-position the planning service to where all stakeholders want it to be.
2. The focus of this paper is to update on progress of the Planning Improvement Plan since the last update in November 2021. The paper also notes the key next steps.
3. It is recognised that the planning service and supporting staff are highly professional, resilient and dedicated and continue to work incredibly hard to maintain the planning service whilst the challenges are being resolved. It is also recognised that expectations from Members and external customers remain high. The Planning Improvement Plan in and of itself creates demand on the service and on the staff which require a balanced approach to managing resources. Planning staff have worked tirelessly and intensively since the Planning Improvement Journey began in April 2021 and remain focused on meeting its objectives.

## **Planning Improvement Journey**

4. Reflecting the scale of the challenges within the service and the scope of the improvements required, a Planning Improvement Board was established in April 2021, chaired by the Chief Executive and attended by relevant Portfolio Holder Members and key officers. This Board meets on a monthly basis to oversee the Planning Improvement programme.
5. The programme holds the overarching aim '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.'
6. The objectives of the programme are;
  - a. Achieve high and consistent standards of performance delivering to the expectations of customers
  - b. Deliver the local plan to set out the framework for growth meeting the areas sustainable development need
  - c. Deliver strong and responsive development management
  - d. Utilise modern ways of working and new technology to optimise the efficiency of working practices
  - e. Create an environment for staff to have job satisfaction and develop their careers within the service that is known for delivering positive outcomes and has a strong reputation.
7. The programme consists of six workstreams working to meet these objectives;
  - a. Structure, People and Culture
  - b. Performance and Development Management
  - c. System and Process Harmonisation
  - d. Customer Service and Support Services
  - e. Local Plan
8. The following section provides an update on the progress against the key objectives within each workstream and sets out the next steps for the following 6 month period.

### **Structure, People and Culture**

9. The key objectives for this workstream are;
  - Recruitment to vacant posts and reduction of agency staff.
  - Implement a new fit for purpose structure.
  - Address workforce issues including low morale, high workloads, staff wellbeing and resilience pressures.
  - Develop a new culture which supports to optimum performance.

- Address challenges of home working.
  - Provide leadership development to Planning Managers.
10. Progress within this workstream has been significant over the last 6 months. The Director of Communities was appointed as interim Director of Planning in April 2021 to provide leadership and support to the service and to drive the delivery of the Planning Improvement Plan. Strong, focussed leadership and improved engagement has provided for a shift in the morale of the staff and the management team. Staff have an improved understanding of the objectives of the Planning Improvement Plan, bringing the workforce together in its collective challenge. Communication has been improved and staff have a voice to raise their concerns and issues, and to share ideas. Celebrating success and ensuring appropriate recognition has been balanced with pushing for the best possible performance and tackling areas of poor performance.
  11. Staff wellbeing and resilience is a challenge for the Planning Service. They are our greatest asset and despite huge challenges of high workloads, complex caseloads and negative views directed at the service, there remains a strong sense of ownership and commitment, refreshed by the recent engagement activity. A resilience programme has been launched, supporting all staff by raising awareness and developing skills in personal resilience. Through this programme, staff will receive training to enhance their skills in supporting their own resilience and for managers, for that of their teams. In addition, a Leadership Development Programme has been launched which will support growth and the key role of the leadership roles within the service as we move towards a positive, high performing culture which can be sustained.
  12. Workloads remain high and performance improvement is being strongly driven. There remains a reliance on the use of agency staff to support the delivery of the service and whilst this presents its challenges, this is key to delivery and improvement in equal measure. 13 vacant posts have been filled since November 2021. Despite this success, recruitment to planning roles is a national challenge. A rolling advert for vacancies has now been implemented and a communication campaign to promote careers in planning within BCP is being developed to support this. The continued recruitment drive will ultimately reduce agency staffing throughout the 2023/23 financial year.
  13. A new structure for planning is in the final stages of development. It is anticipated that this will be launched to the staff shortly. This will provide a fit for purpose structure for the service, to sustain strong performance following the completion of the Planning Improvement Plan, will create a new management and leadership structure, provide for a focus on Major applications and capacity to match the ambition and opportunity for growth within the conurbation.
  14. The transition to the new Civic Centre is now complete. Staff work flexibly in order to support optimum performance but the return to office based

working is complete and teams are now working together within the Civic Centre, improving opportunity for collaboration and support.

## **Performance and Development Management**

15. The key objectives for this workstream are;
  - Address backlog of applications
  - Address issues with Major applications
  - Improve consultee performance
  - Improve section 106 process and performance
  - Reduce incomplete/substandard applications
  - Review and reduce planning conditions
  - Improve the viability assessment process and performance
16. There has been a continued focus and commitment to reducing the backlog of applications. Since November 2021, the backlog of 734 applications has been reduced by 40% to 434 applications in April 2022. Further detail on performance is included from paragraph 23 of this report.
17. A Clearance Plan has been approved by the Planning Improvement Board and this is being implemented with vigour. This includes increasing performance levels through a performance management framework and appropriate capacity and critically, a Clearance Fortnight to be completed from 20 June 2022 to 1 July 2022. The use of Clearance Weeks has been key to the overall reduction we have achieved and whilst there is an impact on the accessibility of the service during these times and staff find the period very intense and challenging, the Planning Improvement Board has taken the decision to move to an extended two week clearance in order to meet our goal. Consultation with Portfolio Holders, staff and stakeholders has supported this decision. The Clearance Fortnight will be publicised and Members will be briefed to ensure there is broad awareness.
18. In June a Major Applications Forum will be launched to support determination and this will form a key part of the operating model for the service going forwards. Officers from many departments of the Council, including statutory consultees will have an opportunity to discuss applications and work collaboratively on them. This will drive consultee performance improvements and provide a programme management approach to these applications.
19. A review of the Section 106 process has been completed and a new one launched in June 2022. This will support the completion of the legal aspects of planning applications by introducing a lean and harmonised process which will be far more efficient and effective. External legal support is currently in place to support the significant capacity requirements relating to Planning and this is functioning well.
20. A review of the process of application registration and validation is underway with the aim of reducing timescales at the front end of the process as well we

improving the quality of applications and increased valid applications on first go. A new approach will be implemented in June 2022 working in partnership with the Business Support and Customer team.

21. A review of some 350 legacy planning conditions is underway to consolidate and reduce duplication. The aim is to reduce this to circa 100 conditions which will significantly streamline the process and reduce the complexity of the current system for officers, stakeholders and Planning Committee.
22. A review of the performance of the Council's provider for Viability Assessments has been completed and a new Service Level Agreement implemented. This front loads viability consideration and moves it towards the application validation stage which will greatly improve determination timescales.
23. The BCP performance data on planning application decisions in time shown as a snapshot from April 21 – April 22 is as follows;

Type	Minimum Statutory Performance Level %	BCP Performance % April 21	BCP Performance % April 22	Overall Annual Average April 21–30 March 22 %
Majors	60	77%	100%	83%
Minors	70	74%	85%	79%
Others	70	71%	96%	85%

24. This table shows that overall performance on planning applications remains above the Government intervention levels meaning there is no risk of intervention. The table also shows that the performance has significantly improved in the last year and is now being maintained and further improved into 2022/23. The reason for the increase in performance is due to the planning improvement interventions introduced over the past year alongside the relentless commitment of the staff.
25. However, it is important to recognise that these headline statistics continue to include a proportion of extensions of time that is a by-product of the various challenges within the service. It is worth noting that it is not unusual for Local Planning Authorities to use extensions of time when dealing with planning applications and the Government accept their use when Councils submit their returns. This is, however, not an acceptable corporate position, primarily because timely planning decisions (i.e. within statutory time periods) are key to facilitating economic growth and investment, as well as the delivery of

regeneration and housing numbers at pace. The measures discussed in this report are aimed at addressing this and moving the service to not using extensions of time wherever possible and to determining the majority of planning applications within the 8 or 13 week statutory timeframes.

26. In order to shift the service away from using extensions of time, it is essential that we reduce the backlog of current applications. This is key to realising a sustained improvement in performance, reducing reliance on extensions of time and moving away from the reliance on agency staff.
27. As is illustrated by the table below, the clearance of the backlog has moved on significantly since the last update in November 2021 and the current percentage of applications in backlog at April 22 stands at 48% of on hand applications, vastly improved from the high point position of 65% as at November 21 at the time of the last update.

<b>Applications Nov 21</b>	<b>Number in backlog</b>	<b>% backlog</b>	<b>Applications April 22</b>	<b>Number in backlog</b>	<b>% backlog</b>
1124	<b>727</b>	65%	901	<b>434</b>	48%

28. It is useful to report on the backlog reduction in terms of historic applications that remain on the system and need to be cleared. The tables that follow show that the service has had to deal with clearing a large number of legacy applications that came with the formation of BCP Council in 2019. There have been complexity involved in many of the legacy applications that have taken time to work through, find solutions and enable applications to be determined.
29. Focused efforts have therefore been made to reduce the oldest applications on hand including those that came with the formation of the new Council. The progress in this regard is shown in the following tables that provide the position on historic applications and overall backlog using a snapshot from July 2021, December 2021 and April 2022.

<b>Live Applications - July 21</b>				
	<b>Bournemouth</b>	<b>Christchurch</b>	<b>Poole</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>2105</b>	1	0	0	1
<b>2016</b>	2	3	0	5
<b>2017</b>	5	0	4	9
<b>2018</b>	4	2	5	11
<b>2019</b>	9	10	6	25
<b>2020</b>	62	20	39	121
<b>2021 beyond time</b>	216	86	207	509
<b>2021 in time</b>	198	75	211	484
<b>Total apps</b>	505	196	472	1173
<b>Total beyond time</b>	307	121	255	683
<b>% beyond time</b>	61%	62%	54%	58%

<b>Live Applications - December 21</b>				
	<b>Bournemouth</b>	<b>Christchurch</b>	<b>Poole</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>2105</b>	1	0	0	1
<b>2016</b>	0	0	0	0
<b>2017</b>	1	0	3	4
<b>2018</b>	0	0	4	4
<b>2019</b>	7	6	3	16
<b>2020</b>	100	6	16	122
<b>2021 beyond time</b>	218	83	145	446
<b>2021 in time</b>	137	72	188	397
<b>Total apps</b>	464	167	369	1000
<b>Total beyond time</b>	257	95	171	523
<b>% beyond time</b>	55%	57%	46%	52%

<b>Live Applications - April 22</b>				
	<b>Bournemouth</b>	<b>Christchurch</b>	<b>Poole</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>2017</b>	0	0	2	2
<b>2018</b>	2	0	3	5
<b>2019</b>	3	6	2	11
<b>2020</b>	19	5	11	35
<b>2021 beyond time</b>	157	64	81	302
<b>2021 still in time</b>	4	0	0	4
<b>2022 beyond time</b>	29	23	27	79
<b>2022 still in time</b>	178	84	201	463
<b>Total apps</b>	392	182	327	901
<b>Total beyond time</b>	210	98	126	434
<b>% beyond time</b>	54%	54%	39%	48%

30. The progress in the reduction in historic applications is further shown by application type in the following tables.

<b>Live Major Applications Tracker</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021 beyond 13 weeks</b>	<b>2021 within 13 weeks</b>	<b>2022 beyond 13 weeks</b>	<b>2022 within 13 weeks</b>
Nov-21	3	3	2	12	20	18		
Dec-21	3	3	7	13	42	31		
Jan-22	3	3	7	13	39	34	0	3
Feb-22	3	3	7	13	54	20	0	8
Mar-22	2	2	7	10	52	1	0	20
Apr-22	2	2	7	10	53	1	0	22



Live Minor Applications Tracker	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021 beyond 8weeks	2021 within 8weeks	2022 beyond 8weeks	2022 within 8weeks
Nov-21	0	0	0	2	3	46	202	188		
Dec-21	0	0	0	0	4	27	228	116		
Jan-22				2	2	25	256	101	0	14
Feb-22				2	2	19	248	51	0	69
Mar-22				1	2	17	191	0	38	167
Apr-22				1	2	17	182	0	42	160

Live Other Applications tracker	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021 beyond 8weeks	2021 within 8weeks	2022 beyond 8weeks	2022 within 8weeks
Nov-21	0	1	4	4	13	385	258		
Dec-21		0	2	2	7	184	250		
Jan-22			2	2	6	170	214	0	23
Feb-22			2	1	6	161	95	0	122
Mar-22			2	1	8	76	0	37	277
Apr-22			2	2	8	67	3	37	281

31. The progress that has been made in reducing the historic applications has been positive and further focus is underway to ensure they are all cleared as soon as possible as part of the improvement journey.

## Benchmarking

32. To support the work of the Planning Improvement Board and to set some context to performance within the Planning Service, performance over the period from Jan 2020 to December 2021 was benchmarked against other Local Planning Authorities (LPA's). This analysis shows that nationally over this period BCP Council is the LPA with the 6th highest demand for Major applications (225 apps), and 10th highest for Non-Major applications (5,249 apps). There are 333 LPA's in England.

33. The benchmarking work shows that the national average performance for major applications is 22% being determined within 13 weeks. The national average performance for non majors is 53% determined within 8 weeks. These also demonstrates that all LPAs operate with a backlog at any given time and BCP's position is therefore not unique.

34. When considering optimum performance, the best performing LPA in the country for Major applications is Tunbridge Wells with a 70% determination rate within 13 weeks. However, their level of applications is significantly lower than that of BCP at 125 applications. Further work then sought to compare BCP performance against LPA's with a comparable level of demand. This identified that when looking at LPAs that dealt with 200+ applications, East Riding had the best performance with 34% of applications determined within 13 weeks. BCP Council determined 22% of Major applications within 13 weeks during the 21/22 period, which whilst below East Riding was consistent with the overall national average.
35. Benchmarking for Non Major applications (that includes Minors and Others) revealed Castle Point as the best performing LPA with a 92% determination rate within 8 weeks (1,224 applications). BCP, however, receive in excess of 5,000 of these applications each year. Comparing BCP then to other LPA's with 5000+ Non Majors, the best performing LPA is Bradford with a 78% determination rate within 8 weeks. BCP in 2021/22 determined 32% of non major applications within 8 weeks compared with the national average of 53%.
36. The 2021/22 period saw the service deal with an unexpected increase in planning applications as pandemic restrictions were eased at the same time as resource pressures. The period also saw the implementation of the Planning Improvement Programme that has resulted in performance increasing upwards throughout the year that is now being continued in the current monitoring year.
37. The current position of applications being determined within statutory timeframes is shown in the table below. This demonstrates that the improvement measures are proving particularly successful for non major applications where performance has now increased to 57% and above the national average. There remains work to be done to improve major applications performance, which is expected to occur as backlog reduces to free up time and resource to deploy to majors.

Type	National Average	BCP Performance 21/22	BCP Performance 22/23
Majors	22%	22%	16%
Non Majors	53%	32%	57%

38. This benchmarking has supported consideration of the future performance standards that BCP will work to from the point of clearance of the backlog and our current assessment of how the service will function and perform from the end of this financial year provides for a very positive outlook.

## **System and Process Harmonisation**

39. The key objective for this workstream is to implement a new harmonised planning system and one customer front door. This complex programme is delivering well, with system commissioning and platform testing complete and aspects such as data coding and migration well underway. The next stages are web development, completion of training for staff, finalising migration to the new system and go live in Summer 2022.
40. This is an incredibly complex project which has been supported by the programmes team, IT, customer, planning, finance and others. Detailed work has been required to produce lean systems, harmonise working practice and devise system protocols for maximum efficiency. Bringing legacy systems together will not only provide for significant benefits in terms of how we work but how our customers access the service and will provide for one front door for a vastly improved customer experience.

## **Customer Service and Support Services**

41. The key objectives for this workstream are;
  - Improvement of registration and validation process
  - Address current levels of complaints including historical complaints
42. A review of the registration and validation process has been completed and implementation of a new model is underway. This will drive towards a target of 2-5 days depending on the scale of the application, for registration and improved performance in validation by July 2022. An external provider has been commissioned to support the clearance of backlog of applications at the front end of the process in the interim.
43. We are seeing a reduction in complaints across the planning service and the support of the Corporate Policy team in co-ordinating and investigating complaints has delivered a significant reduction in historical complaints. As the service moves forward and the Planning Improvement Plan is completed, the service will seek to consistently review complaints and understand the learning points arising from them.

## **Local Plan**

44. The key objectives for this workstream is to deliver and adopt the BCP Local Plan.
45. Since the last report in November 2021 extensive public consultation has been completed on issues and options and responses are being analysed. Further consultation and engagement is being planned on key issues and policy options is being developed.

## **Summary**

46. Significant progress has been made towards the completion of the Planning Improvement Journey and the service is improving. The overall performance

continues to improve with specific focus now being applied to further reduce backlog and establish the service as one that operates predominantly in time.

47. The ongoing work demands and interest in the Planning Improvement journey has presented a challenging environment within which to operate. The staff, however, have dealt with the pressures positively and admirably and have been the driving force behind the increase in performance.

#### **Summary of financial implications**

48. An additional allocation of £250,000 was allocated to the Planning Service for the 22/23 fiscal year within the Medium Term Financial Plan to support the Planning Improvement Plan.
49. The mastergov project is being funded within existing planning budgets and use of residual CIL administration funds.
50. The Local Plan work identified within the report will be covered by drawing down £140,000 from the Local Development Plan reserve which is set aside for this statutory purpose.
51. It is relevant to note that alongside the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, the Government have announced they intend to consult upon a proposed increase of 35% (for major applications) and 25% (for non major applications) to planning application fees. This will be linked to a new performance framework but will provide a significant increase in funding for the service to sustain the improvement in performance.

#### **Summary of legal implications**

52. None identified.

#### **Summary of human resources implications**

53. The new structure under development will be managed using the council's Change Management Policy and Procedure.

#### **Summary of sustainability impact**

54. None identified.

#### **Summary of public health implications**

55. None identified.

#### **Summary of equality implications**

56. None identified.

#### **Summary of risk assessment**

57. Failure to complete the Planning Improvement Journey will continue to present reputational risk to the council. Risks to the delivery of the Big Plan and Corporate Strategy objectives are key.