

**Report to OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PERFORMANCE AND VALUE
FOR MONEY SELECT COMMITTEE**

**Planning Performance:
Development Management October 2019 – September 2020**

Portfolio Holder:
Councillor Hannah Roberts

Officer Contact: Emma Barton, Director of Economy

Report Author: Simon Rowberry, Interim Head of Planning

17 December 2020

Purpose of the Report

To provide an update on performance for the Planning Service in processing major and non-major / other applications against national and local performance targets over the 12-month period 1st October 2019 to 30th September 2020.

Recommendations

Members are asked to note the performance of the Planning Service, especially with regards to performance levels pre / post Covid-19 restrictions being introduced at the end of March 2020 and the additional measures introduced within the team to provide continued improvement.

Planning Performance: Development Management October 2019 to September 2020**1 Background and Report Summary**

- 1.1 This paper provides an overview of the improvements being deployed to the Planning Service systems, processes and customer engagement to support formal planning performance measures.
- 1.2 Over the last 12-18 months, the team have benefited from new officers joining the team to a full complement once again; new training programmes are rolling out; and, the team embarked on a transformational journey to introduce new digital systems to help streamline planning processes, to introduce self-serve portal for enhanced customer awareness on their applications, and to help embed efficiencies and innovation into better ways of working.
- 1.3 The team have been led by an Interim Head of Service while recruitment for a permanent post holder is undertaken: this should be completed in the new year. During this time, the new management arrangements have brought new service improvement ideas, helped shape and develop the team, and worked with the planning officers to nurture their improvement ideas.
- 1.4 There have also been many challenges during this period balancing the transformation work with providing statutory planning application services. This has placed additional pressure on staff workloads, with frustrations and delays causing community and member concerns at times.
- 1.5 Despite the transformation plans, staffing challenges and relentless workload of planning applications, the Council's planning performance has been maintained with regards to formal performance submissions needed to the Department of Communities and Local Government [DCLG] on a quarterly basis: this information is publicly available via the DCLG's website.

2 Service Delivery with CV19 Restrictions

- 2.1 Following national announcements in March for lockdown / remote working, the Planning Service staff adapted well to providing dedicated service from home. These remote working arrangements were made possible following the corporate roll out of Microsoft TEAMS to facilitate virtual meetings and service delivery was also continued via email and phone. Additional planning duties continued through risk assessed CV19 safe site visits, office access for files and printing, and then in Summer the Government legislation permitted Planning Committee meetings to resume to support timely decisions despite these challenging circumstances.
- 2.2 The planning officers are also parents, carers, families – during this challenging period for all our communities, they have had to balance home-schooling, personal and family illness, and caring for parents and neighbours. All of which generate personal / family anxieties while trying to maintain high levels of public service and planning duties.
- 2.3 The Planning team have volunteered for urgent corporate redeployment to support CV19 emergency responses for our communities (foodbank deliveries, community door knocking, technical support for higher volume / prioritised customer service areas).

-
- 2.4 The team has seen a significant increase in electronic correspondence during the CV19 lockdown / Tier system periods. With the reduced availability of officers for personal / redeployment reasons this has had a direct impact on the team's ability to maintain customer service standards and provide timely responses, which in turn generates frustrations, complaints and has significantly impacted on officer morale and work-related stress.

3 Digital Service Delivery Improvements / Transformation

- 3.1 On top of service demands and personal CV19 related concerns. The planning team have been working with a corporate project group to introduce a new planning application system / new software platform, Uniform. This migration process has been many months in preparation and the new system went 'live' on 5th October 2020. The scale of the project is significant and there have been a number of technical issues that have been experienced since the project started. However, significant benefits will result from the project as the Council will have a fully-supported up to date system, which will include a module which will greatly assist with planning application case management. Members concerns are being addressed: for example, the Weekly List is now presented in Ward order.
- 3.2 A significant problem has been intermittent access to the Council's Public Access portal for planning applications on its website. This has meant that members of the public and other third parties have not always been able to make comments on planning applications by the deadline specified. Members will note from briefings and emails, that officers sought to address this issue by extending the period by which consultation responses can be submitted and have also requested that extensions of time be agreed with applicants and agents. This solution is being applied on a case-by-case basis to ensure that no party's interests are prejudiced.
- 3.3 During the transition between systems, it has not always been possible to maintain continuity of application validations for technical reasons, which has resulted in a temporary backlog of applications accruing.
- 3.4 Officers continue to work hard to reduce this backlog and the current delay is about 2 weeks – which is outstanding considering the technical and physical challenges being experienced by the team. Again, the team are trying to ensure applicants and agents are being kept informed and efforts are being made to permanently reduce the backlog as rapidly as possible as a validation backlog is not a normal element of the Council's service.
- 3.5 At the same time, Planning officers are working closely with the Council's IT service and the external software providers to ensure a timely and permanent solution is implemented. Members of the public and applicants are being kept informed through notifications on the Council's website and through individual communications.
- 3.6 The target date for completion is the end of March 2021, with significant steps forward as interim milestones are achieved – such as the Enterprise module completion in January which will map out clearly the deadlines for each step of the process to help re-prioritise workloads and help ensure timely progress with the various stages of submitting / reviewing a planning application.

4 Formal Planning Performance Position

- 4.1 The Council's planning performance has to be reported to the Department of Communities and Local Government [DCLG] on a quarterly basis and the information is publicly available to any user of the service via the DCLG's website.

- 4.2 The Council could be put into ‘special measures’ if it does not achieve a 50% performance target on major applications over a two-year period. ‘Special Measures’ would entail the Council’s decision-making powers being taken away from them.

4.3 Total Applications Received

- 4.3.1 Over the 12-month period from October 2019 to September 2020, the total number of planning applications received per quarter has remained broadly constant.

Time Period	Total Applications Received
1 Oct 2019 – 31 Dec 2019	265
1 Jan 2020 – 31 March 2020	224
1 April 2020 – 30 June 2020	222
1 July 2020 – 30 September 2020	251
Total / Average per Quarter	962 / 241

- 4.3.2 In the two quarters prior to the first CV19 “lockdown” at the end of March 2020, 489 applications were received.

- 4.3.3 In the following 6 months, 473 were received. Therefore, in terms of total workload, this has remained broadly unaffected by the lockdown restrictions and communities / developers have used this home working time to progress development plans and home improvements.

4.4 “Major” Planning Applications

- 4.4.1. Of the total applications received, a proportion are defined as “Major” applications. These are developments of 10 or more dwellings or 0.5 hectares (where dwelling numbers are not specified), or, for other types of development, 1,000 square metres or more of floorspace or a site area of 1 hectare or more.

- 4.4.2 The scale of the proposed development means that only a small proportion of all applications received relate to Major development, and because these numbers are small, they can fluctuate significantly from quarter to quarter.

- 4.4.3 The numbers of applications received:

Time Period	Major Applications Received
1 Oct 2019 – 31 Dec 2019	5
1 Jan 2020 – 31 March 2020	11
1 April 2020 – 30 June 2020	8
1 July 2020 – 30 September 2020	12
Total / Average per Quarter	36 / 9

- 4.4.4 Although the figures have, as expected, varied between quarters, it can be seen that overall numbers have actually slightly increased in the six-months since the CV19 restrictions were introduced.

4.5 Performance Against Targets – Major Applications

- 4.5.1 The Council’s performance in determining Major applications within the 13-week statutory period is measured against two targets:

- National target: 60%

- Local (OMBC) target: 80%

4.5.2 The actual performance is as follows:

Time Period	Major Application Performance
1 Oct 2019 – 31 Dec 2019	100%
1 Jan 2020 – 31 March 2020	90.9%
1 April 2020 – 30 June 2020	100%
1 July 2020 – 30 September 2020	83.3%

4.5.3 It is apparent that, over the 12-month period, both national and local performance targets have been exceeded each quarter in respect of Major applications.

4.6 Performance Against Targets - “Other” Planning Applications

4.6.1 For all other applications apart from Majors, performance against the 8-week statutory determination period is measured against the following two targets:

- National target: 70%
- Local (OMBC) Target: 80%

4.6.2 The actual performance is as follows:

Time Period	“Other” Application Performance
1 Oct 2019 – 31 Dec 2019	94.6%
1 Jan 2020 – 31 March 2020	90.1%
1 April 2020 – 30 June 2020	90.2%
1 July 2020 – 30 September 2020	94.9%

4.6.3 It is apparent that, over the 12-month period, both national and local performance targets have been exceeded each quarter in respect of “Other” planning applications. Performance has also not been affected by the Covid restrictions.

4.7 Overall Performance Summary

4.7.1 It is evident from the data and the analysis set out above, that despite the various challenges being experienced, performance has been maintained throughout the 12-month period and that performance targets continue to be exceeded up to the end of September 2020.

4.7.2 As a result of the technical issues being experienced more recently since the new planning portal went live in October, it is likely that overall performance, in terms of the targets set out above, will be negatively impacted in the current quarter (1 October to 31 December 2020). This will be a temporary reduction in service performance, the causes of which, as set out above, are exceptional and are being actively and urgently addressed.

5 Continuous Performance Improvement: Next 12 Months

- 5.1 Once the challenges of CV19 decline, and the new planning digital system is fully active the team are keen to continue to work on further service delivery improvements. Customer service remains a priority for the planning team, however the nature of the correspondence and the sheer number of enquiries have resulted in cyclic wave of negativity impacting on the team. The nature of the service results in high numbers of negative views and complaints, which at times has generated verbal and written abuse of officers, false allegations and vexatious complaints – all of which take time to investigate thoroughly and resolve / action appropriately.
- 5.2 The Customer Service Standards are attached as Appendix 1. Automated responses have been set up to ensure that emails are immediately acknowledged and that customers are reassured that, when sent to a named officer, their query will normally be responded to within 10 working days. When this is not possible, the reason will be given, and a new deadline will be proposed. Where queries are received by the generic service inbox, these will be immediately acknowledged and forwarded to the relevant case officer. Current working arrangements and the exceptional pressures noted above mean that a 10-day, rather than 5-day full response time will also be given at present for these enquiries.
- 5.3 Queries from elected Members should now be sent directly to Bethany Ostell (Bethany.ostell@oldham.gov.uk) who will record and acknowledge their receipt, forward them to the appropriate officer and monitor the response, which will be subject to a 10 working day target.
- 5.4 With additional protocols and customer service improvements already in place, the new systems and processes, new team members, and new leadership / management will continue to develop and embed service improvements with a dedicated commitment to high quality planning service remains a priority, the team are working hard to continually improve customer service.

6 Recommendations

- 6.1 Members of PVFM are asked to note the formal planning performance against the targets, and to endorse the continuous improvement plans for service delivery.

7 Financial implications

- 7.1 There are no financial implications raised by this report

8 Legal implications

- 8.1 It is acknowledged that planning processes are legislative with complex national, regional and local planning legislation. There are no legal implications raised by this report.

9 HR / People implications

- 9.1 HR are aware of personnel issues and additional help, support and advice is provided as needed.

10 Strategic Links

-
- 10.1 The Development Management Service improves the physical environment of communities and plays a key role in enabling investment, skills, quality jobs and a thriving local economy – all things encouraged in the Oldham Plan.