

# Planning Transformation Business Case

## Planning Policy Committee Thursday, 25 November 2021

Report of: Chief Executive

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Purpose: For decision

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Publication status: Open

Wards affected: All

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### Executive summary:

In response to the review by the Planning Advisory Service (PAS), the Council agreed the need for a transformation programme to be commenced with the aim of building a high performing, resilient and reputationally strong Development Management Service.

Following on from the Planning Transformation – Interim Report that was presented to Planning Policy Committee on the 23 September 2021, this report sets out details of the proposed re-structure of the Development Management Service with supporting data and a progress update on key work streams.

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**This report supports the Council's priority of:** Building a better Council

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### Recommendation to Committee:

That the proposed re-structure of the Development Management Service, together with the additional staffing (organisation chart 2 within section 1.11 of this report refers), be approved.

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### Reason for recommendation:

To ensure the best possible outcomes in terms of structure, staffing, resilience, value for money and Councillor/Officer engagement.

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## 1. Structure of the Development Management Service

- 1.1 The charts below demonstrate that high volumes of lower-level application types have resulted in senior planning officers having to determine applications that would normally be carried out by planning assistants and planning officers.
- 1.2 Insufficient numbers of permanent planning officers relative to the volume of planning applications received have resulted in a reliance on temporary staff. This does not represent good value for money and leads to a lack of continuity due to high staff turnover.

**Table 1**

| <b>Application Type</b>             | <b>Application Number</b> | <b>Income Generated</b> |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| Planning Apps Householder LDC other | 1,231                     | £194,000                |
| Planning Apps Minors Outline majors | 432                       | £306,000                |
| Discharge of Conditions             | 128                       | £13,000                 |

Chart 1

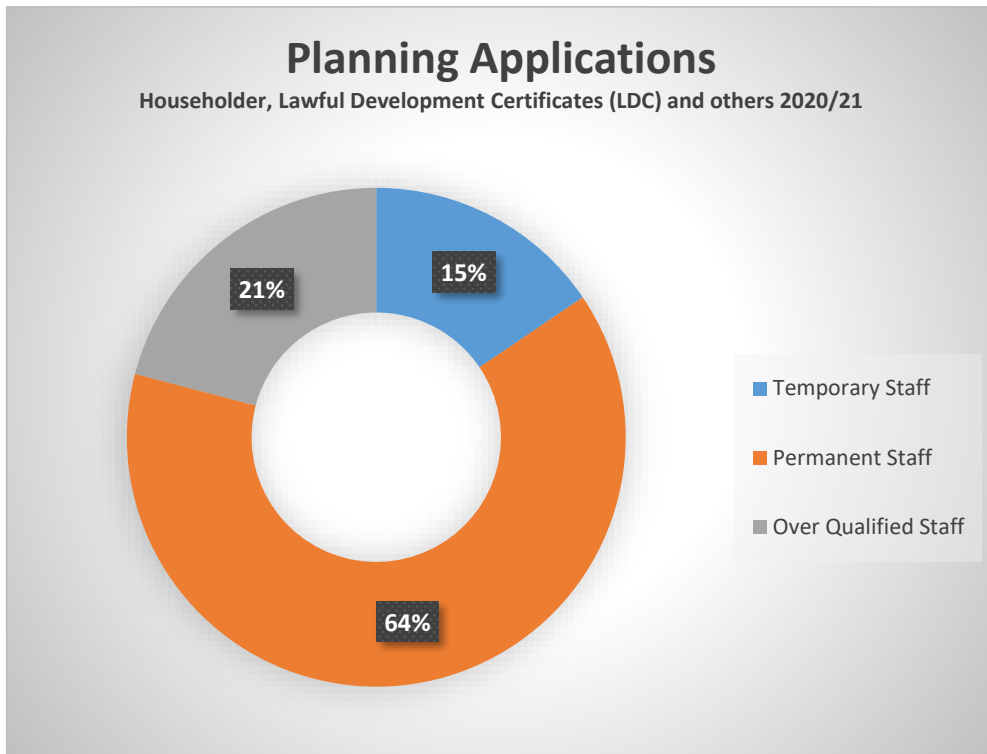


Chart 2

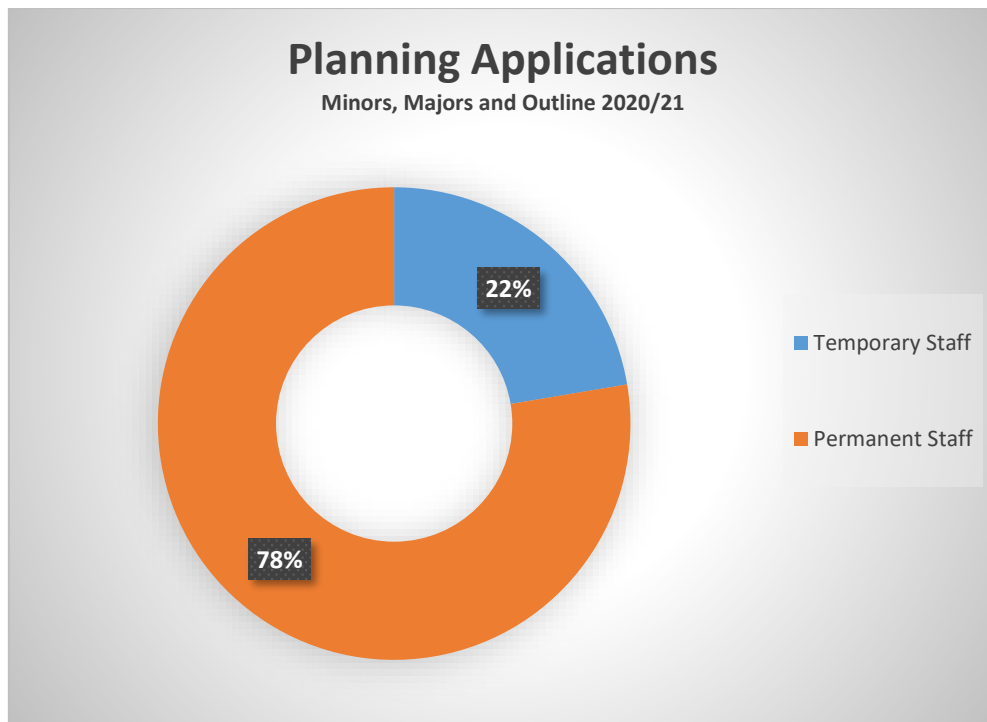
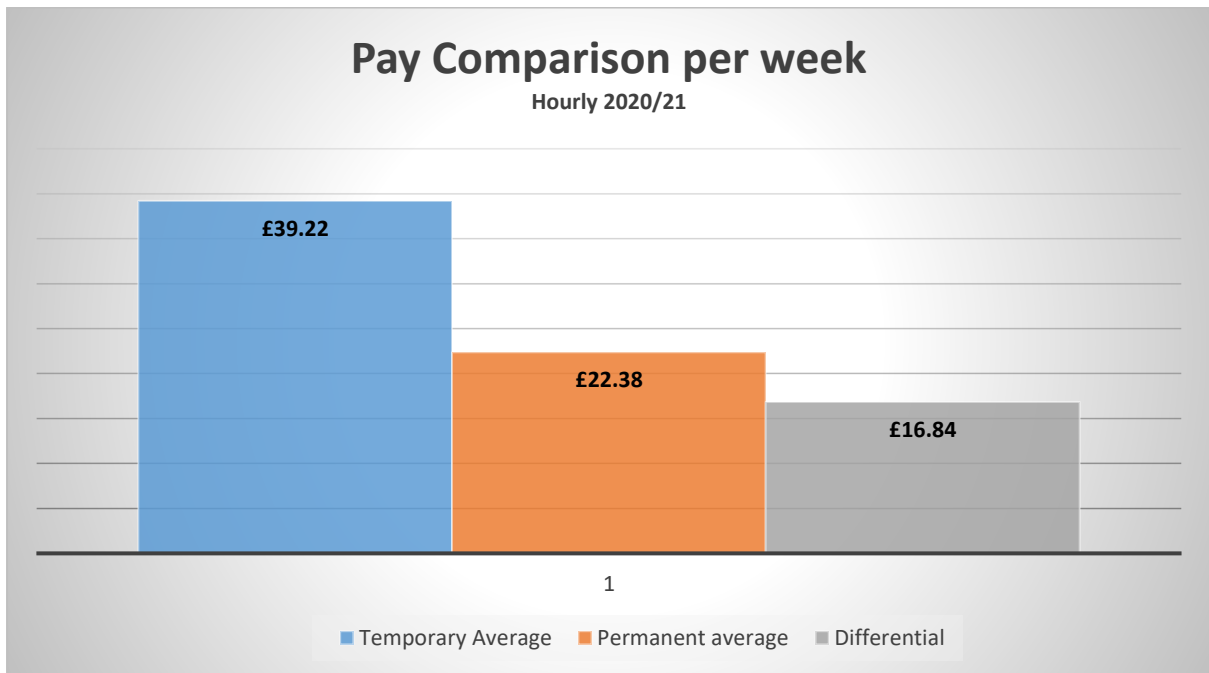


Chart 3



- 1.3 The proposed structure will streamline the delivery of the service by grouping officers by function e.g. Development Management, Planning Enforcement, Trees. The re-alignment of reporting lines allows for better and effective supervision of staff, sign-off capacity, coaching, mentoring and contribution to service/IT system improvement.
- 1.4 The proposed structure is also better positioned to deal with fluctuations in demand, without reliance on temporary staff. The provision of additional permanent staff and reduction in direct reports to the Head of Development Management and the Validation and Business Support Team Leader will enable them to undertake ongoing improvements to the service.
- 1.5 The provision of additional posts has been targeted to where statistics have highlighted a lack of resilience, i.e.:
- 1 x Senior Planning Officer
  - 1 x Planning Officer
  - 1 x Planning Assistant
  - 1 x Apprentice.
- 1.6 The net additional cost takes into account rationalisation of the current resource and additional funding received from the apprenticeship levy.

- 1.7 The net increase is £75,932 per annum including on costs. It is envisaged that this funding will be required for 18 months which equates to a funding requirement of £114,000, which is proposed will be drawn down from flexible capital receipts. At the end of the transformation period there will be a need for the investment to be absorbed into the base budget either by increased income or a reduction in the establishment.
- 1.8 A new role profile will be provided for the Validation and Business Support Team Leader and job titles have been amended in accordance with equivalent roles at neighbouring authorities.
- 1.9 The re-introduction of the full pre-application service has potential to create additional revenue which will help offset the recruitment of additional staff. A temporary member of staff has been recruited to provide pre-application advice in the short term. Once the new structure is in place and additional posts are filled, the pre-application case load will be allocated to Officers, dependant on the level of planning advice required. A benchmarking exercise, followed by a revised fee schedule for the pre-application service, will be taken forward.

**Table 2**

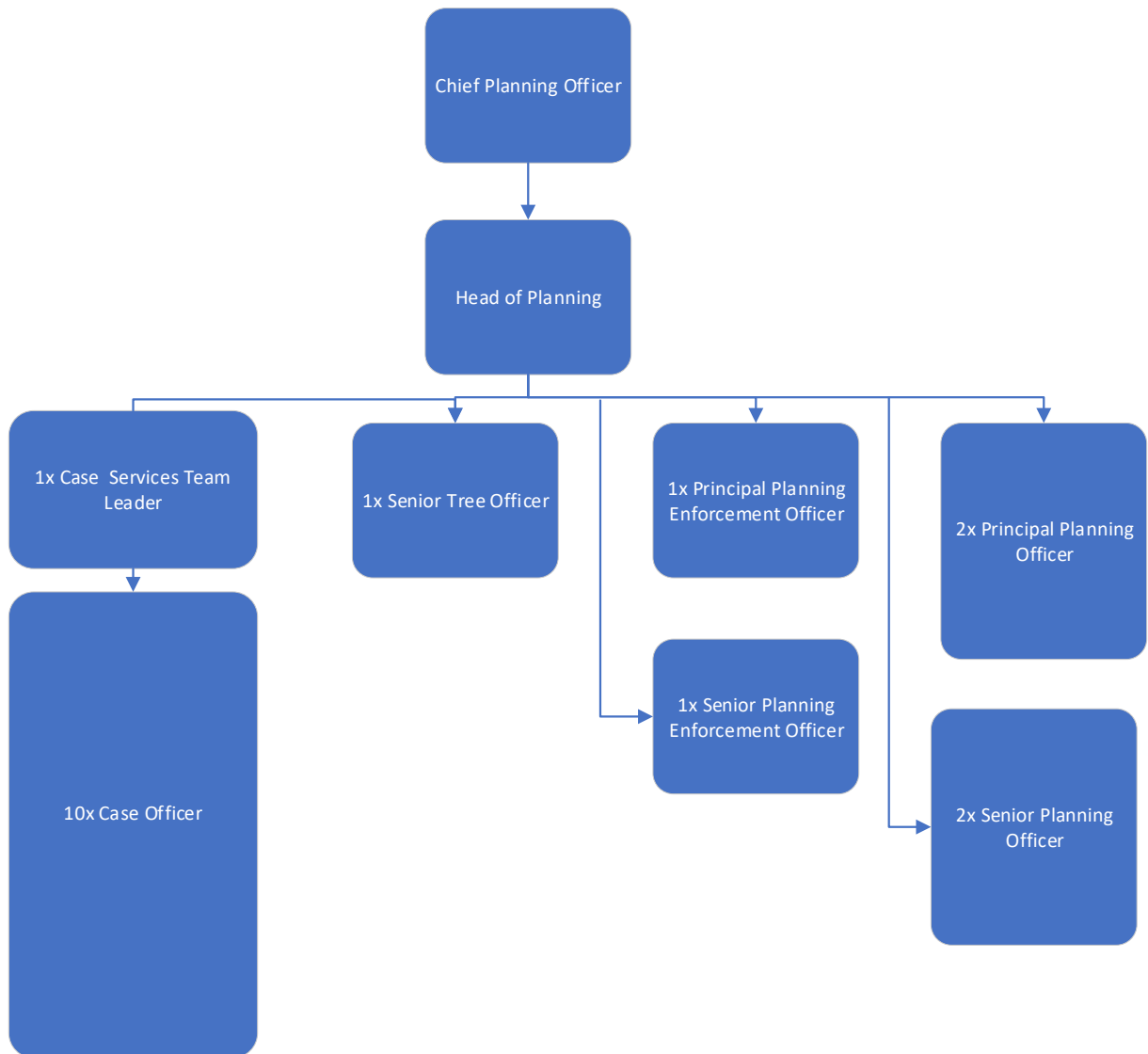
| <b>Income from pre - application advice</b>                |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Actual for 2020/21</b> (service suspended for 3 months) | <b>Potential for 2022/23</b>                              |
| £51,000  | £70,00 to £100,000<br>(subject to a revised fee schedule) |

- 1.10 Staff Consultation and time-lines for implementing the new structure is as follows: -
- A letter will be sent to all Development Management Officers, informing them that the 14-day consultation period will commence on Wednesday 1st December together with a link to this Committee report.
  - One to one meetings will be undertaken by the HR Business Partner and the Planning Transformation Lead with each member of the Development Management team during the consultation period.
  - The HR Business Partner will respond to any questions or comments from affected staff during the consultation period.
  - Staff Conference have been shown the proposed structure and have no objections.
  - The new structure will be implemented on the 3rd January 2022.

1.11 Organisation charts showing the current and proposed new organisation structures for the Development Management Service are set out on the following two pages.

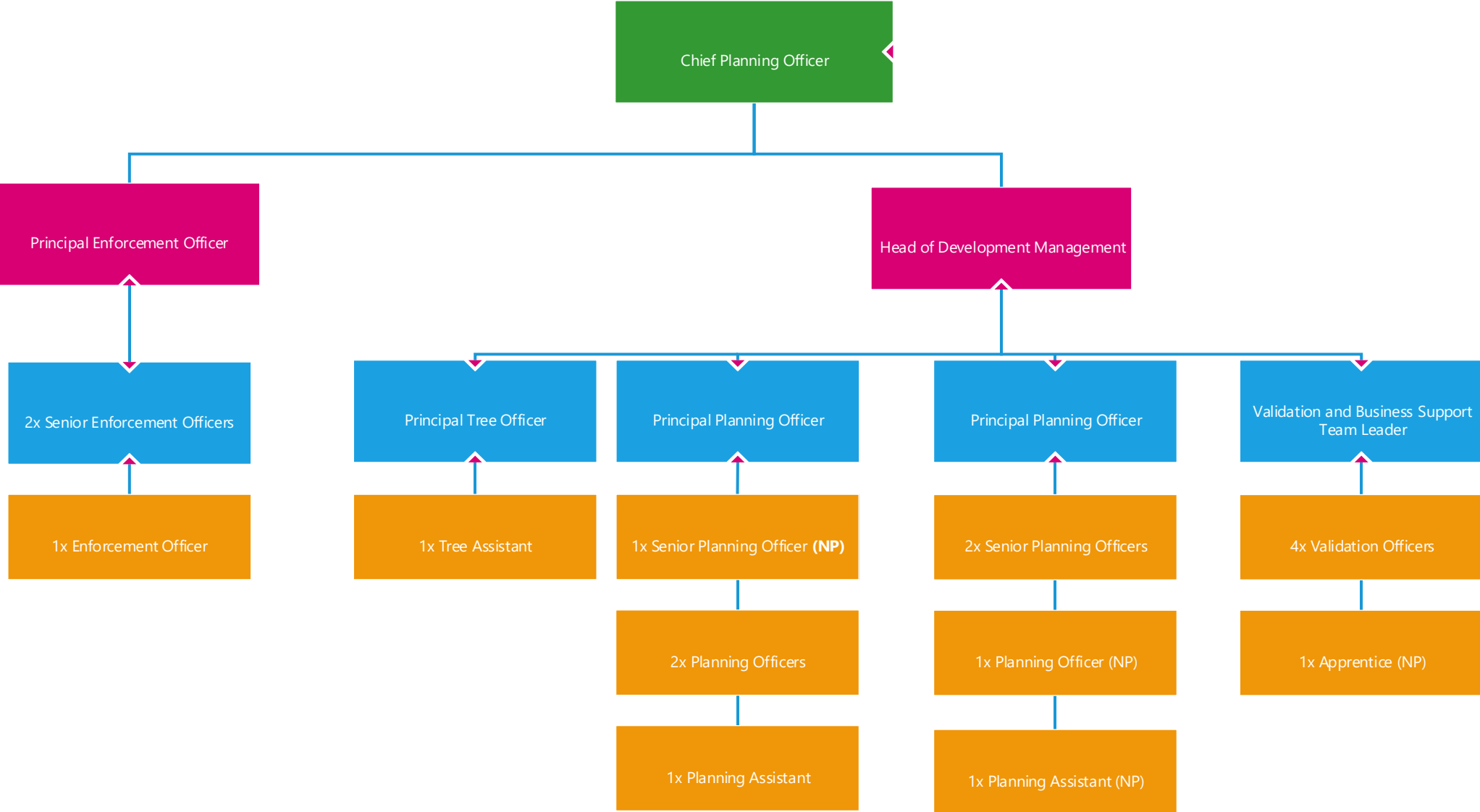
### Structure Chart 1

#### Existing Development Management Structure



Structure Chart 2

### Proposed Development Management Structure



**(NP) = New Post**

## **2. Resource requirements**

- 2.1 The process of validating planning applications has been identified as an area of concern in the PAS report. To address the issues raised, a review of the validation process by an experienced validation team leader from a neighbouring local authority is underway. A training programme, together with a supporting training manual and a revised Local Validation Checklist, will be provided in line with the outcomes and recommendations of this Review.
- 2.2 Results from the activity analysis completed by the Development Management Team flagged areas where internal cross skilling and training is required. Single points of failure and a need for additional staffing have been identified as well as ongoing IT issues. The proposed structure and additional staffing will address some of the issues raised.
- 2.3 The analysis of this data is ongoing and any elements that have not been completed by the end of the Transformation Project on 31st January 2022 will be captured in a monitoring spreadsheet and taken forward by the Development Management Team.
- 2.4 The proposed new structure includes additional posts that will be filled by applicants that are looking to develop a career in Planning. Both apprenticeships and graduate programmes will be introduced subject to guidance from the HR Business Partner for Planning.
- 2.5 Further training in Salesforce for the Development Management team has taken place and a video of the training session on creating and running reports has been made available within the Salesforce knowledge articles.
- 2.6 It has been agreed that a member of the Validation Team attend the Surrey Planning Technical Support Group meetings. This forum informs best practice, provides networking opportunities, updates on Policy changes and bench marking exercises.
- 2.7 Due to the high level of complaints that the department receives, it is recommended that all Development Management Officers attend a complaint training course.

## **3. Systems and Processes**

- 3.1 A peer review of our existing Planning Performance reporting has taken place and the required changes to the formatting of our reports has been completed.
- 3.2 The IT issues log, and in-box is still in operation and 2 weekly meetings are held with members of the IT team to review and resolve issues. We have worked through a lot of the issues raised by the DM team and improvements are ongoing.



- 3.3 The process for indexing documents in Civica has been reviewed and a process map has been agreed with Customer Services. The scanning team which sits in Customer Services will index all planning applications when they are received freeing up the validation team to spend more time validating planning applications. A new process has also been agreed to mitigate the risk of inappropriate content being displayed on our web site.
- 3.4 A re-platforming of the Planning Portal is currently underway. Two members of the IT team have attended a workshop for Local Authorities and any improvements to the Planning Portal Service will be highlighted on our web site once the re-platforming goes live.
- 3.5 A new Geographical Information System (GIS) contract has been approved, resulting in a saving of £13,000 per annum over the next 3 years and an upgrade to our existing GIS software. The new software will help deliver improvements to the Development Management service.
- 3.6 Improvements to the web site have been agreed with the IT team as follows:
- Work has been completed to enable the generation of a Planning Application weekly list by an adjustable date option and download into a pdf document on our web site.
  - Additional wording, to highlight where the planning history relating to a planning application can be viewed, has been added.
  - The date in the consultation "comments until" box has been reinstated on the search planning application web page.
  - The option to search by area will be available via a web GIS application.
  - Work is underway to automate an email that is sent weekly with a link to the search planning applications web page to Members and Parish Councils. Recipients can easily click on the link and immediately access the current planning application weekly list, then save as a pdf.

#### **4. Member/Officer Relations**

- 4.1 Agreed actions to date are as follows: -
- A working group, comprising of Officers and the Chairs of the Planning and Planning Policy Committees, will begin work on reviewing the Planning Protocol in the new year.

- The Development Management team are all now available to take calls between 9am and 10am every working day. This time frame will be extended when Officers' caseloads decrease. Planning Officers will also be provided with work mobile phones.
- Government Live Tables on planning application statistics will be included in the standard performance and risk report, to be reported on a quarterly basis to this Committee.
- Planning enforcement statistics will also be included in the standard performance and risk report to be reported on a quarterly basis to this Committee.
- The introduction of an informal planning forum has been agreed in principle, subject to staff availability.
- A full time Planning Legal Specialist and an Interim Senior Planning Specialist (initially p/t for three months) have been appointed to improve communication and collaboration between the Legal and Planning departments. The PAS report highlighted some weaknesses which are being addressed, including the review of all planning committee reports before they are published, and the review of internal instructions/processes.

## **5. Consultation**

- 5.1 This report, including the proposed actions and work streams that are currently being progressed, has been prepared in consultation with the Chairs of the Planning and Planning Policy Committees. Suggestions put forward by Councillors Duck, Dennis and Davies have also been taken into consideration.

## **Key implications**

### **Comments of the Chief Finance Officer**

This is an important piece of work which is tackling some longstanding issues within the Development Management Service. Against a difficult and challenging financial context for the Council, I support the additional investment in the service to allow the necessary changes to be made to transform into a leaner and more efficient service.

The proposed increase in investment is £75,932 per annum for 18 months from 1<sup>st</sup> January 2022. This equates to a funding requirement of £114,000, which will be funded from flexible capital receipts. This also means that the additional funding will be withdrawn from July 2024.

During this period, it will be necessary for the service to ensure that it identifies and delivers the improvements and efficiencies necessary to allow for a reduction in cost at the end of 18 months, or to offset the additional costs through the generation of additional revenue.

## **Comments of the Head of Legal Services**

Members will note from the report that good progress is being made on a number of initiatives that relate directly to the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) review's recommendations, some of which have been mentioned in paragraphs 3-4 above. It is clear that the scope of work involved is significant and so indicative milestones are continued to be kept under regular review as the transformation programme proceeds. There is no doubt that there are clear benefits on increasing staff numbers within team and as set out in this report. Having more resilience within the team, more efficient software systems, improved processes, a fit-for-purpose customer planning portal, and a new structure that is aligned to the demands of the Council should lead to better service standards improvements.

In addition, notable improvements to current staff well-being would be expected to arise from reduced inefficiencies in performing day-to-day tasks, alleviating pressures from application backlogs, and improved customer feedback.

It is anticipated that with an increase in legal services support the Council will be able to introduce Planning Performance Agreements. This, along with an improved preapplication advice service, has the potential to increase discretionary income as a means of improving financial resilience in order to offer value added services.

## **Corporate implications**

There are no current plans to delete posts. Some recruitment may take place after the consultation period has concluded and the transformation is completed on 2 January 2022. All posts will be advertised internally and externally.

## **Equality**

None

## **Climate change**

This report contains no proposals that would impact on the council's commitment to climate change.

## **Appendices**

None

## **Background papers**

None

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