

Planning Service Improvement Plan Update	
Executive Summary	This report provides an update on the progress towards the completion of the Planning Service Improvement Plan (PSIP).
Options considered	This report does not consider options
Consultation(s)	This report does contain feedback from customers.
Recommendations	<p>a) That the Committee welcomes the changes and improvements made as a consequence of the Planning Service Improvement Plan process; and,</p> <p>b) That the Committee note that future performance reports will be made available via reports to Development Committee quarterly and annually.</p>
Background papers	N/A

Wards affected	All
Cabinet member(s)	Cllr Andrew Brown
Contact Officer	Russell Williams

Links to key documents:	
Corporate Plan:	Customer Focus
Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS)	No direct links to the MTFS
Council Policies & Strategies	Not applicable

Corporate Governance:	
Is this a key decision	No
Has the public interest test been applied	N/A
Details of any previous decision(s) on this matter	O&S meetings 13.09.23, 15.02.23 and 28.09.22

1. Purpose of the report

1.1 To provide an update on the Planning Service Improvement Plan (PSIP).

2. Introduction & Background

2.1. During 2021, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered that the Planning Service should be subject to a performance review, following perceived concerns over the speed of decision making, communications between stakeholders and Members and difficulties in obtaining information in relation to planning obligations (S106 contributions). It was also suggested that insufficient focus and/or cross-service priority has been attached to business related proposals.

- 2.2. Following this, at the Overview & Scrutiny Committee in March 2022 it was agreed that the Director for Place and Climate Change should undertake the formation of a Planning Service Improvement Plan (PSIP).
- 2.3. A Draft PSIP Strategy was subsequently presented to this Committee on 28th September 2022 and following further public and Town & Parish Council consultation, a completed PSIP Strategy and supporting Action Plan was agreed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in February 2023.
- 2.4. The resolution of the February 2023 Committee (item 137) states:

Resolved

1. *That the Overview & Scrutiny Committee supports the Planning Service Improvement Action Plan.*

Actions

1. *Update on action plan to be added to 23/24 Work Programme, to include breakdown of performance as impacted by delays with statutory consultees.*

3. Current Position

- 3.1. The PSIP is a priority for the Planning Service. With much of the programmed plan now completed, officers are continuing to improve our service provision through additional work streams including, software development, a training and development programme to better inform and upskill our staff and the monitoring and the roll out of quarterly and annual performance report(s).
- 3.2. At headline level – the Council’s Planning Service is now recognised as one of the very best in the country for speed and quality of its Development Management service - see: [North Norfolk identified as ‘platinum’ rated Planning Service. This shows that](#) our Planning Service was one of twelve nationwide recognised as being at a ‘Platinum’ (i.e. the top) level (and the second highest district authority).
- 3.2 This report will focus on reporting on progress with the Plan. The Action Plan, agreed in February 2023, had three headline ‘areas’ under which sat 13 delivery components. The areas of focus were:
 - People;
 - Process; and
 - Performance.

3.3 The 13 components were:

- 1) Undertaking a comprehensive training and support programme for Members
- 2) Improving engagement and support for Town & Parish Councils
- 3) Engaging the public effectively
- 4) Improving Communication through website functionality and accessibility
- 5) Improving communication and strengthening links with key stakeholders
- 6) Providing exemplary customer service to planning service users
- 7) Ensure that North Norfolk District Council provides a positive work environment for planning staff
- 8) Improve accessibility and transparency of Development Committee (DC) and planning processes
- 9) Planning Service Process Improvements
- 10) Using performance to measure success
- 11) Managing S106 payments & processes
- 12) Managing and responding to complaints and compliments
- 13) Performance enabling

3.4. Presently, approximately 80% of the Plan has been completed. Further information is provided in Appendix 1.

3.5. In recent months, Development Committee have considered a series of reports on progress with key elements of the Plan.

4. Forthcoming tasks

4.1. Whilst significant progress has been made, there will be a continuation of the PSIP work in order to see a continual improvement and embracing of best practice. This will involve:

- A new local validation list – *a first draft has been reported to Development Committee with consultation about to commence. It is anticipated that this will be formally adopted prior to the end of the calendar year.*
- The new pre- planning application (pre-app) service – *a draft was tabled for Development Committee in August 2024 and should be finalised and introduced in the coming months. The related fee schedule will require approval by Full Council.*
- Improved performance monitoring – *a draft suite of Performance Indicators was tabled at Development Committee in August 2024. The new suite should be reported on – for the first time – following the end of Quarter 2 (i.e. July to September) – and will be reported publicly to Development Committee. These Indicators cover the full breadth of the Planning Service and not just the Development Management part.*
- Ongoing training for Development Committee Members – *a programme for training was agreed at Development Committee in July 2024.*

- Ongoing training for Planning Staff – *Quarterly all Service sessions now take place alongside ‘Learning Lunches’ for staff. Staff completed a skills questionnaire which has led to the production of a Service Training Plan which is due to be launched this autumn.*
- Improved planning web pages – *‘new look’ webpages will launch during October / November 2024.*
- Improved back-office procedures including streamlining processes and quality checking document templates – *this work continues – although a number of elements have already been introduced – such as, a new report format for our Householder Officer reports and clearer guidance to Officers around presentation content and lengths for Development Committee. In addition clearer guidance and prioritisation of workloads has been set put for internal consultees and better, more accessible information provided to team leaders and managers on staff workloads. Finally, we have reviewed and made improvements to processes and provided additional training on dealing with the Appeals.*

5. Customer Feedback questionnaire responses

5.1 Since May 2023 we have been including a feedback questionnaire link to the applicant /agent when decision notices are issued. Unlike earlier consultations this is aimed specifically at those that have used our Development Management service.

5.2 Currently we have received 51 feedback responses. Generally, the feedback is positive with many applicants suggesting we listened to their views and reasons for the decision were easy to understand. We have been working on the website improvements including providing more help and guidance in the early stages.

Fig 1: Feedback questionnaire results

2. Thinking about your recent experience of the Council's Planning service (from start to finish) , please can you indicate your thoughts on the following questions.

[More Details](#)

■ Excellent ■ Good ■ Satisfactory ■ Poor ■ N/A

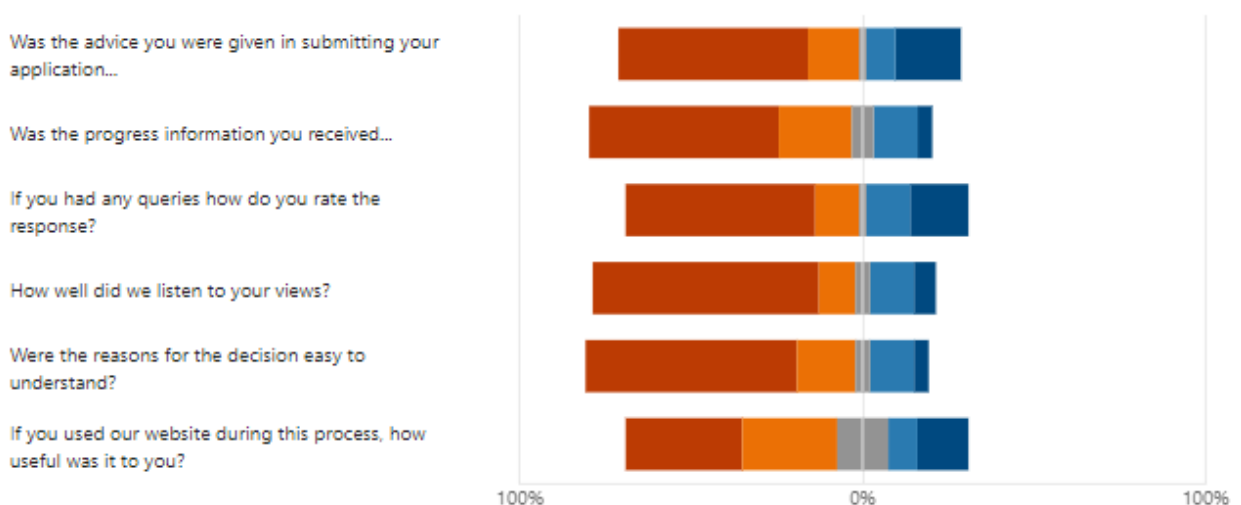
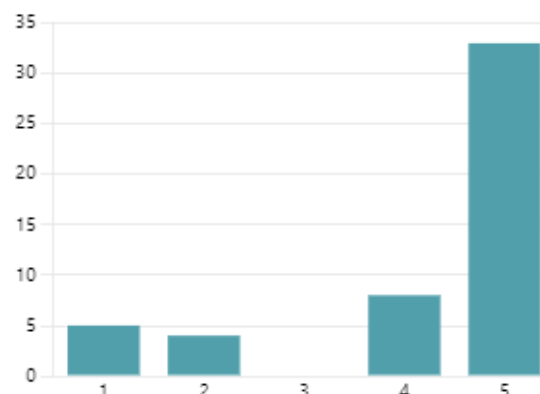


Fig 2 Overall score for service received

9. Overall - from start to finish how would you rate the service you received?

[More Details](#)[Insights](#)

4.20
Average Rating



5.3 Responses to what we 'did well' included:

- *"You were incredibly helpful when we re-submitted the application - you actually helped us source and submit the correct supporting plans etc - the planning officer really went above and beyond and we were very appreciative."*
- *"The turnaround time from your on-site visit to notification of the decision was very fast."*
- *"Telephone contact initiated by officer cut out delays with written communication to move things forward quickly."*
- *"All the staff were very friendly and knowledgeable"*
- *"Good communication that enabled the productive momentum to continue"*
- *"I was kept well informed during the whole process and was very happy with the way it was handled."*

5.4 Responses to 'what we 'could do better' included:

- *"A couple of things were perhaps not as clear as they could have been e.g. how to mark out the location site colours, but help was available."*
- *"Only speed. Mainly it seemed that some of the departments took a very long time to respond to the planning officer, which I understand is what caused the two extensions."*
- *"Quicker decisions needed for minor permissions and too many people involved in correspondence plus final answer could include 'yes' or 'no' decision instead of technical language."*

6. Town and Parish Council Roadshows

- 6.1 During the past 12 months the service has organised and participated in series of training events (7 to date) for Town & Parish Members and Clerks. To date well over 100 people have attended the sessions with representatives from over 40% of councils now having attended at least one session.

6.2 These sessions have been well received with each future event having been improved and honed following initial feedback.

6.3 Feedback included:

- *“This session was excellent but the presentation possibly a little too detailed. Apart from enforcement which is an area of concern and might benefit from a little more depth. Case studies in both planning and enforcement would be helpful. The Q&A was on target - the more the better.”*
- *“Thank you for your transparency and depth of instruction that was pitched at the right level.”*
- *“It was helpful to know how that responses to planning applications should be correctly framed to make the most impact as a parish council when responding to applications in our area. Also food for thought in the neighbourhood plan.”*
- *“I wouldn't change much. It was good and hung together well, I thought.”*
- *“Excellent session that probably should be compulsory attendance for all Parish councillors. truly helped to increase my understanding of the process but also the complexities around planning and the various roles.”*

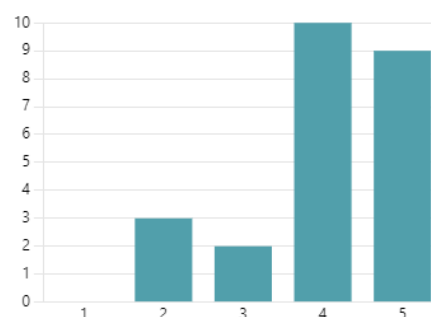
Fig 3: Overall score awarded by attendees of T&PC Training sessions

6. Overall how would you rate the event?

[More Details](#)

[Insights](#)

4.04
Average Rating



7. The Future

7.1 A quarterly update on Planning Performance will be reported to Development Committee and an Annual Report published. In each such Annual Report there is an intention to identify some areas where the Service will look to manage change / improvement in the coming year – and progress on those will then be covered within the subsequent Annual Report.

7.2 All these reports will be made to Development Committee offering Councillors the opportunity to ask Officers about performance matters and to shape and influence the areas where the Service should look to improve.

8. Corporate Priorities

- 8.1 This report will support the 'A Strong, Responsible and Accountable Council' Priority of the Corporate Plan 2023-2027. Action 3 of that part of the 2024/25 Annual Action Plan stated:

"To continue improvements to our Planning Service under the Planning Service Improvement Strategy introduced in March 2023 and to deliver the action plan by July 2024, with the intention of providing exemplary customer service to planning service users, improving performance monitoring and reporting, web pages, training for members and staff, review of appeal decision notices and pre-application processes and refining validation list requirements."

9. Financial and Resource Implications

- 9.1 There are no direct financial implications resulting from this update report.

Comments from the S151 Officer:

Although there are no direct financial implications. Once implemented the improved service will hopefully be able to generate additional income for the Council.

10. Legal Implications

- 10.1 There are no legal implications relating to this update report.

Comments from the Monitoring Officer

This is an update report as to progress on the Planning Service Improvement Plan, and as such there is no direct governance issues arising. With reference to the proposed future tasks, where such require changes to fees/ to the Constitution such will need approval at Full Council. Eastlaw has been contacted with reference to aspects of this and the proposed pre-application service.

11. Risks

- 11.1 The key risks are:

- 1) outstanding tasks are not completed due to resource issues.
- 2) Performance will suffer if support, particularly with regard to software development is not ongoing

12. Net Zero Target

- 12.1 No implications for this update report.

13. Equality, Diversity & Inclusion

- 13.1 No impact identified with this update report.

14. Community Safety issues

14.1 No impact on community safety issues with this update.

15. Conclusion

15.1 The Development Management service is, without doubt, in a better place than it was at the beginning of this process. Indeed, it is now recognised as a high performer at national level - which is a step change from where we started prior to PSIP being introduced. The conclusion of the PSIP in 2024 will not mark a cessation in our endeavors to monitor and improve the service. Our customers will remain at the heart of what we do, both now and in the future.

15.2 Whilst there are a few parts of the PSIP that are still being finalized. These should be completed in the next few months.

15.3 A new programme of improvements across the wider planning service area will be identified within each planned Annual Report on performance. Further improvements will help to maintain and improve our performance levels and will help ensure that our Planning service is effective and transparent in its operations and effectiveness.

15.4 Feedback provided by customers is a fundamental and valued element of improving the customer experience. Officers will continue to seek feedback, as appropriate, in identifying and carrying out continuous service level improvements.

15.5 A series of key performance indicators have been identified and we will monitor them and use the data to pro-actively manage team performance whilst also providing meaningful data to Members, senior management and staff alike. Regular performance reports will be presented to the Development Committee.

16. Recommendations

16.1 It is recommended that:

a) That the Committee welcomes the changes and improvements made as a consequence of the Planning Service Improvement Plan process; and,

b) That the Committee note that future performance reports will be made available via reports to Development Committee quarterly and annually.

Appendix 1: Feedback regarding the PSIP elements agreed by O&S

1 PEOPLE		
1.1 Undertake a comprehensive training and support programme for Members		
Actions	Outcomes	Comment
Develop, consult on and implement a training programme for post-election delivery to Members	Members feel confident in their knowledge of the planning process, their roles they and how best they can support their wards in the planning process.	Some upskilling/information sharing events have been held but a 'formal' training calendar was agreed at Development Committee in July 2024 - for roll out commencing Autumn 2024.
Provide accessible guidance to support learning for Members	Members know there are easily accessible resources to support their learning process	The Planning Advisory Service guidelines for Members was thought to be the best available and has been circulated to Members. Members have been invited to attend the Town & Parish Council training roadshow during 2023/24.
Provide quarterly updates on local and national planning matters to all Members (electronically)	Members are kept up to date on planning related matters that affect their communities and the district as a whole	This is planned to start formally alongside the publication of quarterly service data referred to in the body of the report.
1.2 Improving engagement and support for Town & Parish Councils		
Actions	Outcomes	
Regularly attend T&PC Forum to provide updates and training on planning matters and received feedback. Where appropriate attend T&P Council meetings.	Town & Parish Council members feel that they have a greater understanding of the Planning Service and their role in the Planning process. Provide opportunity to ask questions and receive training.	The Planning Team has attended T&PC Forums to update attendees on Planning Matters. We have also delivered seven roadshows for Town and Parish Councils (in Cromer, Stalham, Well-Next-The-Sea, Holt, North Walsham and Fakenham and one via Teams)
Provide an easily accessible suite of T&PC specific guidelines and resources through a dedicated page on NNDC website	Town & Parish Council members feel that they have a greater understanding of the Planning Service and their role in the Planning process. Provide opportunity to ask questions and receive training.	The Planning team spearheaded the review of how we present all pages to T&PCs. A landing page was developed and a range of topic based pages pulled together service information across the Council.
Regularly seek feedback via Town & Parish Forum – intervals to coincide with meetings	The Planning Service can act on feedback and make improvements in its support of T&P Councils	We have sought feedback on the seven (thus far) 'Planning Training Roadshows' .
1.3 Engaging the public effectively		
Actions	Outcomes	
Create and implement improved communication channels to better inform our local communities i.e., Outlook Magazine, social media and digital newsletters	An improved public perception of the Planning Service through greater understanding, transparency and communication.	The Planning Service has and will continue to contribute to the content of the Outlook Magazine as well as social media.
Introduce customer feedback questions as part of the planning process through normal correspondence (e.g., with all decision notices)	The public are able to give timely feedback on their experience and for the service to understand issues and undertake regular and timely reviews and improvements to all aspects of the Planning Service provided.	The Planning Service had a feedback questionnaire in place which is sent to applicants following the issue of a decision notice.

Provide improved information through interactive, and intuitive web pages and new media, to include videos explaining processes and issues	For the public and stakeholders to value our website and consider that it provides informative, accessible and topical information. Users feel they have a good understanding of the planning process and service provision.	Whilst the changes to the website have been slower than we might have hoped - because of the amount of work to be done to re-set many of the pages, we are confident the 'new look' website will be available in the autumn of 2024. Feedback will be sought on this following its release.
1.4 Improving Communication through website functionality and accessibility		
Actions	Outcomes	
Review and compare websites, identify best practice and useful tools and external links. Plan options and seek feedback. Implement changes.	The provision of easily accessible planning advice and guidance to a wide-ranging audience with different needs. Successful employment of various media to purvey the provision of a professional but personal and understanding service provider.	The website is being redeveloped to improve accessibility, especially for those who have not dealt with a Planning application previously. This work will be ongoing and managed to ensure regular 'public-friendly' content will be added frequently. We looked at other Planning websites as part of this work.
Seek feedback from various forums including T&P Councils, Members and service users.	To obtain positive feedback on changes made and continue to discover preferred ways of communication and user needs. Continued development and enhancement of the web pages.	We will seek feedback when the main website upgrade happens and make further changes where necessary.
1.5 Improving communication and strengthening links with key stakeholders		
Actions	Outcomes	
Set up and facilitate regular agent / developer Forums	To hold regular meetings encouraging open dialogue, facilitated training and planning updates in a forum that is well attended and appreciated because the Council listens to and responds to the questions and concerns of major developers and Agents.	We have held quarterly meetings with Agents and Developers. Because it is normally held via Teams we average 25-30 developers and agents per meeting. An in-person session was held in July 2024.
Set up regular consultee and stakeholder forums (i.e., Norfolk County Council, Anglian Water, Historic England, Natural England)	To hold regular meetings encouraging open dialogue, facilitating cross working and shared planning related updates.	Many Stakeholders are now being met on a regular and / or as and when needed basis.
1.6 Providing exemplary customer service to planning service users		
Clarifying a specific set of customer service performance indicators around communication and delivering to high customer service standards. Raising awareness and setting expectation across the service and to the public.	<p>Providing clarity regarding the planning process</p> <p>Providing verbal or emailed updates at key points in the application</p> <p>Responding to correspondence in a timely manner in accordance with Council standards</p> <p>Making timely decisions</p>	<p>A guide for Town & Parish Councils and the forthcoming website changes will give greater clarity to our customers and stakeholders. Customer Service expectations have been made very clear to case officers.</p> <p>Our response to complaints system has been overhauled and is delivering far better to target than was the case in 2023 and before.</p> <p>Our speed of decision performance has contributed to us being rated as a Platinum Service.</p>
Regularly monitor performance – 6 monthly	Reducing the need for extensions of time by determining applications within the original statutory time limit wherever possible	This will be measured and reported upon for the first time within the new set of Performance Indicators.

Address shortfalls in customer service promptly through direct contact. Aim to resolve any issues without need to follow complaints process through better engagement and timely responses.	Being responsive, polite and helpful at all times.	Evidence from customer feedback has shown this has improved greatly and where service has been lacking this is picked up immediately with the Team Leader to address at staff one to ones.
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1.7 Ensure that North Norfolk District Council provides a positive work environment for planning staff

Actions	Outcomes	
Provide a 'planning specific' induction programme for all new staff joining the service.	New starters feel welcomed, informed and comfortable with what they are being tasked to do. They know who to contact when they have questions, who their colleagues are and how the service functions. Written guidelines provide additional support and clarity. Everyone is provided with the same process and Managers / Team Leaders know what they are expected to do.	This has been put into place and has been in place for the last half a dozen new recruits.
Create and implement a clear communication matrix ensuring everyone is clear and about who, how and when we actively engage with various other parties both internally and externally	Planning staff feel that they are well informed and kept up to date with planning related and corporate matters. Provide the opportunity to seek clarity and offer well informed advice.	All of the Planning teams have reviewed all its interactions to ensure an appropriate amount of communication, information sharing and cross working takes place. Seeking staff feedback on will be part of the performance indicator suite.
Provide opportunities for personal development and learning, following personal development plans.	Planning staff feel they can grow and progress within the service and are supported in doing so.	The Planning Service has recently undertaken a comprehensive skills audit which is allowing officers to produce personal development plans. The audit is enabling the service to better respond to development needs in a variety of ways including formal training, learning lunches and mentoring.
Provide platforms to orchestrate communication, engagement and change.	Planning staff feel they have a voice, are given opportunities to participate in service wide objectives and are regularly consulted on things that affect them.	All staff are encouraged to use MS Teams (chat and announcements) and various meetings take place to discuss cases and raise issues whether this is on a wider corporate level at Quarterly service meeting, Team Meetings or at weekly one- to ones.

2 PROCESS

2.1 Improve accessibility and transparency of Development Committee (DC) and planning processes

Actions	Outcomes	
Agree, establish and implement clear communication guidelines for Member/ case officer interactions	Members feel confident about when, how and who to contact in the service area with planning enquiries	A new Call In Form / Process will be introduced from September 2024 following discussion at Development Committee. The weekly list of applications ensures that Councillors see everything in one place on a consistent basis.

Develop and deliver comprehensive DC training programme and resources for Members including allowing for ongoing training needs	The Development Committee feels fully informed and able to carry out its role effectively with full understanding of role in delivering transparent, considered decisions.	The new Councillor training programme that has been agreed has two inter-linked but separate components – one relates to training on planning matters for all councillors and one relates to training that is more targeted at those that sit on Development Committee. The new Performance Indicator suite will ensure – for the first time – that we report on some key elements of Committee Performance.
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2.2 Planning Service Process Improvements

Actions	Outcomes	
Draft, consult on and implement a new local validation list	The new local validation list that is understood by applicants, developers and planners and provides a clear, professional working framework.	The draft is due to be reported to Development Committee in September 2024. It will then need to go out for public consultation before it can be adopted.
Identify best practice and benchmark our service delivery against others.	A planning service that is confident in providing quality documentation and process and seeks to improve where necessary.	The new performance indicator suite is intended to enable the performance of the whole service to be assessed and should aid efforts to benchmark / compare our performance with that of others.
Review, Revise and implement the Council's Pre-App service. Roll out through website and communications with customers.	A clear, concise pre-app service that is fit for purpose and attractive to customers. Clear charges and outcomes promoted.	The new revised pre-apps service has been tabled at Development Committee in August 2024. The fee structure will need to be approved by Full Council before it can be introduced. This should be in the next few months.
Following on from the Planning Advisory Service 'best practice workshops' in October 22:	To provide a planning process that is efficient and fit for purpose.	Whilst this work remains ongoing, many improvements have already been implemented (see rows below).
Review, and revise report writing to improve speed of decision making, offer consistent production of high-quality documents and communications.	To improve speed of decision making, offer consistent production of high-quality documents and communications.	Our software system - Uniform - is being developed to provide a smarter way of working for officers which ensures consistency in report content and appearance.
Undertake Uniform (IT) changes to templates and process: Report writing, Allocations; workload management, and decisions & conditions drafting.	To have a supporting IT system that works with case officers to enable better management of caseloads, easy templates and processes that are clear and logical.	This is ongoing work but much has been done to streamline processes, upskill officers and set the foundation for ongoing improvements.
	To ensure the supporting IT systems (Uniform/Enterprise/Exacom) are functioning well, are regularly upgraded to offer best support and functionality. Downtime is kept to a minimum.	A further (3yr) contract was procured which led to the continuation of the Idox (Uniform) contract. This in turn has led to continued development to improve how officers undertake and manage their work.

3 PERFORMANCE

3.1 Using performance to measure success

Actions	Outcomes	
Introduce a set of targets relating to customer service. Monitor the targets and report to Service Managers. Ensure any 'underperformance' is dealt with promptly and effectively.	Focus on customer care because staff seek to provide the best service though understanding of the customer perspective.	A new suite of performance indicators have been introduced that relate to the whole Planning service. These will be monitored and reported on regularly to Development Committee.

Establish a robust system for monitoring development conditions, as identified through a matrix.	The Council is seen to take action to safeguard against unapproved or inappropriate development or conditions of development approval.	This has be introduced – where Case Officers analyse conditions attached to approvals and identify cases for our Enforcement Condition Compliance officer to keep under review.
3.2 Managing S106 payments & processes		
Actions	Outcomes	
Ensure that developer contributions are managed effectively. Educate officers and stakeholders so they are aware of how the funding criteria works and it can be accessed.	Stakeholders experience a transparent process supported by fully accessible software and educated staff, that allows the public to interrogate and identify the current S106 funds for their locality, parish or ward. Developers are clear of their commitments.	Exacom software was procured and an S106 officer recruited to enable better management of our S106 payments. This public facing software has enable greater interrogation and management.
Working with Eastlaw, review and establish protocols and sound legal agreements for securing and recording S106 agreements.	Developers, officers and stakeholders have clarity and security regarding obligations and payment of S106 monies.	The Assistant Director – Planning meets with the Council’s Legal team planning lead to discuss workload and cases on a fortnightly basis.
3.3 Managing and responding to complaints and compliments		
Actions	Outcomes	
Establish an effective system to monitor all correspondence relating to dissatisfaction (or praise) of services provided (that pre-empt / are not already captured by the corporate complaints system).	Ensuring monitoring and reporting of informal complaints/ potential complaints to ensure appropriate responses and that lessons are learnt. To reduce escalation of complaints.	Systems are now in place to monitor and make timely responses to, our informal complaints. Our system that we operate to respond to formal complaints has also been over-hauled.
3.4 Performance enabling		
Actions	Outcomes	
Enable and enact the enforcement team to undertake mobile working through the use of tablets and connections to back office via a mobile application (app).	Efficiencies in working through officers having easier digital access to site plans, conditions etc whilst on any site. Ability to Take pictures and make notes that are automatically uploaded to main databases.	This has been completed.
Digitise all remaining DM and Building Control paper records.	Reduced storage need, easier access to files.	This has been completed across all of the Planning Service including Building Control.