**Belfast City Council**

| Subject: | Performance and Improvement Update |
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| Date: | 15 December 2020 |
| Reporting Officer: | Aidan Thatcher, Director of Planning & Building Control |
| Contact Officer(s): | Ed Baker, Planning Manager (Development Management)<br>Helen Richmond, Business Support Officer |

| Restricted Reports | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Is this report restricted?** | **Yes** | | **No** | X |
| **If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?** | | | | |
| **After Committee Decision** | | | | |
| **After Council Decision** | | | | |
| **Some time in the future** | | | | |
| **Never** | | | | |

| Call-in | | | | |
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| **Is the decision eligible for Call-in?** | **Yes** | X | **No** | |

| 1.0 | Purpose of Report and Summary of Main Issues |
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| 1.1 | The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an update on performance and improvement in relation to the Council's Planning Service. |

| 2.0 | Recommendation |
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| 2.1 | The Planning Committee is asked to note the report. |

| 3.0 | Main Report |
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| | Background |
| 3.1 | The Planning Committee receives periodic updates on performance and improvement. Given the need to priortitise business continuity during the pandemic, this has not happened over recent months. This report therefore provides an update to Members on performance and improvement to date for 2020/21. |

| 3.2 | The Planning Service has responded positively to the challenges presented by COVID-19 and is currently fully operational save for the office being closed to the public, which is a corporate decision. This means that the hard copy planning register is currently unavailable to view by customers, however planning applications continue to be accessible online and alternative arrangements are being made for the public to view applications as and when required. The Council is actively encouraging new applications and amended plans to be submitted by email as it is both quicker and more efficient than hard copies. The Duty Planner service is operating remotely.

Performance |

| 3.3 | Development Management performance has inevitably been affected by COVID-19, which has presented a range of challenges. The Planning Service has adapted very well and introduced a number of changes including:

- Development of new processes and roll out of IT to support remote working;
- External and internal face-to-face meetings conducted through video conferencing;
- Staff working in the office on a part-time rota basis;
- Promotion of email application and Pre Application Discussion submissions;
- Specific COVID-19 risk assessments for office working and site visits; and
- Temporary virtual Planning Committees. |

| 3.4 | The Planning and Building Control followed corporate guidance and a number of planning staff were furloughed in June and July. |

| 3.5 | Regular updates have been provided to customers both directly and on the planning pages of the Council's website on the availability of services. |

| 3.6 | Inevitably, there has been an impact on performance since the pandemic began earlier in the year with the total number live planning applications on hand having increased as shown in the table below, reflective of processing delays. Planning applications peaked at 1,217 but have been reduced by 100 to 1,117 live applications. Enforcement complaints had risen to over 550 but these have since lowered to pre-lockdown levels.

|  | **February 2020** | **Current** | **% Difference** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Planning applications | 872 | 1,117 | +28% |
| Enforcement cases | 475 | 476 | +0.2% | |

| 3.7 | Importantly, the Planning Service has introduced a number of successful changes and performance has been improving over recent months with increased decisions and the total number of live applications and enforcement cases falling. |

| 3.8 | Members will be aware that planning performance is subject to three statutory indicators:

- Average time for processing Major applications (target 30 weeks);
- Average time for processing Local applications (target 15 weeks);
- % of enforcement cases concluded within 39 weeks (target 70%). |

| 3.9 | 2020/21 performance for the year to October is shown in the table overleaf. Performance for the same point last year is also provided so that current performance can be compared with a "normal" year. |

|  | Major decisions (volume) | Major performance (30 weeks) | Local decisions (volume) | Local performance (15 weeks) | Enf Cases Closed | Enf Performance (70%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **2019/20** | 17 | 37.2 | 1,046 | 13.8 | 457 | 93% |
| **2020/21** | **20** | **37.6** | **613** | **20.6** | **255** | **72%** |

3.10 Major applications account for a very small percentage of overall applications (1%) and due to this, their scale and generally longer processing time, performance for Major applications has been similar when compared to the same point in the previous year. In fact, whilst average processing times are about the same, the number of decisions has actually increased over 2019/20.

3.11 Inevitably, Local applications – which make up 99% of all applications – have been impacted the most. The pandemic has understandably resulted in a decrease in application decisions and increase in average processing times. As previously mentioned, performance has been steadily improving over recent months and this trend is expected to continue following the introduction of new streamlined processes.

3.12 Performance in Enforcement has also been impacted by COVID-19 with the number of cases closed having fallen compared to the same point last year. The percentage of cases closed within 39 weeks has also reduced, although is still within the statutory target.

Improvement

3.13 Officers last provided the Planning Committee with an update on the Planning Improvement Plan in September 2019. A further update was due to be reported to Members in March this year, however, this did not take place due to the pandemic.

3.14 Despite the challenges around COVID-19 and substantial focus on ensuring business continuity during this time, the Planning Service has been able to progress the improvement programme across several key areas, including:

- Supporting the design, configuration and implementation of the replacement Planning Portal for Northern Ireland;
- Participating in the Department for Infrastructure's review of the planning sytem including improving the role of statutory consultees in the application process and review of the NI planning legislation;
- Updates to the Planning Service *Application Checklist* – improving information requirements for outline applications and telecommunication applications; and additional information to help support the assessment of Employability and Skills;
- Publishing new online forms for submitting applications for a Discharge of Condition, Non Material Change and Prior Application Notice (PAN);
- Improving processes around the handling of telecommunication applications;
- Publication of an internal *Consultation Checklist* which provides guidance to officers on who should be consulted and when on planning applications and PADs;
- Introducing an internal intranet Monitoring Form for capturing key information about planning application outcomes including new residential permissions and commercial floor space (to support Plan-making and policy development);
- Publication of an *Annual Monitoring Report* in relation to financial contributions secured through Section 76 planning agreements; and
- Commencement of the redesign of the Planning Enforcement function in line with internal audit recommendations.

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| | <u>Project to replace the NI Planning Portal</u> |
| 3.15 | Members will be aware that there is a highly important ongoing project to replace the NI Planning Portal – the public interface that customers use to find out about and comment on planning applications; and back-office IT system that the Planning Service uses to process planning applications, enforcement cases and regional property certificates. Officers last provided a formal update to the Planning Committee on this project on 21 July 2020. |
| 3.16 | Members will recall that a contract was awarded in June 2020 to replace the current NI Planning Portal with a Commercial Off The Shelf System (COTS) with some local configuration, shared by 10 councils and the Department for Infrastructure (only Mid Ulster Council withdrew from the project and they will be procuring their own system). |
| 3.17 | The new IT system is planned to go live from December 2021 and Belfast City Council will be part of the first wave implementation. |
| 3.18 | To date, planning staff have contributed to 32 "Discovery" workshops to further refine the requirements of the new IT system following agreement of the specification earlier this year. Moving forward, staff will support a series of 40 "Sprints" to design and configure different aspects of the new system. This will have a not insiginifcant impact on staff time but is critical to supporting the project. The Council's own project team continues to meet regularly to oversee implementation from a Belfast City Council perspective. The Planning Service maintains a strong and close working relationship with the Department, which is leading the regional project, both through the Planning Portal Governance Board and regular 121 meetings between the BCC and Departmental project managers. |
| 3.19 | Further updates on the implementation of this critical project will be provided at key junctures over the next 12 months. |
| **4.0**<br>4.1 | **Finance and Resource Implications**<br>Given the economic impact of the the pandemic and general uncertaintly, there has been a 17% decrease in the number of new applications and PADs submitted to the Council's Planning Service over the past year, from 1,977 at the same point last year to 1,642 in 2020/21 to date. This has resulted in a loss of projected fee income. In recent months there has been a steady increase in new applications received but this is not expected to recover the income lost at the beginning of the year. |
| **5.0**<br>5.1 | **Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment**<br>There are no equality or good relations implications associated with this report. |
| **6.0** | **Appendices** |
| | None. |