



Audit and Scrutiny Committee

23rd January 2024

REPORT TITLE:	Report on the progress of work to deliver improvements to the Development Management and Enforcement service
REPORT OF:	Leigh Nicholson – Interim Director of Place

REPORT SUMMARY

In July 2023, a report into the delivery of the wider Development Management services at Brentwood and Rochford was completed. That report contained a number of recommendations, which are now being actively progressed through an Officers Planning Improvement Board chaired by the Strategic Director responsible.

This report is tabled in order to update Members on the progress of this work and to seek comment on the on-going improvement programme.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 1.1 Work was commissioned in the spring of 2023 to look holistically at the delivery of the Development Management and Enforcement functions across both Brentwood and Rochford Councils, with a particular focus on improving the capacity, resilience and effectiveness of those services.
- 1.2 A report was finalised in the summer of 2023 and work immediately commenced to ensure the delivery of various related recommendations. The full list of recommendations is attached at Appendix 1.
- 1.3 In order to ensure the successful delivery of those recommendations, an Officers Planning Improvement Board was set up and met for the first time in September 2023. One of the Board's first actions was to agree a delivery programme consisting of 4 time-bound phases. Phase one was completed at the end of 2023. Phase 2 is now in delivery and will be completed by the end of March. Phases 3 and 4 are anticipated to be completed by the end of July 2024.
- 1.4 In relation to Phase 1, the following has been achieved:

- Updated Service Plans have been completed, with much closer links made to the delivery of the Council's wider corporate objectives.
- A comprehensive review of systems and process has been completed, following a series of review meetings. A process note handbook has been drafted with the main purpose of ensuring consistent processing and understanding between both Development Management and Administration teams (in order to improve timeliness and efficiency).
- Exploration of in-house planning performance monitoring capabilities (in order to inform Phase 2 work).
- Initial feedback to Planning Agents, Parish Councils and Major Developers on the outcome of the review work.
- Resulting from the adoption of the new Service Plans, the production of related Delivery Plans and monitoring arrangements to ensure effective outcomes.

1.5 With regard to the Phase 2 work that is currently underway, the following activities are the principal focus of activity:

- Designing a draft structure for the Development Management team (including enforcement).
- Drafting Terms of Reference for Planning Agent, Parish Council and Major Developer engagement panels and setting up initial meetings with these three groups.
- Production of real time performance dashboards.
- A review of the Planning Performance Agreement process, including associated fee schedules.
- Improved reporting arrangements.
- Review of S.106 processes (including reporting arrangements).

1.6 The position that has already been reached is considered to provide a much stronger initial platform for the delivery of more robust and resilient Development Management and Enforcement services.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

2.2 The wider review work has been undertaken by an external consultant, with extensive industry experience (including having managed a number of reviews of Councils' planning services on behalf of the LGA's Planning Advisory Service). All options and areas of best practice were considered in forming the various recommendations attached to that consultant's report.

3.0 RELEVANT RISKS

3.1 The two biggest risks to the successful delivery of this improvement programme are the interrelated matters of finance and resources.

3.2 In respect of finances, the recent increase in national planning fees and other opportunities to generate addition income (for example, via the more effective use of Planning Performance Agreements), provide the ability to invest in the service and delivery the various improvements that have been identified.

However, this income does not come with any formal ring-fencing requirements and there is therefore a risk that it could be utilised for other purposes. Thus, it is considered essential that the Council makes its own internal commitment to ensuring that these monies are directly invested in the service.

- 3.3 Notwithstanding the above, there is a well-documented acute shortage of planning and related professionals on the market. Consequently, there will be a need for flexible and creative solutions to ensure that the necessary skills, knowledge and overall capacity is available to ensure that the improvement agenda can be delivered and sustained. Of particular note is the need to ensure that the necessary capacity and capability is built into any new structure to ensure that the improvement agenda becomes an on-going focus of activity and that a more business-like approach to service delivery is embedded. This could be a shared function/role with Rochford.

4.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

- 4.1 The review work has involved engagement with a significant range of key stakeholders, including parish councils, planning agents, major developers, internal departments and external infrastructure providers.

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Name & Title: Tim Willis, Director – Resources & Section 151 Officer
Tel & Email: 01277 312500 / tim.willis@brentwood.rochford.gov.uk

- 5.1 The costs associated with delivering the various recommendations are projected to be deliverable within existing budgets. However, as set out in section 3 of this report, this will only be achievable if various planning fee income streams are wholly reinvested in the service.

6.0 LEGAL/GOVERNANCE IMPLICATIONS

Name & Title: Claire Mayhew, Acting Joint Director – People & Governance & Monitoring Officer
Tel & Email 01277 312500 / Claire.mayhew@brentwood.rochford.gov.uk

- 6.1 There are no legal/governance issues arising from this report.

7.0 ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

Name & Title: Leigh Nicholson, Interim Director - Place
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- 7.1 The ability of the Council to deliver a timely, customer-centric Development Management service is a key factor in supporting the needs of local businesses and attracting new economic activity. The improvement programme is designed having regard to these important requirements.

8.0 EQUALITY & HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

Name & Title: Kim Anderson, Corporate Manager - Communities, Leisure and Health

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8.1 There are no equality and health implications directly arising from this report.

9.0 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

Name & Title: Henry Muss, Sustainability & Climate Officer

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9.1 There are no environmental impacts arising directly from this report.

REPORT AUTHOR:

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – List of service review recommendations

BACKGROUND PAPERS

None

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
None	