



Report of Councillor Rebecca Breese Cabinet Member for Strategic Planning, Built Environment & Rural Affairs

30th November 2023

Restructure and Recruitment

The Planning Service restructure has been completed and the internal recruitment process closed on Friday 15 September, this phase of the restructure has successfully resulted in several posts being filled internally across the different planning service teams.

A dedicated external recruitment campaign went live on 18th September to fill the remaining vacancies and to add capacity and resilience into the Service. There are currently interviews underway (at the time of writing several posts in Development Management, Specialist Services and Technical Support have been offered to external candidates and further offers are expected as the external interview process progresses). The timing of when new starters will arrive is very dependent on their respective notice periods (whether 1, 2 or 3 months), so it is already clear that where shorter notice periods apply, we will fill posts before Christmas, where longer notice periods apply, we will not see new starters arrive until the early months of next year.

Consultation with the legacy Northampton team will commence in October to finalise the move of the entire Planning Service to the Towcester office by the close of the year.

A submission to the Planning Skills Delivery Fund was submitted on Monday 11 September to secure £100,000 of funding for the appointment of temporary Development Management and Technical Support staff to support backlog clearance and upskilling, particularly in relation to ecology and the Council's future BNG (Biodiversity Net Gain) obligations. An outcome is awaited from central Government.

A presentation on progress with the actions arising from the PAS (Planning Advisory Service) Peer Review was provided to Members by the Assistant Director on 13 September. This highlighted what has been achieved to date during 2023 and those actions remaining alongside timescales for implementation. A link to a recording of the presentation can be found below for members who were not able to attend.

A similar session will be run for Parish Councils (vis NCALC (Northamptonshire County Association of Local Councils)) on 30 November. A separate session relating to progress on the S106/ CIL (Community Infrastructure Levy) workstreams will be provided to Members at a future date.

West Northamptonshire Local Plan

A Workshop for Members to consider the findings of the Housing and Economic Needs Assessment was held in The Forum on 19 October. A further workshop to consider strategic spatial options for the plan was held in the Forum on 14 November.

Neighbourhood Plans

The Nether Heyford Neighbourhood Plan has been made following a successful referendum on 07 September.

The Arthingworth Neighbourhood Plan has been examined and a report was considered at Planning Policy Committee on 22 November when it was agreed that the plan could proceed to a referendum.

Conservation Areas

Conservation Area appraisals have been prepared and consulted upon for Scaldwell and Holdenby. The responses to the consultation were reported to the September meeting of Planning Policy Committee. Members agreed to adopt the Conservation Area appraisals as Supplementary Planning Documents and endorsed the conservation area boundaries.

Planning Policy Committee

At the September meeting, in addition to the afore-mentioned Conservation Areas, Members debated the government's recent consultation on proposed changes to Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects regime and agreed a corporate response on behalf of West Northamptonshire Council. Members also debated the government's recent consultation on the proposed changes to Plan making system and agreed a corporate response on behalf of West Northamptonshire Council.

New Local Plan

Workshops are well underway and evolving as we look at existing plans, evidence base for new plans and options for spatial planning in the new Local Plan. The numbers attending the workshops is increasing, but I would be very pleased to see more engagement from a wider cohort! Please bear in mind that now is the opportunity to shape our plan and it is developing at pace now.

Development Management

Planning application caseloads continue to be high, however planning performance across West Northamptonshire has remained high with 100% of major applications and 72.8% of non-major applications being determined within agreed timescales during July to September 2023 against a target of 70%. Whilst a dip has occurred from the last quarter this figure still presents an overall improvement for the Authority for the year to date.

Following the major transformation project undertaken to integrate the DEF planning software across the former South Northamptonshire and Daventry areas in March and April, this has now been successfully extended to include the former Northampton area.

There is now one single WNC (West Northamptonshire Council) DEF system operating for the Planning Service.

The Major scale development planning appeals being determined by a public inquiry or hearings are listed below.

Hearings or Public Inquiries awaiting a decision:

- 1) Land South of Halse Road, Greatworth, Northamptonshire, Solar farm, Public Inquiry which took place Tuesday 6 June to Friday 9 June.

Called in by the Secretary of State for the final decision. Decision now received, appeal allowed. In Conclusion the Inspector agreed there was landscape harm, but then stated: 'I have identified very significant weight from renewable energy production and storage, significant biodiversity enhancements and other moderate to limited weights in favour of the scheme. Overall, it is my judgement that the benefits would outweigh the harm. The benefits of the scheme in combination also amount to material considerations sufficient to outweigh the conflict with the development plan.'

The rule 6 Parties/LPA were involved in a whole afternoon condition session with the Inspector – if there is one marginal positive it's that the Inspector has imposed lots of planning conditions the rule 6 parties wished imposed.

- 2) Land at Milton Road, Gayton, Northampton, Northamptonshire, Solar farm, Public Inquiry Public Inquiry took place Tuesday 23 May to Friday 26 May.

Called in by the Secretary of State for the final decision.

- 3) Land to the East of Brington Road, Flore Northamptonshire, Outline planning application of up to 45 dwellings, to include 40% affordable dwellings (7 one bed homes, 5 two bed homes and 6 three bed homes), infrastructure and open space. (All matters reserved other than access).

Forthcoming Inquiries:

Hearing in November (Starting 21st November 2023).

- 1) Land North of, Bedford Road, Northampton, Outline Planning Application (all matters reserved except access) for the development of up to 24,000 sqm (GEA) of employment land (Use Classes E(g), B2 and B8) with new vehicular access, associated parking, highway infrastructure and other ancillary works. Application accompanied by an Environmental Statement.

Councillor Rebecca Breese

Cabinet Member for Strategic Planning, Built Environment & Rural Affairs