

October 2022**Transformation Work**

Last month I reported on the introduction of the 6 workstreams that had been formed to drive forward the improvement agenda. The workstreams are covering the following areas:

- Planning application process harmonisation
- IT system harmonisation
- S106/CIL development
- Customer service, customer interface and communications (internal/external)
- People, structure, performance and culture
- Local Plan and how it captures our future spatial vision

These workstreams are being contributed to by a mix of planning staff, and from other services, are meeting on a regular basis, and reporting into a formal Steering Group.

An update was provided by the AD Planning to all Members in an open session on 5th October – followed by a lively and interactive session of Q&A. The session was recorded and for those that missed the session, it is available in the Member Development area on Teams. We aim to provide further updates as the work progresses, as well as being able to report on key outcomes and successes.

One output from the workstreams, is that we are putting together a communications strategy for the Planning service, a key part of which will be an external information programme, and a new agents' forum, for which we are aiming to have an inception meeting in December and we have written to our regular agents to explain how this will operate. We aim to run this every other month, with a view to communicating what we are doing, but also to listen to our planning agents and to use their inputs to improve our services. We are still aiming to improve our communications with Parish and Town Councils and will be bring forward proposals in the near future to provide more details.

Moving towards a single service approach

Work continues at pace to bring together the 3 separate area planning offices into a single location at Towcester. The Daventry Planning service have been doing a considerable amount to work on this, and will be the first element to move – with the switch over taking place on the 25th November. We haven't set a date yet for the Northampton Guild Hall office move, but we will be talking to staff and unions about timescales and actions over the next few weeks. Our aim is to have Planning operating as a single service as early as possible in the New Year, with the transition to a single operating model as soon as we can. We will also

be consulting with staff and unions again with regard to the new structure, and we will aiming to resume those discussions during November. We will of course aim to minimise any disruption to services during these changes. In the meantime, we are making some changes to staffing arrangements and we now have David Simmons Lindell, looking after the business support service, and James Willoughby managing the Enforcement service across Planning. We will continue look at unifying other areas where we can prior to the full restructure. We also recently welcomed Artemis Christophi who has joined us on an interim basis to manage our Development Management service. Artemis brings a wealth of experience from other Councils in managing change and was last at BCP Council where she managed a similar transition from 3 planning services into one.

Development Management

Planning application caseloads continue to be very high, and staff recruitment is continuing, albeit within a challenging candidate marketplace and a national shortage of qualified Town Planners. The backlog of planning applications remains at around 600, and we are continuing to manage these numbers. We are planning to run another Focus Week to clear as many applications as possible in December, and we are putting measures in place to get the maximum impact from this event. We appreciate the ongoing frustration from our customers with regard to application timescales, and we will be introducing measures to make the decision making process simpler and faster. This will mean that we will also need to work with our regular agents to make sure that the standard of applications is improved prior to them being submitted to us. We are also aiming to reintroduce our pre-application service to help with this improvement work.

Strategic Plan

Work is continuing at pace on the Strategic Plan, and the output of the Local Plan improvement workstream is feeding into it. A number of internal workshops have taken place on this, and some interesting work is beginning to align the thinking in the Plan with other areas and opportunities in the Council, particularly in relation to urban regeneration, housing and transport. It is intended that workshops will be held with members in the new year to discuss the emerging plan.

Northampton Part 2 Plan

Consultation has been undertaken on Proposed Modifications to the Northampton Plan following the examination late last year. Following consideration of the responses to the consultation the Inspectors have asked that further modifications be made to the plan and that these be subject to consultation. This was agreed at the October meeting of the Planning Policy Committee. Consultation is now underway and will close on 19th December.

Provided there are no outstanding matters to consider for further consultation, the Inspectors will issue their Final Report. Subject to the outcome of the report, the Council would then be in a position to adopt the plan.

Employment areas SPD

Over 300 responses were received to the consultation on the Employment Areas SPD. These were reported to the October meeting of the Planning Policy Committee. A number of

changes were agreed to the document as a result of the consultation. The SPD is now adopted and is a material planning consideration which will be used alongside the local plan and other material planning considerations to determine any planning applications.

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