

Report of Chief Planning Officer**Report to Joint Plans Panel****Date: 26 February 2015****Subject: Update on the planning services review**

Are specific electoral Wards affected? If relevant, name(s) of Ward(s):	☐ Yes	☒ No
Are there implications for equality and diversity and cohesion and integration?	☐ Yes	☒ No
Is the decision eligible for Call-In?	☐ Yes	☒ No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? If relevant, Access to Information Procedure Rule number: Appendix number:	☐ Yes	☒ No

Summary of main issues

1. Following on from the planning services review conducted by external consultants Ove Arup in 2014 and the production of their final report and action plan, a planning service implementation plan has now been produced, condensing the 40 plus actions and recommendations from the Arup report to 16 discrete work streams.
2. Five priority areas have been initially identified for implementation, which will release operational and financial efficiencies, and create capacity to provide space and time to facilitate other changes taking place.
3. Several more work streams will be coming forward over the next few months including moving towards electronic working, which may be challenging both logistically and culturally for stakeholders, but is nonetheless necessary to realise operational and financial efficiencies and place the service in a state of readiness for New Ways of Working.
4. Over the coming months more data on the actual cashable savings will be available and this will be monitored and fed back through the governance structure which is in place to manage the implementation phase.

Recommendations

5. Members are asked to note the report and comment as they feel appropriate.

1 Purpose of this report

- 1.1 At the last meeting of the Joint Plans Panel in September 2014, Members received a report on the planning review which had been conducted by Ove Arup Consultants. That report described the progress of the review at that point and presented the Arup action plan to Members.
- 1.2 Going forward, the consultant's action plan would form the basis of a planning services plan for implementing the actions and recommendations identified by Arup. This planning services plan has now been completed and this report describes the progress of implementing the actions highlighted through the planning review.
- 1.3 This report is presented for information and comment.

2 Background information

- 2.1 The aim of the planning service review was to assess the adequacy of the council's development management function and whether it was efficiently using resources to achieve an effective, high quality service, capable of delivering the growth agenda in Leeds.
- 2.2 The review also took account of the budget challenges the Council currently faces and the consequent need to realise operational and financial efficiencies and to look for ways to further monetise the service to meet any additional income requirements going forward.
- 2.3 Through an inclusive process of consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, research and data analysis, the consultants produced a final report and action plan, which highlighted over 40 actions, both strategic and operational. This was shared with Members at the last meeting of the Joint Plans Panel. From this a planning services implementation plan has been developed which condenses the actions into fewer than 20 discreet work streams, arranged by timescales for implementation.

3 Main issues

- 3.1 The implementation phase of the review commenced in September 2014 and progress has been swift on the priority work streams, with some projects through the pilot stage and others implemented already. The ICT working group, described below, is part of our desire for continuous improvement, in this case, to improve the way the service uses the ICT currently in place, to better support business needs.
- 3.2 Cashable savings will be made from some of the changes, but it is too early to quantify this, as the first tranche of projects have only recently been implemented. This information will be fed back through the groups created to provide governance of the review, ensuring transparency and accountability.

3.3 Governance

- 3.3.1 Two groups have been set up for purposes of managing the review- a planning review steering group comprising the Executive Board member for neighbourhoods, planning and personnel, chair of City Panel, chief planning officer, chief highways officer, head of planning services and development project manager. This group has a strategic overview of the implementation phase.
- 3.3.2 A planning review officer group also exists, comprising senior development management staff, a planning officer, development project manager, union representative and representatives from Highways, ICT and Sustainable Development Unit. This group is involved in ensuring a multi-disciplinary approach is taken at the implementation stage.
- 3.3.3 The Planning Services Leadership Team takes a role in the operational overview of the implementation phase, signing off project plans, scoping work, agreeing composition of working groups and reviewing progress.
- 3.3.4 Working groups have been set up for discrete work streams and comprise staff from different levels of the organisation to ensure there is grass roots involvement and buy in to the changes.

3.4 Priority work streams

- 3.4.1 Arup identified that the current staff establishment was broadly correct for the current workload, assuming we made the recommended changes which would generate operational efficiencies. These changes would result in more efficient processes and procedures, reduce duplication and create the necessary officer capacity, to be able to respond more flexibly to fluctuating workloads and other demands.
- 3.4.2 Five work streams have been identified for implementation in the short term. These areas were chosen as they would generate significant operational efficiencies and in several cases financial efficiencies. As these work areas are largely transactional, they will make a significant contribution to creating capacity and space to allow for the more complex or cultural changes to take place as part of the change programme. These first five areas are:
- Registration and validation
 - Pre-application process
 - Site notices
 - Creating of ICT working group
 - Workload and resourcing

3.5 Registration and Validation and reducing print costs

- 3.5.1 A pilot was undertaken in South area planning team to streamline the process for registration and validation and attempt to reduce printing costs. Current practice is inconsistent across all the teams and the pilot also attempted to provide a single process to be applied across the service.

- 3.5.2 The pilot lasted three months and the found that applications got to planning case officers more quickly; it was easier and quicker to address errors or omissions- for example the need for other consultees or advertising, which saves time further into the process. Additionally, reducing the amount and scale of printing undertaken for each application, reduced the print costs by approximately 85% on every application. It is estimated that in the pilot period, for South team this has saved over £3,500 in printing costs. Officers report no adverse issues and once a procedure is written, this will be rolled out across the service early in the new financial year.

3.6 Pre-application process

- 3.6.1 Arup identified that our pre-application processes were inconsistent and not always of a high quality. The Council is firmly committed to providing a pre-application service, helping developers to shape their schemes as part of the Council's commitment to the overall growth agenda. However, given the scale of the budget cuts faced by the Council, the pre-application enquiry service has been reviewed, with the aim of developing a more efficient process and a fee schedule which reflects officer time and resources. Essentially this means two main changes have been made; to the fees charged (which have remained static since they were introduced in 2008 and are now comparable with other Core Cities' charges) and in the way the service is accessed by applicants. These changes were introduced on 1 February 2015.
- 3.6.2 For major applications an initial free discussion is still offered; however this is more limited in its scope and will provide only "in principle" advice on the proposal. Should applicants wish to have a more in depth appraisal of their proposal a charge will be made. The charge is based on the size and scale of the proposal. Included in the overall fee is an element of charging for highways work that is often significant at the pre-application stage, such as modelling, Transport Assessments and so on. New pre-application charges have been introduced for "minor" applications; again this fee is dependent on the size and scale of the proposal. Household proposals will receive a free in principle response, but should further detail be required, design advice, or a site visit required, then a fee of £50 will be charged.
- 3.6.3 Attached as appendix 1 is the full fee schedule for the pre-application enquiry service.
- 3.6.4 Also introduced is the requirement for applicants to submit supporting information, enabling officers to make effective and comprehensive responses and we have set officer response times for each application type so there is more certainty in the service provided. This will help to provide clarity on what advice, information and level of service applicants will receive within defined timescales.
- 3.6.5 The changes have been promoted and communicated to the development industry through a range of opportunities and we will actively monitor take up of the service over the next three months with a formal review after six months of operation.

3.7 Site notices

- 3.7.1 A review of the way site notices are placed and by whom has been conducted. Prior to the pilot a dedicated member of the customer services team spent approximately 3-4 days a week placing notices across the city. The pilot changed this to the planning case officer placing notices as part of their site visit, which they must carry out anyway. This potentially replaces the historical two visits (one to place the notice and another officer site visit) with a single visit to do both, and is therefore a more efficient and cost effective process. There are still some operational issues to be worked through, but at the end of a three month pilot it has been decided to adopt this as standard practice across all teams.

3.8 Creation of the ICT working group

- 3.8.1 The consultant's report cited the more efficient use of ICT as being fundamental to delivering a speedy and efficient service, which supports business needs and recommended the establishment of a dedicated ICT user group which could deal with operational issues and help to develop the system so it meets business needs.
- 3.8.2 An ICT working group comprising staff from all levels and chaired by City Development's head of information management and technology has now been established. The group's remit is to deal with the immediate issues highlighted through the Arup review, support the move to electronic working, explore the functionality of Uniform and Enterprise to fit business needs and explore ways to ensure the service is positioned to respond to the New Ways of Working environment. To this end the group have met with teams across the service to understand current issues and where changes are needed.
- 3.8.3 An action plan of "quick wins", medium and longer term issues has been developed into an action plan which is being worked through.

3.9 Workload and resourcing

- 3.9.1 Arup identified that there were some inconsistencies in the level and numbers of staff in the area teams, the workload they carried and type of applications dealt with by different levels of staff. Since the publication of the Arup report, the service has lost further planning officers with a further 2.6 (full time equivalents) leaving at the end of the financial year. Additionally, a principle planning officer has also been seconded to the Housing Growth Team. Whilst the Housing Growth Team will largely deal with the Council's own housing programme, it is anticipated that the other residential applications will still be dealt with by the area teams. By the very nature of the service, it is impossible to predict when applications come forward and therefore a more flexible structure is required to respond to fluctuating workloads. Work is currently ongoing to look at team structure and composition, the appointment of a senior planner and planning assistant (internal recruitments agreed as part of the business case for ELI's) and to provide more flexibility in the service.

3.10 Next projects

3.11 Household and smaller applications

- 3.11.1 In 2013-14, the service received 2,086 household applications, approximately 46% of the overall application workload. However, this workload generates just 9% of the application income for the service. It is therefore very resource intensive in terms of time and overall service capacity. Time recording from 2011 showed that typically officers spend 5.25 hours per household application, costing in real terms an average of £350. The planning fee for a household application is £172. Therefore the service needs to be more mindful of resource inputs- staffing and time and take a more proportionate approach to applications. The same issues broadly also apply to smaller scale applications.
- 3.11.2 This project aims to
- Build better working relationship with plan drawers and agents to improve the quality of submissions and set expectations
 - Produce more proportionate delegated reports, but which still address material considerations, and other key points
 - Increased capacity by taking a more proportionate approach
- 3.11.3 The work has been scoped up and a project team has been formed to work through the issues and this project will commence in February 2015.

3.12 Moving to electronic working

- 3.12.1 Arup identified that a key issue for the service was “a need to reduce the institutionalised reluctance to electronic working”. They identified that the capabilities of our systems to automate activities and to simplify officer, applicant and external stakeholder interactions have not yet been fully exploited.
- 3.12.2 The service still operates a dual system in most instances i.e. electronic plus paper versions of case files. This system is not cost effective and is inefficient. Minimising inefficiencies in the planning application process and ensuring the electronic systems are exploited to their full potential will allow capacity to be released for other activities.
- 3.12.3 Commencing in March 2015, planning officers will be asked for expressions of interest in becoming a “champion” of electronic working. It is anticipated that a cohort of officers will work through the issues involved in working without hard copy documents. This will be pilot for four months after which time the processes will be reviewed with a view to rolling out across the whole service.
- 3.12.4 However, this requires the necessary investment in ICT hardware and software for officers to be able to work in this way- laptops or tablets to work remotely, Wi-Fi enabled etc. It will also require a significant change of culture, not just of planning officers but of other stakeholders too. However, the move to electronic working is necessary in order to make efficiency savings and be ready to respond to the Council’s New Ways of Working programme.

3.13 Conditions and Section 106

- 3.13.1 Two work streams identified by Arup were the need to review the use of conditions and the discharge of conditions and review the Section 106 process.

This is particularly important in light of the Government's proposal to introduce "deemed consent" if conditions are not discharged within the agreed period, or particular types of conditions. Section 106 delays are cited by both officers and applicant as reasons for delay in the overall determination process.

- 3.13.2 At the recent Housing Growth event on 15 January, hosted by Leeds City Council and attended by members, officers and representatives from the development industry, it was agreed to work collaboratively to investigate and explore the reasons for the delays in discharge of conditions and the S106 process and try to find a way forward in a series of workshops. This work will commence in March 2015.

3.14 Multi-disciplinary working

- 3.14.1 Arup identified that there was an overall lack of a managed multidisciplinary approach on the largest cases. The Housing Growth Team has now been created and a Principal Planner has been appointed to the team with more specialist posts joining the team over the coming months. However, there is the need for the Council to take a multi-disciplinary approach on all other large and strategically important schemes, project managed by the planning case officer.
- 3.14.2 Again this work stream will be initially investigated in a workshop following on from the Housing Growth event last month and will involve stakeholders in moving this forward. This work will commence in March 2015.

4 Corporate Considerations

4.1 Consultation and Engagement

- 4.1.1 Throughout the process of conducting the review key stakeholders- staff, members, customers, development industry have been involved and consulted. This has continued into the implementation phase; the service is committed to involving staff in the changes to ensure positive buy in. The groups set up as part of the governance structure are engaged and consulted on scoping documents, progress and review documents.

4.2 Equality and Diversity / Cohesion and Integration

- 4.2.1 There are no specific equality considerations arising from this report.

4.3 Council policies and City Priorities

- 4.3.1 The effective and expedient determination of planning applications contributes to the overall prosperity of the City and plays a key part in the regeneration and growth agenda. The service makes a key contribution to the delivery of housing growth, a priority in the City Priority Plan 2011-15.

4.4 Resources and value for money

- 4.4.1 An aim of the review was to assess if the service provides value for money and value in judgement. The review concluded that broadly the current level of staff resource is correct for the current workload, if the measures highlighted in their

report to create capacity and streamline process were in place. This process of implementation is just beginning and the service will shortly be able to quantify the cashable savings being achieved through the change programme. The new pre-application service will be monitored at the end of three months to ensure the service is providing value and quality for money. The ambitious housing growth agenda, coupled with the upturn in the economy, means it is likely numbers of applications will rise and it is critical to put measures in place now which will further streamline the service so the service can respond positively. However, should numbers rise dramatically, there may be capacity and resource implications which the service will need to address further.

4.5 Legal Implications, Access to Information and Call In

- 4.5.1 There are no specific legal implications and this report does not relate to a key or major decision.

4.6 Risk Management

- 4.6.1 Local planning authorities risk being placed in special measures by the government if they fail to hit performance targets. The measures outlined as part of the review will assist the service to be more efficient and effective in its operation to support decision making.

5 Conclusions

- 5.1 The implementation phase has only been in place a few months, but progress has been steady. A new validation process ensures applications get to the officer more quickly, there are significant reductions in printing costs, paving the way to more electronic working and consequent further savings, the new pre-application service where a charge is now made to cover work and a more streamlined service creating operational efficiencies is in place, an ICT working group to take forward operational issues to ensure the ICT system best fits business needs, review of the site notice process which cuts out duplication of tasks and ongoing work to ensure that the team structure and composition matches workload, both across the service and within individual teams.
- 5.2 The next projects have been signed off and will start to move forward over the next few months. The ongoing work of moving increasingly to electronic/ paperless working is a significant piece of work where there are both logistical as well as cultural issues to address. It is nonetheless necessary as the Council reduces its footprint and moves to New Ways of Working.
- 5.3 Staff buy in is crucial to the change process and the working groups' composition reflect all levels of staff to ensure involvement, engagement and consistency across the service.

6 Recommendations

- 6.1 Members are asked to note the report and comment as they feel appropriate

Pre-application enquiry service fee schedule (from 1 February 2015)

Application type	Cost
Major applications	
Small major <i>10-199 units, 1,000- 9,999 square metres commercial</i>	
Stage 1, in principle	Free
Stage 2, full appraisal	£900
Large major <i>200+ units, 10,000 square metres + commercial</i>	
Stage 1, in principle	Free
Stage 2, full appraisal	£1440
Minor applications	
Small minor <i>1-4 residential and commercial up to 500 square metres</i>	£150
Larger minor <i>5-9 residential, 501-999 square metres</i>	£300
Household	
In principle	Free
Additional details, site visit etc	£50

All prices include VAT