

Report of Chief Planning Officer**Report to Joint Plans Panel****Date: 6 July 2016****Subject: Member notification of planning application via Public Access**

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. The officer member communication protocol was adopted in 2013 and set out the way officers should communicate and involve ward members in planning applications.
2. Some of the provisions in that protocol are now out of date and internal processes and technology has moved on. It is therefore timely to review the protocol and this was undertaken by the Joint Member Officer Working Group (JMOWG) in March 2016.
3. JMOWG initially looked at the provisions in the protocol for notification and other communication to members about appeals and planning applications. Currently officers send out a range of bespoke emails to members about planning applications and appeals.
4. JMOWG agreed that Public Access should be the main way for the dissemination of information about planning applications and appeals, as the system can automatically inform members about such matters in their Ward area. This requires an initial set up but then requires no on-going staff intervention.
5. This report is presented for information and describes the channel shift to Public Access as the main source of information for members for the dissemination and notification of planning applications and appeals.

6. Recommendations

Members are recommended to note the report and comment as appropriate.

1 Purpose of this report

- 1.1 The Officer Member Communication Protocol has been in place since 2013 and it is timely now to review the protocol due to some information being out of date and systems and processes moving forward since then.
- 1.2 The provisions relating to member notification of appeals and planning applications have been reviewed first. This has been undertaken in the spirit of finding the most efficient and practical way of facilitating member involvement and effective communication, but also in the context of diminishing resources, the need to make operational efficiencies and advances in the systems available.
- 1.3 This report describes the first phase of the review of the protocol undertaken by the Joint Member Officer Working Group (JMOWG), a cross party group comprising the Plans Panel Chairs, Development Plans Panel Chair and the Executive Board Member for Regeneration, Transport and Planning in March 2016 and the consequential channel shift to Public Access as the mechanism for disseminating planning and appeals information.

2 Background information

- 2.1 The Officer Member Communications Protocol was agreed by the Joint Plans Panel in November 2013. This document is almost three years old and some of the provisions described in the document are now out of date, including the Government's commitment in the Localism Act to make it a mandatory requirement for developers to undertake pre-application engagement for schemes meeting certain size thresholds. Therefore it is timely to review practices and the protocol itself.
- 2.2 The objectives of the review were to update the protocol so it reflects the functionality of current systems and to find more effective ways of communicating with ward members about planning applications and appeals. A key feature was to ensure that there was no adverse impact on the timeliness and quality of the information members received, within a context of diminishing resources, increasing officer capacity and expeditious decision making.

3 Main issues

- 3.1 The adopted Officer- Member Communications Protocol sets the framework for officers to follow in relation to member involvement and communication. The protocol ensures that ward members are informed, communicated with and have the opportunity to be actively involved through the life of a planning proposal within their area. This is especially important for those members who have no direct involvement with the plans panels. However, there is a need to give regard to the available resources and for timely decision making. This is particularly pertinent in the current financial climate of realising budget savings, limited staff resource and the need to generate efficiencies.
- 3.2 Currently, members receive bespoke information from officers about planning applications and appeals including:

- Major and sensitive applications
- Pre-applications
- Appeals received
- Appeal decisions

3.3 The communications received by ward members are usually personalised to some extent and therefore there is a resource implication to producing and sending out bespoke communications. All of the information relating to appeals and formal applications is available online through Public Access (the planning register that contains historical records for planning applications and the new applications received and going through the planning process and appeals). Details of pre-applications can also be sent out automatically via the back office system.

3.4 The review conducted by the JMOWG agreed to a channel shift, meaning all members should use Public Access for their information needs. Using Public Access, members can self-serve to find information on an ad hoc basis or after registering and setting up “saved searches” to receive regular updates. Members would be sent a maximum of a daily email, with details of whatever information they have requested to receive from the system and could include:

- All applications in their ward
- Specific types of applications in their ward- eg just household, just major applications etc
- Appeals in their ward- new ones and decisions made

3.5 Additionally there is a function on Public Access whereby members can track particular applications in which they have an interest through the determination and decision stages. A number of Ward Members have been using Public Access for some of years and this is their main way of receiving information about new applications in their ward and the channel shift will bring a consistent approach to the dissemination of information.

3.6 There are a number of benefits of moving to the automated system- it's cost effective-Public Access notification will remove a number of tasks currently undertaken by officers and instead be replaced by a timely automatic communication; it reduces human error of officers forgetting or omitting applications and there is no time delay. It also allows members at a glance to see the progress of individual applications, meaning they can be better informed of the position of an application at any given time.

3.7 The move to using Public Access is entirely in accordance with the way the Council wishes the people of Leeds to access services- channel shifting to electronic delivery. An example of this is from 1 July hard copy plans and documents have stopped being sent to the Parish and Town Councils and instead they will be notified electronically via Public Access. Additionally, planning officers no longer receive the same amount of information in hard copy as the service moves toward “paperless” working; one area team has been paperless since October 2015 and the definitive planning file is now the electronic record.

- 3.8 An upgrade to Public Access has taken place in June 2016, which has improved its functionality especially on searching, mapping and has a new online measuring facility. The user manual has been updated and a new quick guide is now available through a link on Public Access itself. Therefore, the Council has an effective and efficient system for the dissemination of information about planning applications and appeals.
- 3.9 In order for this channel shift to take place, members can either register themselves on Public Access and set up their desired searches, or the Group Support office staff have agreed to assist members in registering their accounts on Public Access and to set up “saved searches”. It is recommended that this takes place over the summer and that the sole way of disseminating information about planning applications and appeals via Public Access commences 1 October 2016.
- 3.10 The revised Officer Member Communication Protocol is attached as appendix 1, showing the proposed changes.

4 Corporate Considerations

4.1 Consultation and Engagement

- 4.1.1 The review of the Officer Member Communications Protocol was undertaken with the JMOWG, as cross party group comprising the three Plans Panel Chairs, Development Plan Panel Chair and the Executive Board Member.

4.2 Equality and Diversity / Cohesion and Integration

- 4.2.1 There are no adverse impacts on equality and diversity and cohesion and integration.

4.3 Council policies and City Priorities

- 4.3.1 This move is in accordance with the Best Council Plan 2015-20; council value-*Spending Money Wisely* and breakthrough project *Becoming a more efficient and enterprising council*.

4.4 Resources and value for money

- 4.4.1 The use of Public Access as the sole mechanism for dissemination of planning and appeal information will create officer capacity by automating a service which is currently undertaken by individual officers and will generate operational efficiencies.

4.5 Legal Implications, Access to Information and Call In

- 4.5.1 There are no legal implications.

4.6 Risk Management

- 4.6.1 There have been no risks identified.

5 Conclusions

- 5.1 Public Access is the planning register for Leeds City Council and the main way members of the public and others access planning and appeal information. However, a dual system currently exists whereby bespoke emails and other communications about planning applications and appeals are being produced for members. This is a duplication of effort and is wasteful in terms of not maximising the benefits of Public Access and in officer time to undertake this task.
- 5.2 The removal of a duplicate staff heavy process will yield operational efficiencies without reducing the service to members. Services to members can then be further concentrated on those areas which add value to the overall planning process- including member briefings, workshops and so on, rather than maintaining an unnecessary administrative burden.
- 5.3 Members, once registered, with support from their Group Officers, as appropriate, can receive information which is tailored to their needs. The channel shift to electronic delivery of information and access of services is entirely in accordance with the overall Council vision to use of ICT more effectively to generate efficiencies whilst still maintaining high quality services. The sole way for the dissemination of planning and appeal information will be via Public Access from 1 October 2016.
- 5.4 Further work will be undertaken on other areas of the protocol, which may result in technical changes to the protocol which will be considered by the Joint Officer Member Working Group in due course.

6 Recommendations

- 6.1 Members are recommended to note the report and comment as appropriate.

7 Background documents¹

¹ The background documents listed in this section are available for inspection on request for a period of four years following the date of the relevant meeting. Accordingly this list does not include documents containing exempt or confidential information, or any published works. Requests to inspect any background documents should be submitted to the report author.