

Appendix 1

Planning Service Transformation and Improvement Plan

Background

Following the Best Value Inspection Report a 'peer review' was commissioned by Thurrock Council of the Planning Service which was undertaken by the Local Government Association's (LGA) Planning Advisory Service (PAS) between 30th October and 2nd November 2023.

Eleven recommendations came out of the review, the table below sets out initial proposals for how the Council intend to address the issues raised in the recommendations.

Further actions will be developed following the commencement of the Chief Planning Officer, the establishment of the Planning Improvement Board and Cross-Party Local Plan Working Group and consideration of the outputs from current and planned actions.

Recommendation	Ownership	What we are already doing	What we propose doing next
Overarching	Exec Director of Place		Set up Planning Improvement Board
<p>R1 Urgently develop a new Vision for Thurrock and a new Corporate Plan with clear strategic priorities to address the silo working by all departments and achieve the stated aim of One Council: One Voice. The development of a Vision and corporate plan need to be actively supported by the planning service and should form the basis of an engagement programme to embed this into future departmental business planning.</p>	Jointly by SLT and Cabinet	<p>A Corporate Plan is currently being developed.</p> <p>A Performance Management Assurance Framework is also being developed. This will also assist with the Annual Monitoring Report and identify areas in need of further improvement.</p>	<p>Clear correlation needs to be made with the vision for the Local Plan and the Corporate Plan. The Corporate Plan's objectives for planning and growth should be identified, set out and monitored to establish whether the Corporate Plan objectives are being met and whether a different approach is required.</p> <p>Clearly understand the Council's key priorities for planning and develop an Action Plan setting out how they will be met.</p>
<p>R2 Urgently develop and agree a stronger corporate narrative, with the planning service helping to shape a strong communications strategy around:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The necessity and benefits of growth. • the role of planning and pivotal role of the Local Plan in shaping this, and • securing balanced communities for the longer-term future of all citizens. 	Exec Director of Place and Director of Communications		<p>Engage with SLT and Communications to produce a member led Corporate message detailing the Council's commitment to Growth in terms of supported infrastructure, quality design and supporting supplementary planning guidance.</p> <p>Introduce new and meaningful climate change policies within the Local Plan.</p>

<p>R3 Urgently progress the Local Plan by continuing to ensure sufficient resources are allocated to taking it through to adoption. This should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • stronger internal processes - to secure cross-party ownership in order to deliver the huge opportunity for growth in Thurrock (including a plan development cross party working group led by senior members) • political leadership and guidance - to ensure the Local Plan addresses the growth ambitions and creates the political environment necessary to ensure the Local Plan is agreed and delivered by the Council. • managerial leadership and stronger project management – with a clearer focus on the steps needed to produce the plan in line with the current timetable, re-assuring all partners of a realistic programme and proportionate evidence base. 	<p>Exec Director of Place/ Chief Planning Officer</p>	<p>Stantec have been commissioned to undertake a full health check of the Local Plan work already undertaken; produce a comprehensive and realistic programme for delivery, identifying the workstreams and resources needed to achieve the programme. To be complete June 2024, funded from existing local plan budget.</p>	<p>Set -up cross local plan party working group and prepare Terms of Reference for the Group.</p> <p>Produce a detailed programme of Local Plan Projects and evidence-based work streams with realistic timeframes, publish on Councils website.</p> <p>Following the ‘health check’ identify key staff and relevant expertise for the future structure of the Strategic Planning Service.</p> <p>Appoint expert Project Manager to support the Local Plan process.</p> <p>Produce a detailed Risk Assessment including mitigation for Local Plan Programme.</p> <p>Engage a KC to provide guidance through the Local Plan Process and support through examination.</p> <p>Build in resilience by commissioning expert consultants to produce evidence base and topic papers</p> <p>Working with Developers Forum put together a development trajectory identifying sites and delivery rates for a 10-year period.</p>
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			to understand their forward build out rates and how these can be supported through actions by the council
<p>R4 Ensure the new Local Plan is promoted corporately and politically as the primary tool to drive housing and regeneration delivery in Thurrock. Political leaders from all parties should ensure that all members understand that the Local Plan is the delivery tool for future growth in Thurrock.</p>	Exec Director of Place, PFH and Shadow PFH	Review and develop KPI's to ensure SLT and members are informed of the outputs from growth in terms of economic growth, housing delivery and tenures and infrastructure.	<p>Keep Members informed of the Infrastructure Delivery Plan (IDP), its contents, funding mechanism, delivery timeframes and interdependencies through a 6 monthly report to SLT and Cabinet on infrastructure contributions and delivery of IDP.</p> <p>Make Members aware of the annual Infrastructure Delivery Statement which is posted on the Councils website annually.</p> <p>Recruit an Infrastructure Funding Officer as part of the Local Plan Team.</p>
<p>R5 Urgently recruit to the Chief Planning Officer post on a permanent basis with a view to that postholder implementing a restructure of the Planning Service. This should focus on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Putting the business support staff that currently sit in the Public Realm Directorate under the Chief Planning Officer. • The appointment of an Infrastructure Planning Officer to oversee the management, 	Chief Planning Officer	<p>A Chief Planning Officer has been appointed.</p> <p>Planning now sits alongside Public Realm within the Place Directorate</p>	<p>Review the structure of Development Services to ensure the balance of support for major applications meets the Council's growth aspirations (see below).</p> <p>Introduce new post of project officer to support the management of Pre-Application Agreements, Planning Performance Agreements and Local Development Orders</p>

<p>monitoring and collection of Section 106 funding and address recommendations of the PAS review in 2021 (potential for funding through a levy on S106 contributions).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embedding a development team approach to progress and deliver large strategically important major developments. • The creation of a Planning Delivery Team (with the potential for external funding) to accelerate planning proposals in the Freeport. • Developing a recruitment and retention strategy including career graded posts and pathways for development from planning apprentices upwards. • Formalising a proper staff appraisal process and ensuring every officer has a performance and development plan. 			<p>Create a delivery team focused on Major schemes (with aim to be funded through PPAs and Freeport).</p> <p>Recruit experienced staff to deliver more complex applications. Recruit a Contributions and Infrastructure Officer to manage and report on S106 delivery.</p> <p>Create a Personal Development & Retention strategy for officer's career progression and performance and progression plan, this will include a career grade so that planning officers can progress to senior and principal level without having to leave the Council to gain career progression linked to a Council wide recruitment and retention strategy.</p>
<p>R6 Produce a detailed action plan to improve the operation of Development Services. This should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The creation of a housing trajectory and delivery action plan immediately to address the lack of a 5-year land supply and 	Chief Planning Officer	A £60k Grant has been applied for and secured from Government to address the backlog and additional resource is being secured to deliver this.	Ensure Housing Trajectory is produced as a live document and is regularly updated with information provided by developers detailing their forward plan. This will assist in demonstrating land supply is in line with NPPF reg 19.

<p>failing Housing Delivery Test. This must be embedded in the Local Plan to provide further certainty and should be a Key Performance Indicator monitored by the Senior Leadership Team.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The preparation of a Development Management Manual to provide clear guidance to officers and consistency of approach in dealing with applications. • Address the backlog of planning applications and enforcement. • Embed a performance management culture within the Planning Department including lessons from benchmarking and good practice case studies. 			<p>Update Development Manual, which is out of date, is not fit for purpose. This to include operating procedures for the IDOX Uniform system including Enterprise. The document will also include the development management processes and governance as set out in the Constitution.</p> <p>Training for staff in use of Uniform and Enterprise training to fully utilise the system's potential.</p> <p>Data cleansing of all applications over 2 years old and where appropriate applications closed.</p>
<p>R7 Alongside modernising and improving the service, a full resource review is needed. There are resource deficiencies in some parts of the service, but existing staff need to be used more effectively to avoid bringing in new resources to an inefficient system. Some areas of need are more obvious than others:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The lack of seniors, the “middle layer” of the DM team is very thin and needs to be addressed. 	Chief Planning Officer		<p>Undertake resource review with a particular focus on Major Applications and Enforcement</p> <p>Enforcement is a discretionary procedure. Agree with members the level of service they wish to provide and recruit to resource the service appropriately.</p> <p>Once the Council has established the level of service it wishes to provide, an</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The lack of a dedicated delivery team for supporting strategically important schemes • Enforcement, if the Council agree this is a priority, an authority the size of Thurrock would need a larger team including one Principal/Team Leader. 			<p>Enforcement Plan will be produced to include a council commitment to what it will investigate and why, how it will prioritise cases and the timeframes for responses.</p> <p>A complaints template will be provided on the Councils website for self-service completion.</p>
<p>R8 Improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the Planning Committee. This should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refresh the constitution in line with the best practice available (e.g. see PAS website) and ensure this is adhered to in decision making. • Review the decision-making process in relation to Member decisions to overturn officer recommendations, reducing deferrals and the number of times schemes return to Committee. • Create a Member and officer training programme to ensure the Committee has a strategic focus – including a review of the length of 	Exec Director of Place	We have already acted to ensure that there is appropriate legal representation sitting next to the Chair and a senior planning officer at all planning committee meetings.	<p>A comprehensive set of training sessions, including mandatory training for new Committee Members will follow the elections in May. This will be developed to also include interactive officer/member training.</p> <p>This will need to be repeated in 2025 and ongoing regular update training programmed.</p> <p>Produce a opening speech for the Chair of Planning Committee which includes that the Council is a quasi-judicial process.</p> <p>Training will also be provided for more junior case officers to present at Planning Committee meetings to ensure resilience and consistency at committee meetings.</p>

<p>reports and presentations, behaviours, and skills.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare a clearer briefing and introduction from the Committee Chair, setting out the constitutional role and “rules” which members should respect in the form of a script. • Political leaders from all parties should ensure that Members with the appropriate skills and behaviours are appointed to the Committee and commit to future training. • Ensure Senior officers are present at each and every Committee meeting, including senior legal representation. 			<p>Review the Constitution to ensure more streamlined delivery. This should consider both processes and the scheme of delegation.</p>
<p>R9 Agree and communicate a set of cultural behaviours across the Council that seek to build trust and confidence among officers and Members and partners. With support from the LGA and PAS these should provide a collective agreement of how the behaviours will translate into actions.</p>	SLT		<p>Review Officer / Member protocols to develop includes a process for member communication and the ways in which we do and do not communicate.</p> <p>Develop a workshop on behaviours and culture for both officers and Members.</p>

<p>R10 Work with officers and Members to co-design a targeted and structured planning training programme for elected members. With RTP1/PAS advice, this should provide members with of the planning committee with a clearer understanding of the planning balance and the skills and confidence they need as well as upskill local ward members on their own role in the planning process.</p>	<p>Exec Director of Place and Chair of Planning Committee.</p>		<p>Develop a regular training programme for elected Members set out in the corporate calendar. See above</p>
<p>R11 Support all of the organisational changes above by streamlining the planning function to meet the challenges of customer focus and responsiveness to local needs. This means a faster pace of decision making, especially on discharge of conditions and reserved matters, greater utilisation of IT, agile working combined with regular “team days” together in the office as well as an ability for applicants to contact case officers.</p>	<p>Chief Planning Officer</p>		<p>Produce a Conditions Discharge Tracker.</p> <p>Consider a post of Development Monitoring Officer who would be responsible for monitoring the correct implementation of planning conditions and monitoring the Condition Discharge Tracker.</p> <p>Instigate a team office day once a month so that officers in the same team have an interactive workday together.</p> <p>Develop and communicate a protocol for responding to and updating applicants.</p>

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