

# Report to Cabinet

<b>Report Title</b>	Planning Development Management performance				
<b>Date of Meeting</b>	Wednesday 12 February 2025				
<b>Report Author</b>	Ashley Baldwin, Chief Planning Officer				
<b>Corporate Director</b>	Executive Director Place				
<b>Lead Cabinet Member(s)</b>	Cabinet Member for Good Growth				
<b>Why is this a key decision?</b>	<table> <tr> <td>1. Expenditure over £500K</td> <td>no</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2. Significant impact on 2 or more wards</td> <td>yes</td> </tr> </table>	1. Expenditure over £500K	no	2. Significant impact on 2 or more wards	yes
1. Expenditure over £500K	no				
2. Significant impact on 2 or more wards	yes				
<b>Wards Affected</b>	All Wards				
<b>Identify exempt information and exemption category</b>	Choose an item.  N/A				

<b>Is report Urgent?</b>	Yes
<b>Reasons for urgency (<u>only</u> where applicable)</b>	The reason for the urgency of this report is that a motion was agreed at the Extraordinary Council meeting on 28th November, requesting the content of this report. As the motion has already been formally passed, it is necessary to present the report at the earliest opportunity to ensure timely compliance with the council's decision.
<b>Appendices (if any)</b>	Appendix A – Planning performance raw data

## 1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report responds to a motion approved at the Extraordinary Council meeting on 28th November. The motion revisits and re-endorses a motion passed in September 2023. The motion calls on Thurrock Council to report on the management and performance of the Planning Department since 2015. Specifically, the report provides a year-by-year analysis of key performance

metrics, including the number of applications received, those dealt with by delegation, those progressed to committee, and those passed or rejected contrary to officer recommendations. Additionally, the report offers a subjective judgment on the Planning Department's performance over each of the years reviewed.

- 1.2 The motion agreed states ***'Council Members in this chamber this evening call on Thurrock Council through its officers to revisit the motion approved unanimously in September 2023 and to re-endorse it, with one significant change. We call on Thurrock Council to report on the management and achievements of Thurrock Council's planning department since 2015 – with that report's remit to be to produce a year-by-year performance analysis indicating the number of applications received, the number dealt with by delegation, the number progressed to committee and the number passed or rejected that have been contrary to officer recommendation. The report should produce a subjective judgement on the performance of the planning department over each of those years. In addition, the remit will include a full and detailed investigation into how and why the council has not been able to formulate a new local plan over the same period of time. When that report is completed, request it be reviewed and analysed by the CEO of Thurrock Council who will then prepare an assessment of its findings, implications, and possible further points of action to be submitted to Cabinet.'***

- 1.3 Cabinet is being asked to note to the findings and recommendations set out in this report, which aims to offer transparency and insight into the Planning Department's performance and decision-making processes. The body of the report presents the detailed analysis and conclusions derived from this comprehensive review.

## **2. Recommendations**

For the reasons set out in this report, the Cabinet is recommended to:

- 2.1 **To note the findings of the report on the performance of Thurrock Council's Planning Department, covering the period from 2015 up until November 2024, including the analysis of applications received, those dealt with by delegation, those progressed to committee, and those passed or rejected contrary to officer recommendations; and**
- 2.2 **To note the contents of the raw data contained in Appendix A.**
- 2.3 **To agree the contents of this report as a response to the motion set out at paragraph 1.2 of this report.**

### **3. Commissioner's Comments**

- 3.1 *There does not appear to me to be any evidence that the planning service has performed in a manner that is out of step with other planning departments. There is nothing in the available evidence that points to anything remarkable or different from other planning services. It is clear the planning department has relied on the extensions of time option to legitimately remain within the national performance expectations. This has been common practice and I note that the Government is amending national performance returns to provide for greater transparency over timescales. There is, however, a legacy of substantially delayed major planning applications. These have now been identified and are being addressed. The Council faces the risk of non-determination in some of these legacy cases and I note that the planning service is prioritising the work to address these outstanding cases with the applicants and is seeking to minimise the risk. I note the endeavours of the service to improve and to diligently address the recommendations of the Planning Advisory Service. The improvements have been closely monitored and reported periodically to Cabinet. The Planning Advisory Service have been invited to carry out an independent review of progress.*

### **4. Proposals – the rationale and evidence for the recommendations**

- 4.1 The Planning Department has traditionally tracked performance using data extracted from the Uniform system into Access and spreadsheets. However,

in August 2024, a significant advancement was made with the launch of a new Power BI dashboard for planning. This dashboard integrates directly with the Uniform system, providing real-time data updates up to eight times a day.

- 4.2 This shift to a live, automated system has drastically improved access to data, enabling greater transparency and the ability to monitor key performance metrics in real-time. Alongside regular performance boards, team meetings, and individual meetings, this new system has already begun driving change in how we use data to improve planning outcomes and enhance the customer experience.
- 4.3 This report uses data from the Power BI dashboard to assess the Planning Department's performance from 2015 onwards, offering detailed insights into application processing, decision-making, and overall service delivery. Full details of raw data is attached at Appendix A.
- 4.4 In responding to the motion this reports identifies and analyses data on the following:
  - 4.4.1 Applications received;
  - 4.4.2 Applications decided;
  - 4.4.3 Committee items;
  - 4.4.4 Member overturns;
  - 4.4.5 Delegated Decisions;
  - 4.4.6 Major applications;
  - 4.4.7 Minor applications;
  - 4.4.8 Other applications;
  - 4.4.9 Planning income;
  - 4.4.10 Validation times;
  - 4.4.11 Appeals; and,
  - 4.4.12 Benchmarking.
- 4.5 **Applications Received:** The number of applications received has fluctuated over the reported years. The peak was in 2021/2022, with 1,076 applications,

driven by an increase in householder applications as many people worked from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to more requests for extensions.

- 4.6 **Applications Decided:** Data on permitted planning applications shows a general decline in both the number and percentage of applications permitted over the years, with fluctuations. In 2015/2016, 85.8% of applications were permitted, but this percentage gradually declined, reaching a low of 70% in 2021/2022. After this dip, the percentage of permitted applications improved, reaching 83.8% in 2023/2024. At the time of writing, it is not possible to confidently identify how many applications will be permitted in 2024/25.
- 4.7 **Committee Items:** The number of applications going to committee has fluctuated, with the lowest in 2019/2020 (28) and the highest in 2021/2022 (36). The number of overturned decisions has remained low, never exceeding five in a year. However, the percentage of overturned decisions has increased sharply, from 5.9% in 2015/2016 to 26.3% in 2023/2024.
- 4.8 **Member Overturn:** There has been a steady increase of member overturns at Planning Committee. This is within Planning Committee's gift to do and as long as Planning Committee are basing their overturns on sound planning reasons, there is limited risks of cost award against the Council.
- 4.8.1 *Year on year analysis of overturn*
- 4.8.2 **2015/16** – There were 48 Committee items considered and 2 overturns from officer recommendation. This 4% would be considered reflective of the experience of other LPAs.
- 4.8.3 **2016/17** - There were 30 Committee items considered this year with no overturns.
- 4.8.4 **2017/18** - There were 29 Committee items considered and the 1 overturn from officer recommendation. These figures would not be considered dissimilar to those for 2016/17 overall.
- 4.8.5 **2018/19** - There were 29 Committee items considered and the 1 overturn from officer recommendation. These figures would not be considered dissimilar to those for 2017/18 overall.

- 4.8.6 **2019/20** - There were slightly fewer items for Committee this year, with 26 being considered and then the 1 overturn. These figures would not be considered dissimilar to those for 2018/19 overall and reflective of other LPAs.
- 4.8.7 **2020/21** - There were only 16 items that went to Committee during the year, which is likely a reflection of the limitations impacting the economy and construction during the Covid pandemic. Of the 16 items 3 were overturns from officer recommendation. Whilst these 3 items do represent 19% of the year's items determined, this percentage is higher than what might have been expected due to the lower number of applications considered by Committee overall. The 3 overturns were in relation to applications that the Committee found challenging to determine and included the application on Land Adjacent To Wood View And Chadwell Road, Grays (Application ref 19.01373.OUT) where Members were asked to reconsider their decision making at the Extraordinary Planning Committee on 19<sup>th</sup> November 2020. All the published Planning Committee Minutes detail these 3 overturns by Members.
- 4.8.8 **2021/22** - There were 32 Committee items considered and 5 overturns from officer recommendation. This 15% was a reduction in the number of overturns from the previous year, but overall the percentage again is considered higher than what might have been expected due to the lower number of applications considered overall. The details of the 5 overturns were all published in the Planning Committee Minutes at the time.
- 4.8.9 **2022/23** - There were 27 Committee items considered and 4 overturns made from officer recommendation. This 14% was a reduction following the previous 2 years and the details of the 4 overturns were all published in the Planning Committee Minutes at the time. It is also notable that this year there were only 807 PS2 application received, which was the lowest number received since 2015/16.

- 4.8.10 **2023/24** - There were only 13 Committee items considered during this monitoring year and 2 of which were overturns. The details of the 2 overturns were all published in the Planning Committee Minutes at the time. The lower number of items considered at Committee is a reflection of the overall lowering in the number of overall PS2 planning applications received including those that were applications scheduled for Committee decision.
- 4.9 **Delegated Decisions:** The proportion of delegated decisions (where planning officers decide without needing committee approval) has remained consistently high, exceeding 93% every year. The highest percentage, 98.17%, was recorded in 2023/2024, reflecting efficiency in decision-making processes.
- 4.10 **Major Applications:** Thurrock's performance in determining major planning applications within statutory timeframes has generally been strong, frequently surpassing national benchmarks. Between 2015/2016 and 2019/2020, Thurrock showed consistent improvement, reaching a peak of 100% in both 2018/2019 and 2019/2020. Nationally, the statutory threshold for major applications is 60%, and Thurrock's historical performance consistently exceeds this, ranking above the national average of 88-92%. For the current financial year performance is strong, sitting at 96% when set against national measures, however the use of Extensions of Time (EoTs)/Planning Performance Agreement are used to keep the Authority in line with measures.
- 4.11 **Minor Applications:** From 2015/2016, when 89.2% of minor applications were determined in time, performance rapidly improved, reaching 100% in 2016/2017. This perfect performance level was maintained for five consecutive years, from 2016/2017 to 2020/2021. Thurrock slightly dipped from its 100% record, achieving 98.8% in 2022/2023 and 98.9% in 2023/2024, which remains well above the national threshold of 70% for minor applications. For current financial year overall performance appears excellent (100% for 24-25), the team are using EoTs to maintain performance when set against national measures. However, there are ongoing efforts to reduce this.

It is imperative that the team do reduce the use of EoTs for minor applications because Government are indicating a change to monitoring performance, which will include assessing performance where an EoT is not used.

- 4.12 **Other Applications:** Thurrock has shown exceptional performance in determining other types of planning applications (such as household applications or non-major developments) within statutory timeframes. Starting at 93.5% in 2015/2016, performance significantly improved to 99.8% in 2016/2017 and further to 99.9% in 2017/2018. The council achieved 100% in both 2018/2019 and 2019/2020. Nationally, the statutory threshold for "other" applications is 80%, and Thurrock's performance consistently exceeds this.
- 4.13 **Planning Income:** Thurrock's planning income has fluctuated over the last decade. Income peaked at £1,446,202 in 2016/2017 before declining to £906,403 in 2019/2020, likely due to reduced development activity and economic uncertainty. Income recovered in the post-pandemic period, reaching £1,138,914 in 2021/2022 but has since fluctuated.
- 4.14 **Validation Times:** Thurrock's average validation times for both householder applications and other types of applications have fluctuated over the years. Validation times for householder applications have generally improved, dropping from 5.4 days in 2015/2016 to just 0.7 days in 2024/2025, reflecting consistent efficiency gains. However, validation times for other applications have been more inconsistent, starting at 8 days in 2015/2016, spiking dramatically to 41.1 days in 2016/2017, and fluctuating between 2.6 and 7.7 days in subsequent years. Notably, in 2024/2025, the average validation time for other applications surged to 25.2 days, marking the highest level since 2016/2017.
- 4.15 **Appeals:** Thurrock's planning appeal statistics show fluctuating numbers and success rates. The number of appeals peaked at 72 in 2019/2020, then decreased to 35 by 2024/2025. The percentage of appeals allowed varied, with notable highs of 38.6% in 2016/2017 and 39.2% in 2021/2022, while years like 2020/2021 saw lower success rates (21.7%). The overall trend suggests that although the number of appeals has reduced, the success rate has fluctuated, possibly reflecting variations in the quality of decision-making



and the nature of cases being appealed. Appeal performance for 24-25 has always been less than 20% save for June, when only 1 appeal was received, and it was allowed.

- 4.16 **Benchmarking:** Thurrock’s planning performance has been generally strong, especially in minor and other applications, where it consistently achieves results above 90%, often reaching 100% in recent years. In major applications, Thurrock performed exceptionally well, particularly between 2018/2019 and 2020/2021, with 100% of decisions made on time. However, there was a dip in 2023/2024, where Thurrock’s performance in major applications dropped to 88%, which is lower than some other authorities like Barking and Dagenham and Havering, who maintained near-perfect results. The table below is taken from PS2 quarter 2 and provides a benchmark against Essex Councils.

Local Authority	Percentage Granted	Decided in time
Thurrock	79	99
Basildon	75	81
Braintree	81	93
Brentwood	81	93
Castle Point	74	99
Chelmsford	81	95
Epping	67	94
Harlow	77	80
Rochford	84	89
Southend	84	100
Tendring	85	86

Local Authority	Percentage Granted	Decided in time
Uttlesford	79	78

4.17 Overall, performance within the planning service is considered to be within expected requirements. The service is progressing with performance improvements in response to the Planning Advisory Service 2023 peer review. Cabinet receive quarterly updates on progress.

4.18 The motion also requests '***the remit will include a full and detailed investigation into how and why the council has not been able to formulate a new local plan over the same period of time***'. This is considered in the Cabinet report titled 'Local Plan timetable delay, analysis and implications', which is being considered by Cabinet on 22 January 2025. It is not necessary to revisit the content of that Cabinet item within this report.

## 5. Alternative options considered

5.1 This report responds to a motion agreed at Extraordinary Council on 28<sup>th</sup> November 2024. There are no alternative options considered.

## 6. Consultation

6.1 No formal consultation is required.

## 7. Financial Implications

7.1 There are no additional costs for managing the live data through Uniform via Power BI. Any future initiatives to improve the planning service will be met from existing planning budgets. The overall Planning Service expenditure budget for 2024/25 is £1,310,161. Planning fee income (including pre-application fees) is budgeted at £1,239,000, which gives a net Planning Service budget for 2024/25 of £71,101.

Implications verified by:

Nisshanth Narendran

Head of Finance (Corporate & Place)

19<sup>th</sup> December 2024

## **8. Risk Implications**

- 8.1 This is an update report, therefore there are no direct risks attached to this report. Any operational/ project risks should be included on the risk register, and monitored regularly and mitigated where possible.

Implications Verified by:

Kelly McMillan

Date 23 December 2024

## **9. Legal and Governance Implications**

- 9.1 This report is written to respond to the motion of the Extraordinary Full Council held on 28 November 2024. It is a report requiring noting of performance data and there are no legal implications.

Implications Verified by

Helen Nicol, Assistant Director Legal & Governance

Date 23 December 2024

## **10. Equality and Diversity Implications (including the public sector equality duty)**

- 10.1 There are no direct Equality and Diversity implications arising from this update report.
- 10.2 Where applicable, Community Equality Impact Assessments will be produced for all options to inform any decisions taken in line with the PAS recommendations.

Implications verified by:

Roxanne Scanlon, Community Engagement and Project Office

Date 20 December 2024

## **11. Other Relevant Implications**

- 11.1 The implementation of the Planning Service restructure has had HR implications. These have been fully assessed in line with relevant HR policies to inform any decisions taken.
- 11.2 There are no ICT/digital implications arising from this update report.
- 11.3 There are no procurement implications arising from this update report.

## **12. Background Documents**

*Appendix A: Planning performance raw data*

**Relevance Check****Budget Reduction/Service Area:****Service Lead****Date:**

In what ways does this Budget reduction have an impact on an outward facing service? How will the service feel different to your customers or potential customers?

N/A

If not, how does it impact on staff e.g. redundancies, pay grades, working conditions? Why are you confident that these staff changes will not affect the service that you provide?

N/A

Is a Customer Impact Assessment needed? No