

Report to Cabinet

Report Title	PAS Review Update #2 - Planning Service Improvements				
Date of Meeting	Wednesday, 12 February 2025				
Report Author	Ashley Baldwin, Chief Planning Officer				
Corporate Director	Executive Director Place				
Lead Cabinet Member(s)	Cabinet Member for Good Growth				
Why is this a key decision?	<table border="0"> <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				
Wards Affected	(All Wards);				
Identify exempt information and exemption category	Choose an item. N/A				

Is report Urgent?	No
Reasons for urgency (<u>only</u> where applicable)	N/A
Appendices (if any)	None

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Planning Service Transformation & Improvement Programme (PSTIP) represents a strategic roadmap for enhancing planning services and meeting the evolving needs of the community. By prioritising stakeholder engagement, operational efficiency, staff capacity, ongoing development and performance management, the council aims to achieve tangible improvements in the delivery of planning services, ultimately contributing to the sustainable development and prosperity of Thurrock.

1.2 This report asks that Cabinet note the progress made in the Planning Service against the PAS recommendations since our last progress report was presented in October 2024.

2. Recommendations

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

2.1 Note the progress made regarding the development and implementation of the Planning Service Transformation and Improvement Plan (PSTIP) since the previous update report presented to Cabinet in October 2024.

3. Commissioner's Comments

3.1 There have been no Commissioner comments received for this report.

4. Proposals – the rationale and evidence for the recommendations

4.1 Since the last update in October 2024, the Planning Service restructure has now moved beyond the consultation phase and has progressed to the implementation phase in line with our Planning Service improvement timeline.

4.2 The focus is now centred on implementing a revised operating model that addresses the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) recommendations, national targets, and being flexible enough to embrace any upcoming legislative changes. This model aims to allocate resources efficiently and position the service to meet performance expectations while supporting both residents and businesses.

4.3 We are now in the process of recruiting for new roles to support the improvements identified, create opportunities for career progression, and address critical gaps, such as in Development Management and planning obligations governance. This approach is designed to build capacity, encourage collaboration, and align with the council's broader efforts to streamline management and enhance service delivery. We expect any external applicants to be interviewed from January 2025.

4.4 In October 2024 we also released our first dedicated Planning Service newsletter that went to key internal and external stakeholders. That edition largely focused on key initiatives to strengthen and enhance our service delivery as well as the changes we had made to drive transformation across the department. Stakeholders were also able to see how we are engaging with the local community to effectively utilise S.106 funding, and how we are working together with local small and medium developers.

4.5 From May 2024 onwards, a programme highlight report has been sent to the CEO/Commissioner each month outlining the relevant month's activity together with planned activity for the following month.

4.6 Since October 2024 the monthly updates have included the following highlights:

Leadership and Governance Improvements

- Workstreams have been systematically monitored, with regular progress reviews to ensure alignment with strategic objectives. The timeline for PSTIP milestones has been refined through collaboration with workstream leads.

Workforce Development and Training Initiatives

- Training programs have been implemented for new Planning Committee members, and a continuous training program was endorsed by the Planning Committee Chair. The assembly of a cohort of Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) is in progress, in collaboration with PAS, to enhance member training sessions with a focus on priority topics, beginning with Green Belt policies in November.

Local Plan Advancements

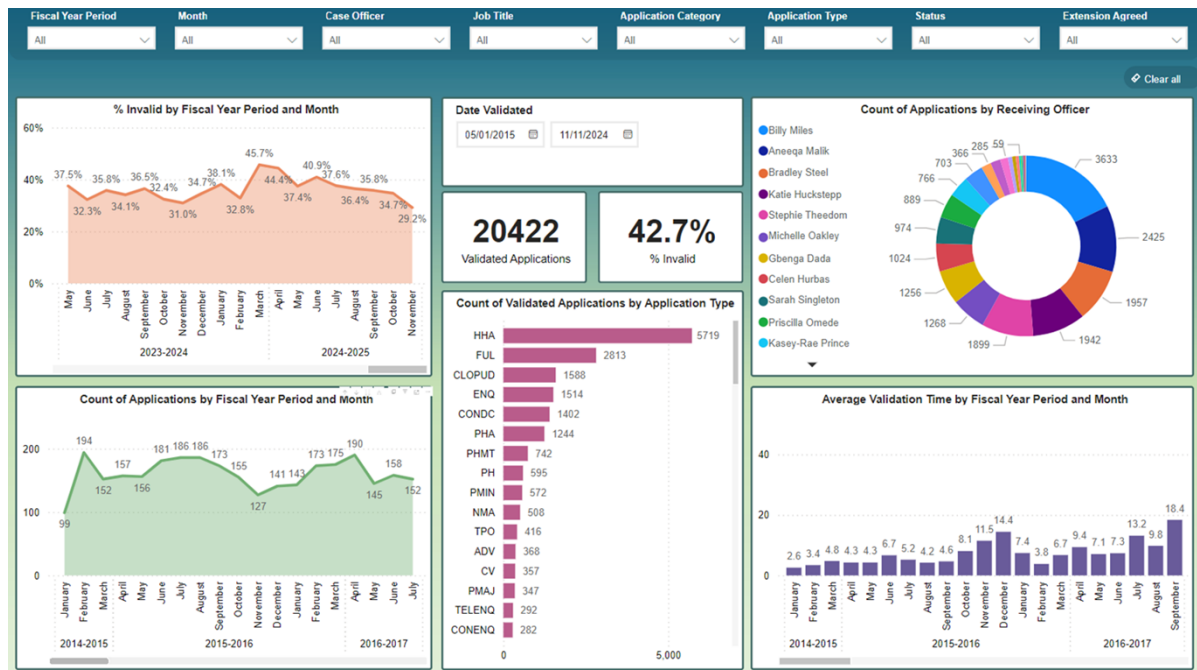
- Progress has been made on the Local Plan, with the recent integration of its timeline into the PSTIP framework. This includes the appointment of a new dedicated Local Plan Project Coordinator, Faraz Latif, who has introduced a fresh approach to our Local Plan development.
- Top 10 Local Plan priorities have been identified, and a structured plan has been implemented to address key thematic areas (e.g., housing, economic development, and transport) to ensure a sound evidence base. Flexible strategies have been adopted to accommodate anticipated changes to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and the 'standard method' for calculating housing needs, which are expected by January 2025.
- An LDS report, agreed at Cabinet in October, outlined a revised Local Plan timeline and identified a budget forecast, with future-year adjustments planned to address the estimated £1.28m deficit.

Operational Efficiency and Performance Monitoring

- The ongoing Planning Department restructure consultation concluded recently, marking the beginning of its implementation phase, which will further streamline operations within the department.
- Operational improvements have resulted in substantial reductions in application processing backlogs. Specifically:
 - **Planning Applications:** Backlogs of overdue applications have decreased from **119 to 30** between June 25 and October 30.
 - **Non-Major Applications:** Backlogs reduced from **80 to 18** in the same period.
 - **Major Applications:** Reduced from **39 to 12**.
 - **Enforcement Cases:** Open cases reduced from **229 to 189**, with 209 cases additionally closed in the reporting period.

- New performance monitoring systems are in place, with an innovative Power-BI dashboard established to provide ongoing insights into departmental KPIs. This dashboard is utilised by the newly formed Performance Management Board, which convenes monthly to ensure consistent tracking and progress toward key metrics.

The example below shows a dashboard view of Application validations over a pre-selected date-range:



Enhanced Stakeholder Engagement and Communication

- The Planning Service launched a monthly newsletter that has been positively received by internal and external stakeholders. This regular communication vehicle will be expanded in January 2025 to include further enhancements.
- In November 2024 we held an Agent’s panel which was attended by local Development Agencies and was positively received. They were updated on a number of initiatives, most of which are contained in this report and were very much looking forward to further engagement opportunities.
- PAS are booked in for a revisit in January 2025. An outline schedule has been developed with PAS Peer Group leads, diary holds have been coordinated for key council representatives, and a stakeholder engagement plan has been organised to showcase the Planning Service’s progress effectively.

Further updates

- The PSTIP, with its structured approach and designated workstreams, has achieved considerable progress. All workstreams are advancing as per schedule, with current completion rates (correct at time of report authoring) as follows:
 - Corporate Development: **76%**

- Local Plan: **24%**
 - Planning Department Restructure and Development: **54%**
 - Improve Development Services: **60%**
 - Planning Committee Development: **61%**
- The Planning Service is conducting a review of the funds it has received from Section 106 Agreements but not spent. To ensure the best use of these funds, assessments are underway of the feasibility of the remaining S.106 proposals against their original legal obligations. Alternatives will be proposed where appropriate and the assessment report will be presented at the next Infrastructure Board meeting. Engagement with the Community Forums through meetings with chairs also aims to make sure the monies available to each ward are clearly designated.
 - Significant progress on Applications backlog reduction reflects operational improvements, while ongoing monitoring and stakeholder engagement efforts continue to strengthen service transparency and accountability.
 - More recently we have been continuing to liaise directly with the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) in the leadup to their revisit to Thurrock on 30th January 2025 to carry out a follow up peer review and monitor our progress with improvements for themselves.

5. Alternative options considered

- 5.1 To re-install confidence within the Planning Service for Residents, Members and businesses, it was agreed by Cabinet in March 2024 that the 11 key recommendations are to inform the basis of a Planning Improvement Programme.
- 5.2 It was unnecessary to evaluate any further options and work is underway to deliver the critical improvements.

6. Consultation

- 6.1 No formal consultation is required but PFH and Shadow PFH engagement will be sought during the Programme's delivery.

7. Financial Implications

- 7.1 This report sets out the progress that has been made against the Planning Service Transformation & Implementation Plan (PSTIP), and no further direct financial implications are identified as a result of this update.
- 7.2 The Planning Service restructure will be funded within the existing budget envelope.
- 7.3 Fully implementing some of the recommendations may lead to changes in funding requirements and will be subject to the appropriate governance arrangements as they are identified.

Implications verified by: Laura Last

Finance Business partner (Place)

12 November 2024

Risk Implications

- 7.4 There are no corporate or operational risks that can be linked to this update report. Any Operational Risks that may transpire would be monitored by the Service on an ongoing basis.
- 7.5 Any programme risks are identified and actively monitored, tracked and mitigated at the weekly Planning Improvement Board and reflected in the monthly PSTIP Highlight reports.

RISK DESCRIPTION & CONSEQUENCE	MITIGATIONS	RISK STATUS
Failing to act upon the recommendations from the PAS review, there is a risk that during their follow-up assessment in early 2025, that we have not progressed as expected. This will be seen as a reputational risk.	To mitigate against this risk a comprehensive programme of improvements is in place (the PSTIP) and are being monitored through the Planning Improvement Board as outlined in this report.	GREEN

Implications verified by: Kelly McMillan

Chief Risk Officer

15 November 2024

8. Legal and Governance Implications

- 8.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from this report. However, it should be noted that any restructuring as a result of implementation of the PAS review recommendations may have staffing implications and legal advice will be given as required. Some recommendations may require additional governance processes to be followed before final approvals, for example any changes to the Constitution.

Implications verified by: Caroline Robins

Locum Principal Solicitor

26th November 2024

9. Equality and Diversity Implications (including the public sector equality duty)

- 9.1 There are no direct Equality and Diversity implications arising from this update report.

- 9.2 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: Natalie Smith

Head of Community Development

13 November 2024

10. Other Relevant Implications

- 10.1 It is possible that implementation of the Planning Service restructure options will have HR implications. These will be fully assessed in line with relevant HR policies to inform any decisions taken.
- 10.2 There are no ICT/digital implications arising from this update report.
- 10.3 There are no procurement implications arising from this update report.

11. Background Documents

- [PAS Review update to Cabinet October 2024](#)
- [PAS Review update report to Cabinet March 2024](#)
- [PAS Review Action Plan to Cabinet March 2024](#)

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