

Development Management Performance Update – FQ1 2023/24

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report provides an update on the performance of the Development Management Service for the reporting period FQ1 2023/24.
- 1.2 The attached document Appendix 1 provides an overview of the current demands upon the Development Management Service, its output during this period, the handling of the current backlog of casework, and the average time taken to determine planning applications.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 It is recommended that PPSL:
- (a) Consider and note the content of the report.

3.0 DETAIL & BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The performance of the Council's Development Management Service continues to be significantly impacted by the legacy effect of the Covid Pandemic upon interruption to workflow and a subsequent increase in demand for regulatory activity relating to new development. This situation has been exacerbated by the Service having previously been down-sized in response to the longer-term wider financial pressures facing the Council combined with a number of long-term vacancies that proved extremely difficult to fill as a result of a national shortage of planning professionals. The determination of planning applications has also been impacted by the uncertainty created by a changing planning policy backdrop with the Scottish Government's adoption of National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) in February 2023 with minimal transition arrangements having had a noticeable adverse impact on FQ4 2022/23 output as a result of a significant volume of casework requiring to be reassessed prior to its determination. The cumulative effect of these extraordinary pressures has given rise to a significant backlog of planning casework that continues to impact upon the ability of the Council to deliver the Development Management Service in an efficient and effective manner at this time, and impacts upon customer service.
- 3.2 The Development Management Service receive approximately 2000 planning

and related application case work items on an annual basis. The Development Management Service is resourced with the expectation that demand will be relatively constant and steady throughout the year. Whilst the volume of new submissions decreased by approximately 10% during 2020/21 they had returned to and exceeded pre-pandemic levels during 2021/22. Submission rates have subsequently been maintained at a high level and during 2022/23 were 5% up on pre-pandemic levels. Appendix 1, Sheet 1 shows that the volume of new applications received during FQ1 2023/24 is slightly lower than the previous two preceding periods but still remains within projected levels.

- 3.3 The resource constraints and performance of the Development Management Service have been highlighted at a senior level within the Council and are subject to regular reporting to Policy Leads/ELT. An improving financial position following the reform of statutory planning fees by the Scottish Government in April 2022 has supported the creation of 3 new professional officer posts that will provide additional capacity within the Service once these posts have been filled. Successful recruitment to vacant posts during the latter part of 2022/23 also means that the Service is now moving toward the position of being fully staffed although two Senior Planning Officer posts remain vacant and work related absence is an ongoing concern and a restraint on individual/team productivity.
- 3.4 During this extended period where the Development Management Service has operated with reduced resource, the handling of applications has sought where necessary to prioritise applications that would support delivery of significant employment opportunities, housing developments, to meet funding deadlines, and where development was required to meet specific health/safety requirements. The continual prioritisation of applications has however resulted in a backlog of 'legacy' applications (applications older than 1 year from validation) that require to be determined. Operating for an extended period with a reduced staff resource has also impacted adversely upon the ability of the Development Management Service to keep customers updated and to manage their expectations, and has resulted in increased customer dissatisfaction relating both to increasing time periods for determination and reduced customer service.
- 3.5 The improving staff resource position in the latter part of 2022/23 is now allowing the Development Management Service the opportunity to increase the resources allocated toward the resolution and determination of the backlog of legacy applications that have accumulated. The positive impact of the increased availability of professional officer resource is evident with the increasing output demonstrated in FQ1 2023/24 (Appendix 1, Sheet 2) making some inroads in the casework backlog (Appendix 1, Sheet 3, and Sheet 4). The increasing proportion of older applications being determined from FQ3 2022/23 onwards is also demonstrated in the bar graphs that provide a breakdown of application age within the average time measures (Appendix 1, Sheet 5 and Sheet 6).
- 3.6 The increasing focus on 'legacy' applications does however have significant consequence for average time performance measures as the determination of a relatively small number of older applications has the potential to significantly impact upon these outputs. This is evident within the 'householder' average time

measure (Appendix 1, Sheet 5) where the determination of 2 older 'legacy' applications alone have the effect of adding 3.1 weeks to the average time period relating to the determination of 59 applications in total. During FQ4 2023/24 94% of 'householder applications were less than 1 year old at the time of their determination and were determined within an average time period of 17.8 weeks (72% were less than 6 months old and determined in 11.8 weeks on average).

- 3.7 The determination of 'legacy' applications has the same effect upon the average time taken measure applied to all other 'local' planning applications (Appendix 1, Sheet 6) where the determination of 4 older 'legacy' applications cumulatively add 5.7 weeks to an average time measure that reports on the determination of 129 applications in total. During FQ4 2023/24 91.5% of all other 'local' applications determined were less than 1 year old at the time of their determination and were determined within 19.3 weeks. (67% were less than 6 months old and determined in 13.5 weeks on average).
- 3.8 The backlog of planning casework (Appendix 1, Sheet 3) currently stands at just over 340 applications and 160 pre-application enquiries and will impact upon performance over an extended period. The effect of the determination of 'legacy' applications will continue to skew average time measures for the remainder of 2023/24 although these should start to improve after the oldest cases are dealt with; it is currently expected that an improving trend is expected by the end of 2023/24 and a commitment to work toward that aim has been set out in the recent PPF 12 which was submitted to the Scottish Government in July 2023. 'Legacy' applications will be subject to regular review to ensure that these longstanding items are progressed to determination at the earliest opportunity that current resources allow.
- 3.9 In addition to resolving capacity issues through the creation of new and filling vacant posts work is also ongoing to review current working practices and procedures with a view to maximising the use of professional officer time for determination of applications and improving output. This workstream will include a review and implementation of new workflow and performance reporting systems in the backoffice, and will seek to extend the use of existing technical staff resource within the validation team to assist in the assessment stage of less complex statutory notification processes. The use of additional short-term professional resource is also being considered a means of resolving issues with individual caseloads that have been unsustainably high for an extended period of time with consequent impact on the health and wellbeing of the team and their output.

4.0 IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Policy	None
4.2 Financial	None
4.3 Legal	None
4.4 HR	None
4.5 Equalities / Fairer	None

Scotland Duty

4.6 Risk

Failure to determine planning and related applications in efficient and effective manner would have potential to adversely impact upon the local economy, delivery of housing, and health and wellbeing of individuals.

4.7 Climate Change

None

4.8 Customer Service

Requirement to manage customer expectations in the determination planning and related applications

Executive Director with responsibility for Development and Economic Growth:

Kirsty Flanagan

Policy Lead: Cllr Kieron Green

9th August 2023

For further information contact: Peter Bain – 01546 604204

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – FQ1 2023/24 DM Performance Stats