

## **SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**REPORT TO:** Overview & Scrutiny Committee

**DATE:** 12<sup>th</sup> March 2020

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**WARD(S):** All

### **PART I**

#### **FOR COMMENT AND CONSIDERATION**

#### **PLANNING PERFORMANCE, RESOURCING, CUSTOMER INSIGHT AND IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME**

1. **Purpose of Report**

To inform the Committee of planning performance, resourcing, customer insight and improvement programme. .

2. **Recommendation(s)/Proposed Action**

- The Committee is requested to note the information contained in the report. .

3. **The Slough Joint Wellbeing Strategy, the JSNA and the Five Year Plan**

3a. **Slough Joint Wellbeing Strategy Priorities**

- Housing

3b. **Five Year Plan Outcomes**

- Slough will be an attractive place where people choose to live, work and stay
- Our residents will live in good quality homes
- Slough will attract, retain and grow businesses and investment to provide opportunities for our residents

4. **Other Implications**

(a) **Financial**

There are no financial implications of proposed action.

(b) **Risk Management**

Category	Negligible	Marginal	Critical	Catastrophic
Economic/Financial	Speed and quality of planning			

	decisions contribute towards the local economy. There are no specific economical or financial risks arising from this report.			
Political	Planning applications are considered on their material considerations according to planning law. Planning decisions must not be made on political grounds.			
Health & Safety	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Environment	Quality and timely planning decisions contributes towards sustainable environment			
Legal/Regulatory	Planning decisions must be made in accordance with the Planning Acts			
Management inc Contractual		High level of permanent vacancies has resulted in use of agency staff via existing mechanisms with Council's partner for delivering temporary solutions for workers.		

**The Table below must be completed fully for each recommendation from Section 2**

Recommendation from section 2 above	Risks/Threats/ Opportunities	Current Controls	Using the Risk Management Matrix Score the risk	Future Controls
The Committee is requested to note the information contained in the report.		Management monitor performance.		Management monitor performance.

(c) Human Rights Act and Other Legal Implications

None arising from this report. It has to be noted that planning decisions have to consider these issues.

(d) Equalities Impact Assessment

None arising from this report. It has to be noted that planning decisions have to consider these issues. As part of the review of the emerging local plan, the Council's Statement of Community Involvement will be updated to include reference and consideration of the Equalities Act 2010.

(e) Workforce

The budgeted established is able to meet customer needs for planning applications. However, as noted below, due to a shortage of trained planners and other market forces, there are a high number of permanent vacancies in the planning team which has been addressed through employing agency staff through the Council's 'temporary solution for workers'.

5. **Supporting Information**

5.1 Planning Performance

5.1.1 The Government has set out performance standards for Local Planning Authority's measured over a two year rolling period. The measures include:

a) Speed of decision making:

*For applications for **major** development: less than 60 per cent of an authority's decisions made within the statutory determination period or such extended period as has been agreed in writing with the applicant;*

*For applications for **non-major** development: less than 70 per cent of an authority's decisions made within the statutory determination period or such extended period as has been agreed in writing with the applicant.*

b) Quality of decision making:

*The assessment period for this measure is the two years up to and including the most recent quarter for which data on planning application decisions are available at the time of designation, once the nine months to be allowed for beyond the end of the assessment period is taken into account. For example, a two year assessment period ending March 2018 will be used for designation decisions in Q1 2019, this allows for applications to be decided between April 2016 and March 2018 and a 9 month lag to December 2018 for appeals to be decided. The average percentage figure for the assessment period as a whole is used.*

5.1.2 Table 1 below sets out our current performance for speed of decision making.

Table 1: Performance for speed of decision making:

	Slough's performance	National average	Gov't Target
Major applications decided within 13 weeks (or agreed time limit)	97.1%	88.2%	60%
All applications decided within statutory timescales (or agreed time limit)	85.3%	88.8%	70%

5.1.3 Whilst we strive to determine planning applications for non-major development within 8 weeks, we work with applicants and their agents to negotiate proposed development to be acceptable in planning terms and this does lead to extensions of time being agreed to reach a positive decision for many applicants.

5.1.4 For major developments, we have been encouraging applicants to enter into Planning Performance Agreements (PPA's) to enable certainty to be given to development proposals, working in a positive and proactive way with applicants to deliver decisions in a timely manner taking account of complex planning issues which are negotiated and often take longer than 13 weeks to resolve. Furthermore, major applications are considered by Planning Committee which typically meet once a month.

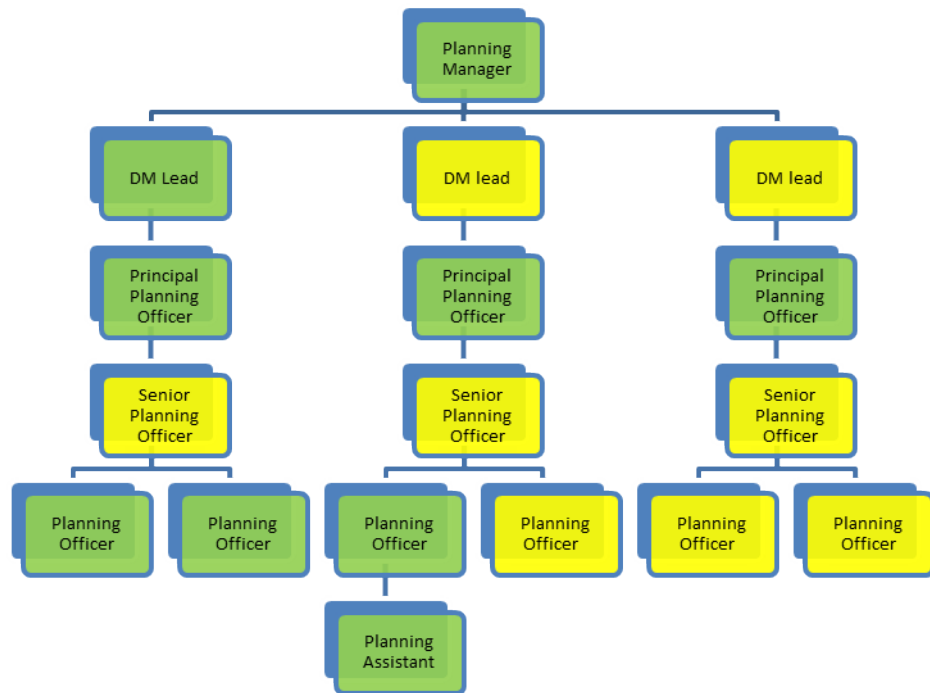
5.1.5 This has resulted in our percentage of decisions being granted is 91% of all planning applications. With regard to decisions overturned at appeal, we have no major planning appeals overturned and for non-major development, only 1.4% of decisions have been overturned at appeal.

## 5.2 Resourcing

5.2.1 We receive on average 1400 planning applications a year, approximately 35 planning appeals, 170 formal pre-application enquiries, 330 investigations for planning enforcement, 100 freedom of information requests and 14,000 telephone calls.

5.2.2 At 1 March 2020, the current budgeted structure for Development Management staff considering planning applications is:

Table 2: Development Management Establishment



Key: Green posts are filled by permanent staff.

Yellow posts are vacant

Red Accent is a post identified as being needed but not currently in establishment.

5.2.3 As can be seen from the table above, there are 8 vacant posts in the planning team to consider planning applications. Currently to help meet customer expectations on the planning application service, there is a significant reliance on agency staff. Most of the vacant posts are currently being filled by agency staff, however, there is still the equivalent of 1 post being vacant even after agency staff have been employed to meet demand.

### 5.3 Customer Insight & Improvement Programme

5.3.1 The planning service have committed to putting the real needs of customers at the centre of our business practices and processes. We undertook a customer engagement programme during which we spoke with representatives of key stakeholder groups (residents, businesses, planning professionals, councillors and staff) to develop a comprehensive understanding of the needs of people in Slough throughout the Planning Application process, and the extent to which those needs are met.

5.3.2 The feedback we received outlined a compelling case for change. Customers – both external and internal – have a small number of needs but they are very important and were not being met consistently.

5.3.3 Our customers told us they need:

- Proactive communication
- Consistent responses
- More information online
- Better internal coordination
- To be understood.

5.3.4 We want to meet and where possible exceed those needs to provide an excellent customer experience. To enable that to happen we are delivering the following:

- A comprehensive review of processes – we now working towards lean processes which streamline the planning application to enable us to communicate effectively with our customers
- A thorough technical review to ensure the advice and decisions we make are right first time and every time. This includes identifying best practice from the planning industry and delivering high quality training to our team
- A ground up rebuild of our planning IT systems, in conjunction with our partners Agile Application. Our systems are being designed to meet the way our customers want us to work, and to support our lean processes, with an added focus on being able to better deliver information on the progress of applications online. This has also involved extensive work to the background infrastructure to make it fit for future enhancement so that we can continue to meet the changing needs of the customers.
- Support to our team in terms of training. We have already delivered customer advocacy training and have committed to provided the following in the next year:
  - Leadership - through & beyond culture change
  - Comprehensive training on getting the most out of our IT systems – this will include basic IT skills
  - Technical training from industry leaders on planning topics

5.3.5 We are confident in our ability to deliver these changes and look forward to sharing our best practices and learned lessons with the wider organisation towards putting the customer at the heart of everything we do.

## 6. **Comments of Other Committees**

6.1 The matter has not been considered by any other Committee's.

## 7. **Conclusion**

7.1 The report demonstrates that despite a high number of permanent vacancies in the planning team, our performance exceeds government targets. We work with applicants to deliver sustainable quality development. We engage with our customers and as part of the Council's futures programme we are looking to

improve our digital offer for customers to be able to find the information they need to help them with their planning applications.

8. **Background Papers**

MHCLG Website  
Town and Country Planning Acts.