

**REPORT FOR: PERFORMANCE AND
FINANCE SCRUTINY
SUB-COMMITTEE**

Date of Meeting:	29 January 2013
Subject:	Review of Planning
Responsible Officer:	Stephen Kelly Divisional Director - Planning
Scrutiny Lead Member area:	Cllr Sue Anderson – Performance Lead & Cllr Stephen Wright - Policy Lead
Exempt:	No
Enclosures:	None

Section 1 – Summary and Recommendations

This report sets out the approach to continuing service improvement in the Development Management Service and reports on progress of the current LEAN programme of Process Re-engineering .

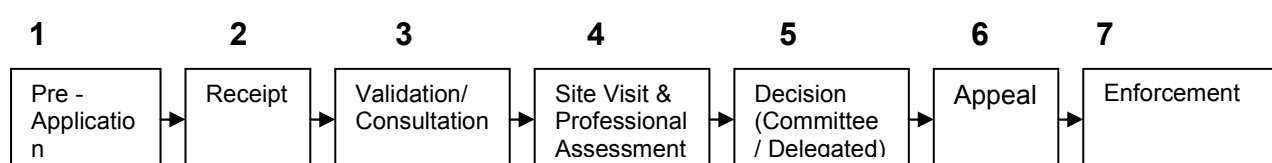
Recommendations:

Note the broad conclusions of the LEAN review to date

Section 2 – Report

Background

The Planning Service operates within a statutory framework. The development management service provides all of the functions of the “local Planning Authority” in respect of the processing of planning applications and planning enforcement. Since 2011, some £170,000 of savings have been made within this service area, resulting in a reduction in staffing from 31 to 27 front line operational staff. The service has a current budget of £1,125,437 and employs 27 staff directly. Since August 2011 the service has been provided in association with Access Harrow, who provide all administration and processing functions for the service (see diagram).



Access Harrow Involvement in Stages 2,3 and 5. Support also provided by Access Harrow for stages 1, 6 and 7

Harrow receives some 3,000 planning applications per year, down from a peak of 3900 in 2007. Of those applications, some 41% [1233 applications] are from households seeking to alter or extend their properties. A further 38 applications are for “major developments”, defined as more than 10 units, 1000 sq.m of development. In 2012, major planning applications contained development with a value in excess of £600m.

The planning service has been subject to a programme of continuous improvement and development over recent years in response to customer and member feedback. As the role of the service has moved from “control” to enablement”.

In line with the growing economic and social imperatives affecting the Borough, a suite of service improvements have been undertaken; including:

- Restructure of service from 5 development management teams to 2
- Re-writing job descriptions of all staff to enable progression and migration of staff between policy, DM and enforcement
- Introduction of trainee posts to support succession planning and address recruitment issues
- Replacement of agency staff with permanent professional resources
- Fundamental review of planning enforcement provision and approach
- Significantly progress on LDF to provide a robust policy context for decision making
- Developed a partnership with GLA on design and development management

- Introduced planning performance agreements for all strategic proposals
- Re-engineered and re-packaged the pre application advice service
- Created a regular agents forum to enable interaction with key developers and applicants
- Re-focused performance indicators around outcomes, as opposed to a singular focus on speed
- Revised the scheme of delegation to extend delegation support officer “ownership” and reduce errors.
- Significantly reduced Committee overturns through closer collaboration with Members

Planning performance

Traditionally “performance” of planning services was focused upon speed of decision making, regardless of the outcome. Considerable financial inducement, through Planning Delivery Grant was attached to the achievement of targets on speed of decision making. Performance against householder applications in Harrow since 2009 is reproduced below. This used to drive perverse behaviour aimed at making “decisions” within the target timescales. For householder planning applications the national Indicator was the determination of 80% of applications within 8 weeks. The Council has consistently exceeded this target.

Year	2009	2010	2011	2012
Householder Applications Determined	1008	1173	1303	1233
Target	80%	80%	80%	80%
Achieved	92%	92%	85%	85%

Following concerns expressed by members to the Director of Planning upon appointment in 2009, the planning service has broadened its approach to performance management to encompass a wider set of indicators, as well as changed its behaviour and engagement practices in a way that is consistent with a shift from development “control” to development “management”. This reflects the contemporary role that LPA’s now play in supporting and delivering economic prosperity, health and wellbeing and climate change agenda’s, alongside more conventional responsibilities for “regeneration” that grown in importance during the downturn.

In 2011/12 the Planning Service, as part of the annual service plan piloted a target of 6 weeks for determining householder planning applications. Recognising the consistent achievement above the national target of 80% of householder applications determined within 8 weeks, this new (non-statutory) target was introduced to test whether it was possible, with sufficient focus, to influence officer behaviour to meet a tighter target. Moreover, future year proposals within the MTFs, had identified the aspiration to introduce a “differentiated” product in future years based upon an discretionary “fast track” service (at a premium).

During the pilot itself, performance against this target fell consistently below the 60% target within the Service Plan. A review into the reasons for this under performance indicated that:

- Delays in the initial validation of planning applications left limited time for case officers to undertake their assessments.
- Applications submitted to the service display significantly high level of error (against local and statutory requirements)
- The ability of officers to make timely site visits following delays was impacting performance
- Workloads of officers were high
- The Councils pre application function was requiring considerable resources to service

Current situation

Notwithstanding that the pilot failed to meet its target “performance” the service has used the project to inform its ongoing service improvement programme. In particular a number of changes have been undertaken:

- A LEAN review, using the corporate LEAN resource is being undertaken that involves AH and Planning (see below)
- The service has Leased a “pool car” to reduce travel time and increase responsiveness
- The pre-application process has been subject of consultation with agents and is being modified to reduce the amount of input required for a response.
- The local validation requirements for planning applications are being reviewed and a revised local list developed for consultation with agents
- Officer report templates have been revised to reduce case specific officer input and reduce the time taken to prepare recommendations.
- Agency/temporary staff have been replaced with permanent officers and training provide to ensure a consistent approach and higher quality decision making.
- Investment in training and development focusing on customer need/experience as well as outcome (approvals) is being pursued through IPADS and team meetings.

Since August 2012 the service has been undertaking a review of its process using LEAN principles. This review has involved staff members representing teams across the Council. There have been representatives from the Planning team, Access Harrow (Technical Support team, Call Centre and One Stop Shop staff) and Business support. Typically these workshop sessions have been held fortnightly, initially looking at the Service as a whole, but reducing scope as the team begun to understand the areas of greatest concern.

The LEAN project dovetails with the ongoing and targeted enhancement being made within the end to end planning process. (see above) which

accords with the core principles of LEAN. A simple definition of a Lean process is;

“...a Lean process is one that delivers services (or products) that the customer wants, at a price that reflects the value that the customer is willing to pay for or deems acceptable.”

Detailed work with Access Harrow and the planning officers has focused upon the administration process surrounding the receipt and processing of planning applications through to the final planning decision being made.

The review has identified key areas of process inefficiency and also the limitations of current management and operational reporting. Particularly the reports required to recognise failures with specific process areas and also, the ability utilise this information for performance and training requirements.

The inefficiencies within the current situation arise from several sources. Over 50% of planning applications submitted are found to be invalid (unable to process) when initially received, as information or plans are either missing or incorrect or there is an issue with supporting documents or fees. This results in delays as further information has to be sought from the applicant/agent. Additionally, 35% of invalid applications will be received more than once.

These delays mean that in 35% of all calls to the planning line within Access Harrow, are residents or their agents are chasing the status of an application.

There are 31 different types of planning application, each with different requirements for information and fees. Whilst planning fees are set nationally and there is no discretion to vary them, a number of validation requirements are set by the Council. Simplification of these, including reducing the amount of information and reports required and improving supporting information on the Council's website, is being targeted to reduce these initial errors. Any change to local validation criteria will need to be consulted on, and formally approved by the Council prior to implementation.

The review has also highlighted that a great deal of information record on our systems are recorded as 'free text' and therefore we are unable to report against these. This is also being addressed by using standard entry codes which can be reported, but also giving the ability to expand explanations where required. This information can then be used to provide more specific guidance for applicants to help them **'get it right first time.'**

Areas the services are initially taking forward include;

- Improving the quality of applications received. This includes a review of the local validation criteria, where possible simplifying the requirements for information required to be submitted with the planning application, reviewing and updating the information held on the planning website, and continued work with planning agents.
- Improving the quality of our internal vetting process
 - Reducing errors through targeted training, and providing ongoing support through regular review meetings
 - Reducing the processing time. Work towards each officer within the Access Harrow team responsible for planning being able to deal

with the whole process, from initial recording of the applications, vetting against national and local validation criteria, and monitoring performance of the service against targets set within a Service Level Agreement.

- Improving the quality of information our IT systems, including limiting areas of free text, the performance monitoring data that can be drawn from and increased use of standard codes
- Providing better information to applicants to promote engagement and “management” of their proposals
- Creation of a suite of Operational reports, to facilitate monitoring and allow for improved performance management
- Standardising training and officer manuals
- Improving confidence in decisions made by staff
- Exploring behaviour change “nudges” such as agent “accreditation” to help broker better partnerships

In addition to the internal Lean review, Harrow is collaborating on a review of planning being conducted by “Red Quadrant” Service Transformation Academy.

It is planned that the Rapid Improvement Event (RIE) comprising of a series of workshops and improvements will begin on the 28th January 2013.

Rapid Improvement Events (sometimes called Kaizen Blitz) focus on a particular area of work to go through a ‘lean’ review and implementation within a few weeks. The events bring the whole “system” together – from customers to suppliers to employees – to work through problems and come up with solutions that are compatible with wider organisational objectives.

Implications of the Recommendation

The LEAN review sitting alongside the other current and planned activities is part of a package of measures aimed at driving improved customer experience, better planning outcomes and reduced cost for the Council. LEAN and the move from DC to DM especially, seeks to reduce avoidable work (refusals) and improve effectiveness of the resource deployed (through approvals and new investment).

The financial benefits arising include reducing the costs of re-work and errors (and associated delay for users). Furthermore, the streamlining of the process, together with the simplification of validation requirements, (in line with emerging government guidance), will have direct benefits to customers on terms of the amount of information and cost to them of the application process and clearer advice on how to get it right first time.

Financial Implications

Benefits arising include more efficient use of resources, not only in terms of staff time, but also

- Wider resource implications (staff, accommodation, IT etc)

Performance Issues

The service is working to a suite of evolving indicators. Government has recently consulted on measures to define quality of advice as part of a suite of intervention measures,. The current draft looks to measure outcomes as well as process performance. The Council suite of indicators may need to be modified in response to the governments final proposals.

Given the focus on outcomes, the emerging indicators, are expected to enable much more effective, and early targeted interventions – to drive up approvals of quality schemes, nudge behaviours to address failure demand and enable targeted engagement and fulfilment of customer needs.

Environmental Impact

- None

Risk Management Implications

Risk included on Directorate risk register? No

Separate risk register in place? No

The review has helped to drive discussion in the service around the barriers to performance and identifies opportunities for securing efficiencies within the service. The implementation of the recommendations of the report will serve to de-risk the planning process, by eliminating errors and allow more effective monitoring and reporting. The risk to the business of not taking forward the recommendations of the review is in relation to the ability to maintain and improve performance and ensure the resilience of the service going forward.

Equalities implications

Was an Equality Impact Assessment carried out? No

The review of planning performance is not related to a protected category. The Planning service is currently in discussion with the Corporate Equalities team surrounding the capture of equalities data in order to better monitor outcomes from the planning application process.

Corporate Priorities

Please identify which corporate priority the report incorporates and how:

United and involved communities: A Council that listens and leads. Implementation of recommendations of the review will not only facilitate improved performance against targets, but will also respond to feedback from agents and customers, delivering an improved customer experience of the planning application process.

Section 3 - Statutory Officer Clearance

Name: Abiodun Kolawole	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	on behalf of the Chief Financial Officer
Date: 16.1.13		
Name: Kanta Hirani	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	on behalf of the Monitoring Officer
Date: 16.1.13		

Section 4 - Contact Details and Background Papers

Contact: Beverley Kuchar, Head of Development Management and Building Control, 0208 736 6167

Background Papers: None