

Development Management Performance Update – FQ1 2024/25

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report provides an update on the performance of the Development Management Service for the reporting period FQ1 2024/25.
- 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 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. At FQ4 2022/23 the backlog of applications amounted to approximately 375 formal applications and 175 pre-application enquiries.

- 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 whilst submission rates reduced slightly in 2023/24 there has been an increase in demand during FQ1 2024/25.
- 3.3 The resource constraints and performance of the Development Management Service have been highlighted at a senior level within the Council and continue to be 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 provide additional capacity within the Service. During FQ1 2024/25 the DM Service has largely operated with a full staff compliment (with the exception of two new posts created within the Major Applications team) but has continued to be impacted by unplanned absence, including the impact of work related stress. In an effort to make further inroads in the backlog of casework, an additional two agency staff have been drafted in to the MAKI and BCHL teams with funding now identified through until Nov. 2024 as a means of supporting existing staff and improving productivity.
- 3.4 The positive impact of the increased availability of professional officer resource within the DM Service has however been evident with the continued delivery of above average output demonstrated since FQ1 2023/24. Output for the most recent reporting period, FQ1 2024/25 has been excellent, particularly given that officers are still familiarising themselves with a new Development Plan following the adoption of LDP2 in February of this year (Appendix 1, Sheet 2).
- 3.5 Improving output also means that the Service is now making significant inroads in addressing the outstanding casework backlog (Appendix 1, Sheet 3). At the end of FQ1 2024/25 the backlog of formal casework had reduced to approximately 150 applications.
- 3.6 Demand for pre-application advice remains high, particularly following the adoption of LDP2 in February 2024. It is disappointing to note that during FQ1 2024/25 the backlog of pre-app submissions increased from 217 items to 236 (Appendix 1, Sheet 4) as the team have struggled to keep pace with demand and balance this casework with the determination of statutory applications. A commitment has been provided to review and improve the pre-application process, this will include the provision of enhanced information on the Council website to allow a greater proportion of customers to 'self-serve'.
- 3.7 The performance of the Development Management Service is also measured in terms of the time taken to determine applications as it is recognised that failure to

provide timely decisions can create uncertainty and be detrimental to the delivery of development across the Council area. Overall 'time-taken' measures are however currently skewed by the determination of a high volume of older 'legacy' applications that have accrued as part of the planning backlog. The increasing proportion of older applications being determined from FQ3 2022/23 onwards is identified in the bar graphs that provide a breakdown of application age within the average time measures (Appendix 1, Sheet 5 and Sheet 6) and demonstrate that 'legacy' applications are successfully being targeted for determination.

- 3.8 The increasing focus on 'legacy' applications continues to have significant consequence for average time performance measures as the determination of a relatively small number of older applications significantly impacts upon these KPIs. This is particularly evident within the 'householder' average time measure (Appendix 1, Sheet 5) where despite 83% of all householder determinations being determined in an average time of 9.6 weeks this measure is significantly impacted by the determination of 4 older applications that have cumulatively added nearly 4 weeks to the average time period for determination of this KPI. It is further noted that during F3 the overall average time period improved from 20.0 weeks to 16.1 weeks.
- 3.9 The determination of 'legacy' applications had a similar impact upon the average time taken measure applied to all other 'local' planning applications (Appendix 1, Sheet 6) where the determination of 27 older 'legacy' applications cumulatively add 11.0 weeks to an average time measure that reports on the determination of 163 applications in total. During FQ1 2024/25 83% of all other 'local' applications determined were less than 1 year old at the time of their determination and were determined in an average of 19 weeks. (59% of the total were less than 6 months old and determined in 11.6 weeks on average). The average time taken to determine 'all other local applications' has improved during FQ1 from 33.4 weeks to 30.0 weeks. It is also highlighted that this position relates to 'raw' data and does not factor in delays which have arisen as a result of matters outwith the control of the Council. During FQ1 the Council determined a number of legacy applications which have impacted on the raw data relating to the average time period, including items that were delayed largely due to matters outwith the control of the Council.
- 3.10 The backlog of planning casework (Appendix 1, Sheet 3) at the end of FQ1 has reduced by 56 formal applications (reduced from 213 to 150 applications). Whilst this is an improving position it is highlighted that the additional burden of the backlog volume upon existing staff resource will continue to impact upon performance over an extended period throughout 2024/25. Whilst the determination of legacy items will continue to impact upon performance reporting for some time to come, analysis of the granular data shows that average time periods for determining applications are now starting to reduce and, that despite headline figures that might raise alarm, the majority of applications are in fact being processed within much faster timescales which are currently improving over time.
- 3.11 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 has seen the introduction in 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 continues to be implemented as means of resolving issues with individual caseloads which had been unsustainably high for an extended period of time with consequent impact on the health and wellbeing of the team and their output. Individual officer caseloads are now generally identified to be within manageable limits although efforts remain ongoing to address the exceptions to this position and to implement improvements to working practices across the board. During FQ1 two additional senior planning officers have joined the major application team and will provide additional resource to support the resilience of both Planning Officers and Area Team Leader functions, in addition to providing sufficient capacity for the processing of more complex casework.

4.0 IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Policy	None
4.2 Financial	None
4.3 Legal	None
4.4 HR	None
4.5 Fairer Scotland Duty	
4.5.1 Equalities – Protected Characteristics	None
4.5.2 Socio-economic Duty	None
4.5.3 Islands	None
4.6 Climate Change	None
4.7 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.
4.8 Customer Service	Requirement to manage customer expectations in the determination planning and related applications
4.9 The Rights of the Child (UNCRC)	None

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1st August 2024

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – FQ1 2024/25 DM report to ELT