

Rother District Council

Report to:	Cabinet
Date:	6 September 2021
Title:	Planning Service Review – Update
Report of:	Ben Hook – Director of Place and Climate Change
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Vine-Hall
Ward(s):	All
Purpose of Report:	To update Members on the outcome of the iESE Planning Service review and the consequent action plan based on their recommendations.
Decision Type:	Non-Key
Officer Recommendation(s):	It be RESOLVED : That the outcome of the Planning Service review by iESE and the consequent action plan be noted.
Reasons for Recommendations:	To ensure that the Members are aware of the outcome of the iESE review of the planning service and how the recommendations are to be implemented.

Introduction

1. During March 2021, iESE was engaged to carry out a review of the Council's Planning Service. This report gives a brief synopsis of the review, its main recommendations and the key actions arising.
2. There were a number of drivers to the review including:
 - a) The Council is under significant pressure to deliver very ambitious housing targets in a geographic area that has a very significant Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).
 - b) There are additional pressures from COVID-19 challenges, BREXIT and the potential for significant changes to planning through the Planning for the Future white paper.
 - c) Coupled with staffing levels and recruitment concerns, the Council needs to take a radical look at how best to deliver its future planning service.
 - d) There is a need to meet the rising demand of planning applications, which need appraising in a modern, customer-focused and responsive manner.

Areas Covered by the Review

3. The review covered the following aspects of the Planning service:

- a) An analysis of the current state of play taking into account stakeholder views (both internal and external) and an assessment of performance.
- b) A review of customer demand.
- c) Review of current processes for pre-application advice, application validation, planning applications, enforcement and Community Infrastructure Levy.
- d) Staffing and resources.
- e) Designing a new vision for the Planning services.
- f) Communications.

Headline Recommendations

4. The review made the following headline recommendations that the Council should:
 - a) Consider the level of Transformation the organisation is prepared to invest in.
 - b) Create a project plan, identify roles and a timeline to deliver based on your priorities.
 - c) Categorise your approach across three key areas, people, processes and systems.
5. The three key areas are expanded into work themes at Appendix A together with an action plan.

Planning Re-imagined

6. Part of the work undertaken by iESE with officers and Members was to examine the current Planning Service to develop a new vision and mission that encapsulated both Members' and officers' aspirations.
7. The collective vision for Planning re-imagined is described as: 'An innovative, inclusive and dynamic service working collaboratively to meet the social, economic and environmental aspirations of our District.'
8. To underpin this vision the agreed planning mission is to shape the future direction of the District by:
 - Preserving and protecting AONB and the historical aspects of the District.
 - Reducing carbon emissions and environmental impact.
 - Stimulating economic growth, inwards investment and housing development to attract and support residents and businesses.
 - Protecting, enhancing and upholding built and natural environmental standards for the District.

Early Actions

9. As part of the iESE report there were a number of quick wins, early actions the Council could take to start to make changes to the Planning Service. These are focused on how we interact with Planning customers including through our website and Customer Services Team and how we keep customers up-to-date with progress of their application. In addition, it was recommended that the expectations of Members and officers be reviewed and

agreed. As part of this the committee reporting process would also be reviewed.

10. Further detail of the quick win actions are shown at Appendix B.

Longer Term Actions

11. The iESE review also made some longer-term recommendations which built on the quick wins and reflected the main themes of People, Process and Systems. Appendix C details these actions and the action plan.

Progress so far

12. Since receiving the draft report from iESE, work has already started on implementing the recommendations. Detailed at Appendix D is a summary of the work completed to date.

Communications

13. A communications plan is being developed that will cover both internal and external communications.
14. Internal Communications – this will cover both officers and Members and will include regular progress updates. An important part will be proactively engaging officers and Members to develop and implement the agreed changes.
15. External Communications – this will cover key stakeholders including customers of the planning service and strategic partners.

Resources

16. To deliver on the recommendations of the iESE review will require a cross departmental team to ensure they are implemented in a timely way. In addition to the Planning team, staff resources will be required from the Transformation Team, Communications Team and Human Resources.

Conclusion

17. The review by iESE highlights the significant pressures the Planning Service is experiencing and on the negative impact this has had on their relationship with both customers and Members. These pressures have been exasperated by long term difficulties in recruitment and limitations of the current configuration of software to deliver high levels of self-help and interactivity with customers.
18. The action plan has been developed to enable a high degree of participation both internally (officers and Members) and key partners and customers. The overall objective of the plan is to enable the Planning Service to deliver a customer focused and reliable service going forward. This will require the support and commitment of both officers and Members to ensure this is delivered.

Financial Implications

19. At present the costs of delivering the plan are largely officer and Member time. It is likely however that there will be costs arising from investment in Information Technology (IT), particularly to deliver greater levels of self-help for customers. This cost will be met from the Capital Programme provision for Rother Transformation ICT Investment.

Environmental Implications

20. The planned improvements in themselves do not have a direct environmental impact at this stage. However should investment in IT be required there potentially will be an impact through the manufacturing, operation and ultimately disposal of devices and network equipment, in addition to the energy used to operate the planning software systems. The Council electricity supply contract is based on 100% renewable energy.

Risk Management

21. There is a risk that the Council fails to deliver the recommendations of the iESE review through many drivers including but not exclusively:
- a) Lack of commitment and capacity of officers.
 - b) Lack of commitment of Members to support the service during the transition period.
 - c) Lack of adequate resources to support service improvement.
22. In order to manage these risks a cross department team will be established to deliver the action plan and will use the project management methodology developed to support the Corporate Plan.

Other Implications	Applies?	Other Implications	Applies?
Human Rights	No	Equalities and Diversity	No
Crime and Disorder	No	Consultation	No
Environmental	Yes	Access to Information	No
Risk Management	Yes	Exempt from publication	No

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Appendices:	Appendix A – Suggested Work Themes Appendix B – Early Actions Appendix C – Other Actions Appendix D – Actions undertaken following the iESE service review feedback
Relevant Previous Minutes:	None
Background Papers:	iESE Review document
Reference Documents:	None

Suggested Work Themes

People

- Review lines of definition between roles
- Reduce spans of control (no. of employees under one manager)
- Consider career grading
- Invest in learning and development
- Develop values and behaviours essential for high performance

Processes

- Review 'as-is' analysis and invest in 'to-be' redesign for key processes
- Implement quick wins
- Design from a customer perspective

Systems

- Develop a business case, technical specification for a new Planning system
- Review of the website – design from a customer perspective

Early Actions

Action	Work Theme	Comment	Start date	Target finish date
Website design – engage in comprehensive re-design of planning pages on the Council website from a customer perspective. Follow best practice examples from other organisations to save time.	Systems	The Council's website has already undergone major improvements, particularly around customer self-service. The current usability of planning part of the website will be reviewed for enhancement.	Sept 21	March 22
Customer notification service – take advantage of the free gov.uk 'Notify' service to send emails and text messages to customers to provide regular progress updates and help manage expectations around the service: https://www.notifications.service.gov.uk/ . This can help offset demand and improve the customer experience.	Systems	This work will be incorporated into the "my Rother" solution currently deployed through the Council website. This allows customers access to their interactions with the Council. The number of services accessible is increasing and a solution for planning will be given priority.	Sept 21	March 22
Identify your top ten planning service enquiries and develop training documentation for customer services staff to respond to these – feed into Customer Solutions approach in the longer term.	People	Confirmation of current information provided and identification of training needs for Customer Services. Links to longer term actions re customer services below.	Sept 21	March 22
Committee Screening Process – consider a screening process to remove applications that do not need to be considered at committee. Potential to develop a sub-group to handle these applications (including those from Members/employees).	Process	Part of a review of Committee processes to identify scale and scope of the problem / issue and agree relevant changes.	Sept 21	March 22
Jointly re-negotiate member expectations on performance and behaviour-to be agreed by both Members and Planning Officers.	People	Need to review identify scale and scope of the problem / issue and agree any consequent actions to ensure Officers and Members have a common understanding of what is expected and deliverable.	Oct 21	March 22
Opportunity to review committee report length, format and quality, including timescales for report distribution prior to committee meetings.	Process	Part of the Review of committee processes (including reports).	Sept 21	March 22

Other Actions

Action	Work Theme	Comment	Start date	Target finish date
Define technical specifications for a new IT system, including a client view allowing for self-service.	System	<p>Before embarking on a new procurement, this work will include a review of utilisation of existing software to determine whether it is fit for purpose and any investment required.</p> <p>Also within scope will be a separate piece of work on the Council's mapping software, GGP and its integration with Planning software. To include looking at alternative suppliers to improve efficiency of service.</p> <p>If new system to be implemented, new project and timescales to be agreed.</p>	January 22 TBC	March 22 TBC
Review information recorded and shown on mapping layers – as applicant you should be able to view different layers showing AONB, Grade II listed buildings, development zones etc.	System	Review GGP as a provider - as per comment above. Also, review data and layers on GGP to ensure that old and irrelevant information is deleted or updated.	TBC	TBC
Organise a visit to Sevenoaks DC (SDC) to understand their thinking around the use of Customer Solutions and the management structure within planning.	Process	Work has already commenced to engage with Sevenoaks DC to understand their approach. Action plan to be agreed for delivery of any changes to the customer service/planning processes and demarcation points – combined with recommendation below. Timescale not just related to engagement with SDC but the longer-term change project for the service.	Sept 21	Sept 22
Continue to engage applicants and stakeholders in the design of the planning service going forward	People/ Process	Planning Agents' Forum & Parish & Town Councils' Seminar to re-start in Autumn to enable engagement and feedback.	Oct 21	On going

Action	Work Theme	Comment	Start date	Target finish date
Change the culture – it is currently perceived as risk averse and inward looking. Can it be refreshed to be more commercially minded and engaging with applicants, seeing them as customers rather than problems.	People	This work will focus on understanding the perception of the planning service and embedding the new agreed vision and mission. A staff and Member engagement plan will need to be developed and where necessary specific training delivered.	Dec 21	June 22
Engage Customer Services in the 'to-be' process design – they can do so much more than they are doing and help spread the load, and in doing so, reduce failure demand.	Process	This work will review the demarcation points between customer services and planning including where best staff resources are deployed to have maximum impact.	Sept 21	Sept 22
Review of staffing to include recruitment and retention.	People	This will review the service structure taking into consideration recruitment and retention issues including shared services where appropriate and grading.	Oct 21	June 22

Actions undertaken following the iESE service review feedback

Action	Comments
Set up service review group	<p>Planning meeting to review the feedback from iESE. As a result, a Teams group has been set up with current actions being:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. List actions taken to date (this document). 2. Review iESE 'quick wins' and begin to draft officer response to recommendations.
Meet with Sevenoaks DM managers	Met with DM managers at Sevenoaks to understand what they do differently to RDC – the outcome seems to suggest very little difference albeit SDC has created a firewall between planning and customers (the public and general enquiries) this is dealt with by the Customer Solutions team (largely it appears they are better resourced and fully staffed).
Meet with Sevenoaks validation manager	Met with Sevenoaks to seek an understanding as to what they do in relation to processing/validating applications. Meetings ongoing on a monthly basis (as Sevenoaks was referred to in the review – reference to their Customer Solutions model – which seemed to cover several service areas).
Liaise with Customer Services (CS)	Met with CS to seek better communication links and produce additional advice and support for CS officers when dealing with customer queries on planning matters – including FAQs, sign posting to the website and duty officers in Planning Business Support to take calls as a last resort. Further meetings undertaken and continuing with CS.
Set up PBS duty officer	Rota for duty officers implemented – 2 PBS officers are available each day to take queries that CSOs cannot address themselves.
Review CS planning script	Planning Business Support have reviewed the CS planning script to ensure planning advice is up to date. This should ensure CSOs are equipped to deal with as many queries as they can themselves.
New procedure for CSOs liaising with planning officers – particularly for delayed applications.	As a result of the meetings new procedure implemented for CSOs contacting officers – Queries are now posted on Teams.
Contracted with Capita	Capita are now under contract and are supporting the service to provide planning application validation and application processing services to help reduce the outstanding workload. As of 23 August 2021, they had validated 111 applications (+ processed 10 invalid). Progress on applications will be known as consultation periods start expiring and the reports can be written up.