

Report on	Mid Year Progress in relation to the Business Plan 2023- 24
Date of Meeting	3rd November 2023
Reporting Officer	Dr Chris Boomer
Contact Officer	Dr Chris Boomer.

Is this report restricted for confidential business? If 'Yes', confirm below the exempt information category relied upon	Yes	
	No	x

1.0	Purpose of Report
1.1	To inform members of progress being made in achieving the Planning Service Business Plan Objectives for 2023/4
2.0	Background
2.1	Members will recall that the Business Plan contains objectives in relation to average time taken to process a planning application for both local and major applications, the time to complete an enforcement investigation as well as the desire to progress the local development plan.
2.2	The business plan also includes measures aimed at improving the service which include completing the staff review, conducting customer surveys, improving the property certificate service and developing action plans for both mid ulster and working at regional level to improve the delivery of planning services, The detail report gives a brief summary of where we are currently at in achieving these objectives.
3.0	Main Report
3.1	Planning Applications Planning Performance statistics published for 1 st April to 30 th June (available of the Dfl website) show that Mid Ulster received the third largest number of applications at 296 nearly double of that received by a couple of our neighbouring authorities. We also determined 339 applications, which is more than any other planning authority, of which 99.4% were approvals. This has assisted to address our

	<p>backlog. The number of live applications to be determined had reduced from 909 at the same time last year to 840.</p>
3.2	<p>Of the decisions made seven were major applications representing 20% of all majors in Northern Ireland determined. The average time take to determine these was 73 weeks, demonstrating the amount of work and negotiation involved in reaching these decisions.</p>
3.3	<p>The average time taken to process the remaining 332 applications was 16.1 weeks not achieving our 15 week target but up from the 17.9 weeks achieved last year. The processing time was 6th best and better than the 18.9-week average across all councils.</p>
3.4	<p>We opened 42 enforcement investigations and closed 76 investigations, again assisting to address the backlog left as a result of Covid.</p>
	<p>Local Development Plan</p>
3.5	<p>Members will recall we submitted further information in support of our Local Development Plan Strategy and are still awaiting the Department to call a public examination.</p>
	<p>ICT Transformation</p>
3.6.	<p>Members have supported the work that has gone into installing our computing system and assisted in managing the risks associated with such a big project. The fact the system is fully operational and that we are now addressing our backlog lays testimony to its success, as is the fact that we have received no complaints on its use from our customers.</p>
3.5	<p>The next phase of this ICT transformation will be implemented of a totally on line and paperless property certificate, which will allow solicitors to make payment, submit the application and received the certificate electronically. We have written to the law society and solicitors to advise that the aim is for this to go live the beginning of November. We are currently undertaking our final testing.</p>
3.6	<p>In recognition of the exceptional work of our inhouse cross disciplinary team who installed the system, the participation of local agents in testing the system and our excellent communications with our customers, Mid Ulster are one of the finalists for a national planning award. Karla McKinless (the inhouse project team leader) and the Deputy Chair of the Council will be representing the Council at the National Awards Ceremony in London, just in case we win.</p>

<p>3.7</p> <p>3.8</p> <p>3.9</p>	<p>Restructuring of the Planning Department</p> <p>On 1st November the operational restructuring of our planning Department was implemented which aligns planning officer grades with other services in the Council. It is anticipated that this will make our staffing arrangements more agile with the ability to ensure we have the right staff in the right place with the right training to deliver for our customers. The result of this exercise also means, nearly all of the professional staff will have moved from civil service to council's terms and conditions. Our Human Resource partners deserve special recognition for the care and effort they have put in to deliver this change smoothly. Members will appreciate that any change can cause a climate of fear, mistrust and anxiety amongst staff, however, this has been carefully managed by briefing staff, providing individual clinics to address their concerns and discuss what the changes mean and providing bespoke documentation and employment contracts for individuals across the grade.</p> <p>Further Improvements to Customer Services</p> <p>The Service Director, Head of Strategic Planning and Head of Local Planning are all involved in regional working parties designed to look at improvements to be brought forward to the planning system. Much of this requires legislative change and members will be aware that consultations are taking place with regards to some of the proposed changes already. The first of those was putting up the planning fees in April which was essential to ensure our service remain sustainable, and discussions are underway with regards to other measures to assist. Unfortunately, the wheels of central government move slowly.</p> <p>In Mid Ulster we are looking to define our agenda for future improvements and as part of that are engaging with our customers to establish their views. The first step is a customer survey of agents which will help us to understand their perspective on how we deliver services. This will help us to know what we are doing well and to focus what future changes will be.</p>
<p>4.0</p>	<p>Other Considerations</p>
<p>4.1</p>	<p>Financial, Human Resources & Risk Implications</p> <p>Financial: N/A</p> <p>Human: N.A</p> <p>Risk Management: N/A</p>
<p>4.2</p>	<p>Screening & Impact Assessments</p> <p>Equality & Good Relations Implications: N/A</p>

	Rural Needs Implications: N/A
5.0	Recommendation(s)
5.1	<p>The Planning Committee support the Serve Director in sending the Deputy Chair of the Council and the IT project team leader to represent the National Planning Awards</p> <p>The Planning Committee commends the hard work and diligence of our Human Resource partners in delivering the restructuring and further integration of the Planning Department within the Council.</p>
6.0	Documents Attached & References
6.1	www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-planning-statistics-april-june-2023