

## London Borough of Enfield

### Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Meeting Date: 31 January 2023

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**Subject:** Planning Service Response Times  
**Cabinet Member:** Cllr Susan Erbil  
**Executive Director:** Sarah Cary, Executive Director Place  
**Key Decision:** N/A

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1. The report is for noting purposes only and shares the plan to fix the structural shortfall in the capacity of the planning applications service in the short-term, to remove a backlog of planning applications and establish a sustainable and responsive approach to working practices that will greatly reduce the risk of current issues recurring and improve the customer service for applicants, residents, businesses, communities, and councillors.

#### **Proposal(s)**

2. To note the next steps are to hire 6 additional temporary planners for 6 months and create a Decision-Manager-level role to drive and embed process that will increase productivity to remove the backlog and adopt a more effective and efficient form of working that meets customers' needs.

#### **Reason for Proposal(s)**

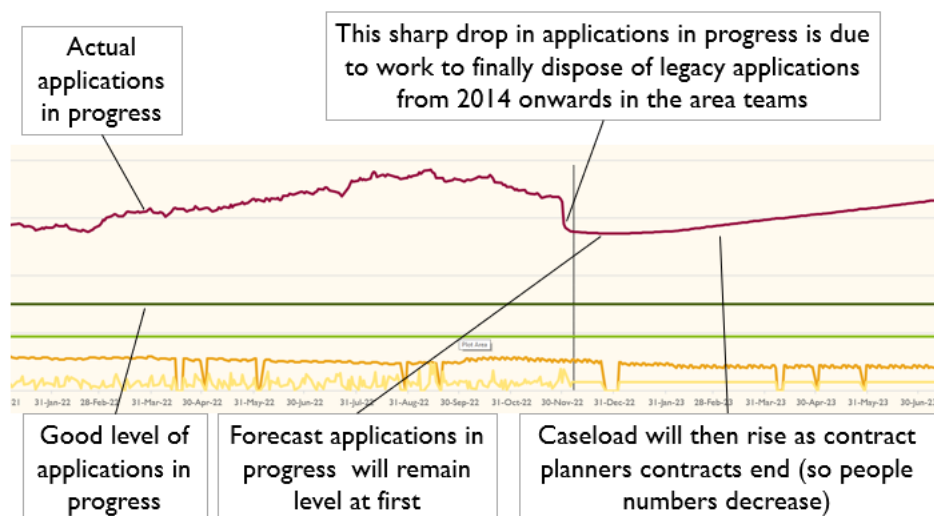
3. The Planning Service has assessed the match between the usual and forecast workload for the team, the team's productivity, and the numbers of people in the team. From this, it is considered there is about the right number of people in the structure overall for the long term.
4. However, there is a temporary need for more capacity to deal high levels of work in progress (caseload). This has built up over time and is beyond the capacity of the permanent team to address.
5. The team are regularly working over their contracted hours to assess and sign off applications and complaints have been received regarding the timeliness of the response times. Management are currently assessing and signing off applications rather than leading, co-ordinating and managing the Planning Service. As a result, the workload is being distributed unevenly, which affects the wellbeing and productivity of the planners officers and the team as a whole, this is consistently low.

## Relevance to the Council Plan

6. The proposal/work of the temporary staff will enable the Planning Service to focus its efforts to create thriving, affordable neighbourhoods and increase the supply of affordable housing in line with the Council Plan.

## Background

7. The planning team are progressing planning applications more slowly than its customers, residents and businesses expect and deserve. That has led to:
  - Applications being processed outside the statutory period for determination
  - A slow service for many of our customers
  - Complaints have been received across the Council, including Members, senior leaders, the head of service, decision managers and the rest of the team
  - Responding/Dealing with complaints further impacts on the service provided. This exacerbates the situation resulting in low levels of professional satisfaction and wellbeing for the team
  - The impact on the Team members and others to work regularly beyond normal working hours and become increasingly pressured
  - Very high caseloads for the team, causing significant pressure for them and for the decision managers, which affects productivity
  - Affects the recruitment and retention to the Planning Service
8. The organisation and allocation of the work compounds situation which in turn affects/impacts on all of the above. problem is partly caused by the way the work is done, allocated, numbers of people in each role and the productivity.
9. The purple line on the graph below shows the trajectory of the current caseload if the staffing levels and productivity continued.

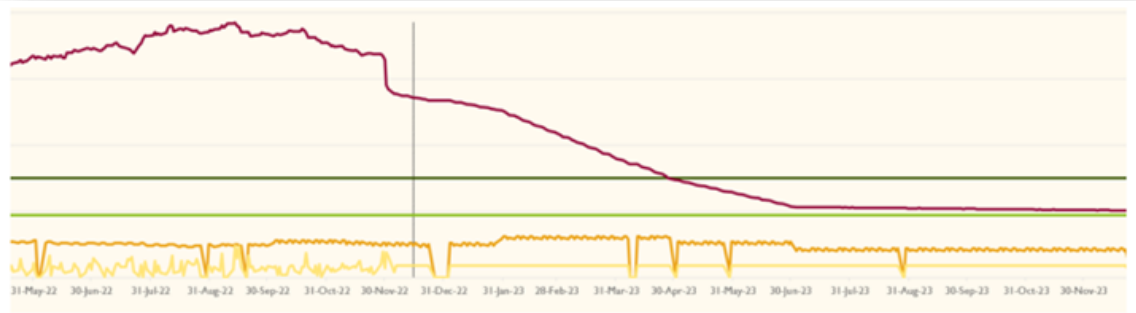


## Main Considerations for the Council

10. The team are currently working to improve the service by seeking solutions and new ways of working? This includes laying important foundations on which to build the improvements identified. Who is we? The Planning Service has a plan (**Option 1**) for this work which includes;

Agree roles and responsibilities within Development Management  
Monitor and manage performance within the team  
Introduce a 'fast track' for small, simple applications and set up a dedicated fast track team of Officers

11. Make short-term process changes to increase productivity such as:
- a. Pre-app advice will be required for amendment requests
  - b. Write shorter reports, in consultation with Members, Monitoring Officer and Legal Services
  - c. Charge agents for work undertaken by the Planning Service to amend/improve very poor-quality applications that don't meet the minimum legal requirements for validation
  - d. Not giving Extensions of Time unless for pre-application advice
12. Creating an additional Decision-Manager-level role to drive and embed the work to increase productivity. It is proposed that the currently seconded Principal Planning Officer providing cover for an area team's Decision Manager role be redeployed to this position as that secondment ends.
13. It is expected that the proposals will increase productivity, improve processes and help the team develop their skills and knowledge. However, the current shortfall in people numbers makes it more difficult for this to be achieved.
14. If an additional 6 temporary planners were hired for a period of 6 months, to bring caseload down to 'good' levels quickly it will increase the capacity of the service to drive these improvements through. There will be a cost of £126,000.
15. Responsibility for determining 'fast-track' type applications would be given to the current staff in the Planning Tech team, whose roles would be backfilled with 3 permanent Planning Technician Officers.



**If we increase average productivity by 20% and extend existing contract planners only until end April 2022 and hire 5 additional contract planners from end Jan 2023 for 6 months then caseload would reduce to excellent levels by June 2023**

16. The improvements to the service will be communicated to the Council's customers and stakeholders, including the Planning Inspectorate [PINS]. The reasons for the changes, once implemented, must be consistent. The Council must create a recorded, shared understanding of why the changes were being made across the Council, including the way in which the planning applications are processed, the impact for our customers and stakeholders and any associated timescales and risks.

#### **Safeguarding Implications**

Not applicable. Report is for noting.

#### **Public Health Implications**

Not applicable. Report is for noting.

#### **Equalities Impact of the Proposal**

Not applicable. Report is for noting.

#### **Environmental and Climate Change Considerations**

Not applicable. Report is for noting.

#### **Risks that may arise if the proposed decision and related work is not taken**

17. It is expected that the current work in progress would increase from around 1345 cases now to around 1650 cases at the end of May 2023. There will be no additional costs associated with this option however it but will impact on the Council's ability to generate income and prevent the service failing.

#### **Risks that may arise if the proposed decision is taken and actions that will be taken to manage these risks**

18. The Planning Service will maintain a risk log which will be updated regularly. Progress reports will be provided to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee?

The first and main risks are:

- If the Council cannot increase productivity by implementing process changes quickly then it may not be able to deliver the reduction in caseload as quickly as the plan shows
- If additional staff cannot be recruited quickly, then the Council may not be able to deliver the performance improvements as quickly as the plan shows

19. If we do not maintain a clear plan and clear expectations for the work that the extra staff carry out, then the Council will not deliver the expected outcomes – The Planning Service will monitor and manage the work and people using a daily short interval management approach for the length of time of the project.

### **Financial Implications**

Not applicable. Report is for noting.

### **Legal Implications**

Not applicable. Report is for noting.

### **Workforce Implications**

Not applicable. Report is for noting.

### **Property Implications**

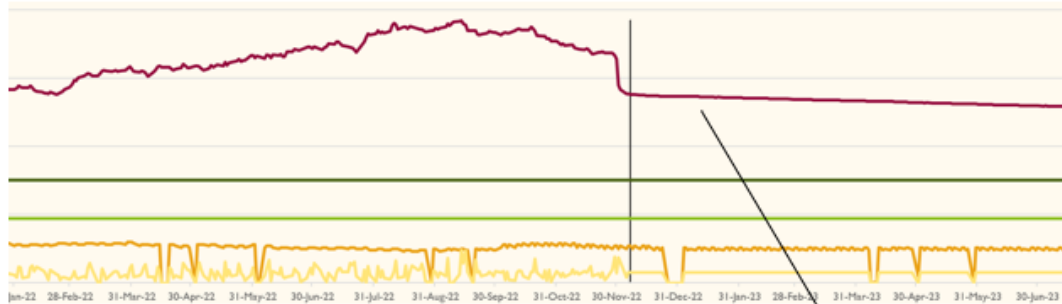
Not applicable. Report is for noting.

### **Other Implications**

Not applicable. Report is for noting.

### **Options Considered**

20. **Option 2** - improve capacity by extending or replacing the contract planners currently employed



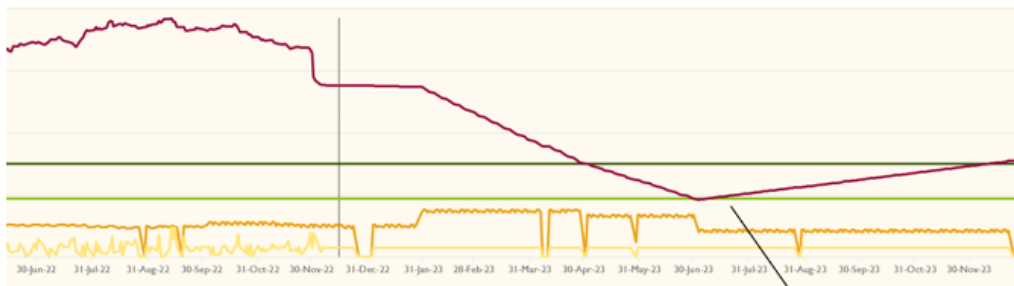
If we remain at current productivity and extend contract planners indefinitely or replace them with no interruption

Caseload would reduce slowly but would not reach 'good' level of applications in progress in 2023

21. **Option 3** - provide more people in the DM team for the short-term

This option is based on the following principles:

- The current contract planners will finish their contracts as planned, and
- Additional 12 temporary planning officers would be employed/hired for a period of 6 months from the end of January 2023 until the end of June 2023



If we remain at current productivity and extend current contract planners, plus hire another 12 contract planners from end Jan 2023 to end June 2023

Caseload would reach 'excellent' levels by the end of April 2023

22. With this option it is expected that work in progress would fall from around 1345 now to around 470 at the end of June 2023 but then begin to rise again as the contract planners' contracts ended.

Costs:

- The one-off cost of this option is approximately £306,000

23. Risks associated with this option:

- Recruitment of 12 contract planners is likely to be challenging
- The work to increase productivity is less likely to be driven, embedded, and sustained in establishment planning officers because the weight of the work to reduce caseload would be borne largely by the temporary planning officers.

## Conclusions

24. This is an issue that requires an urgent response for the reasons set out earlier in this business case. The recommendation provides a solution that delivers what our customers, residents and businesses deserve in a time that responds to the urgency described and will deliver:

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- Better, faster service for our customers
  - Fewer complaints
  - Less time lost to non-value adding work and less frustration for everyone involved
  - Lower work in progress – expected to be around 700 by the end of April 2023
  - Reduced stress for the team
  - Capacity to devote to increasing income from premium services like PPAs and pre-application advice
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**Date of report:** **18 January 2023**