

ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL

COMMITTEE	Enterprise, Strategic Planning & Infrastructure
DATE	21 January 2014
DIRECTOR	Gordon McIntosh
TITLE OF REPORT	Planning Performance Framework 2012-13
REPORT NUMBER:	EPI/14/269

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1. The purpose of this report is to update the Committee on the feedback received from the Scottish Government in relation to the second annual Planning Performance Framework (PPF) covering the period April 2012 to March 2013.
- 1.2. Such annual PPF reports are currently prepared in the autumn and compare performance levels over past years, seeking to provide a focus for incremental improvements in performance.

2. RECOMMENDATION(S)

- 2.1. It is recommended that the Committee note the findings of the report and delegate authority to Officers to take appropriate actions to address the issues raised.

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1. The production of an annual PPF report is an integral part of the planning service function and as such is accounted for in budgets and work programmes. The improvement areas identified in the feedback are anticipated to be achievable within future budget parameters.

4. OTHER IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1. The feedback identifies areas where improvements are required and these are set out below.

5. BACKGROUND/MAIN ISSUES

- 5.1. The feedback, which is directly provided by Derek Mackay (Minister for Local Government and Planning), provides an overview of the Scottish perspective prior to giving direct feedback on Aberdeen City Council's PPF report when assessing: national headline indicators; defining and measuring a high-quality planning service; improvements during 2012-13; and commitments to further

service improvement during 2013-14. It should be noted that the feedback is based solely on the information provided in the PPF report.

- 5.2. Conclusions are that: the PPF report is thorough, well structured and very much reflects the focus on a holistic view of the planning service and a drive for continuous improvements across all aspects. Good progress has been made since the last report in advancing our reputation with customers; there are clear benefits of working with an up-to-date Local Development Plan (LDP); but that urgent action is required to address a slowdown in decision making timescales, although it is recognised that steps are being taken to deal with this, by changing practices and recruiting staff.

6. SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK

- 6.1 The submitted performance report is thorough, well structured and very much reflects a holistic view of the planning service and seeks to drive continuous improvements across all aspects. Since 2011-12 there is clear progression of a number of initiatives which will enhance our reputation with customers. Clear benefits are being seen as a result of working with an up-to-date Local Development Plan (LDP), allowing us to confidently take forward discussions on delivery of good quality development. The positive and on-time progress being made in the production of the next LDP is noted. Information on land supply levels associated to housing, employment and commercial land are noted. The provision of information relating to applications subject to pre-application advice is supported, as early engagement brings real benefits in the handling of applications. The policy encouraging the use of 'processing agreements' for major applications is noted and further progress is anticipated. In recognising that these poor timescales associated to decision making may be improved through the 'stop the clock' arrangement, Aberdeen City Council being one of only 10 authorities who did not use this in the last year. It is noted that there is a stated intention to use this process in PPF2. It is also recognised that applications subject to legal agreements have seen their average timescales reduce by a year and that further efforts are being made to improve timescales, in partnership with ACC's Legal Team. The review of the Enforcement Charter over the past year is welcomed and the statistics associated to the enforcement function are considered reasonable.
- 6.2 However, in what is an otherwise positive feedback on national indicators, one area stands out and requires to be addressed urgently – decision making timescales on planning applications, which have slowed in comparison to the 2011-12 PPF figures. It is however noted that the PPF2 report recognises this fact and that steps are being taken to deal with this, both in terms of changing practices and in staff recruitment.
- 6.3 Moving to "defining and measuring a high-quality planning service" there is evidence of a strong focus on partnership working with the development industry, agencies and other customers to support delivery and improve experiences in planning processes. Feedback from developers and agents is also positive. The proposed efforts to improve engagement with Community Councils are also welcomed.

- 6.4 The efforts put into masterplanning is welcomed and displays a clear emphasis in improving quality of place through design review and building specialist knowledge on consideration and the environment.
- 6.5 The adoption of a range of service protocols with consultees and regular liaison meetings with internal service managers are recognised as maintaining a corporate focus on service delivery.
- 6.6 The accreditation of the Development Management Team as delivering 'Customer Service Excellence' is welcomed, as is the intention to roll this out across the rest of the service.
- 6.7 The review of schemes of delegation; service restructuring; and the reinvestment of fee income towards recruitment to the planning service is noted. The importance of structural changes to maintain a strong focus on continuous improvement is important. A good commitment to staff and member development is also displayed.
- 6.8 In relation to the delivery of service improvements during the reporting period, the completion of a good range of previously identified actions, with continuing work ongoing, is noted.
- 6.9 Moving to Service Improvement Commitments identified for 2013-14, the focus of actions on delivery and placemaking, as well as customer experience is good, with a clear link to identified issues.
- 6.10 Actions to tackle delays in application decision-making are important and should be addressed across the scales and types of development.
- 6.11 It is also noted that the aim of gaining "maximum benefit" from developer contributions should remain reasonable, meet the tests and avoid adding unnecessary or disproportionate delays to planning processes.
- 6.12 Mr Mackay also gives his personal thanks to staff for participating in Scottish Government performance events held by him during the summer of 2013, where he outlined his vision for a highly performing planning service to local authority staff across Scotland.

7. PARTICULAR AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- 7.1 Average decision making times for all applications types have increased and a reduction of average timescales is required. In order to improve these statistics staffing levels have been consolidated and are now such that additional resources are available and it is anticipated that decision making timescales shall improve as a result of this increased staffing capacity. Additionally, the use of 'stop the clock' procedures are to be introduced, where periods of time associated to delays outwith the control of ACC's planning service are not accounted for in statistical returns. A process of reviewing undetermined 'legacy' applications will result in long term cases being 'flushed out' the system. Finally, improved timescales to secure application legal agreements is

anticipated, following a restructuring and refocusing of ACC's legal service in relation to this important matter.

- 7.2 Cases with legal agreements have reduced from 95 to 45 weeks, a future target of 6 months (26 weeks) is recommended in the Scottish Government feedback. As mentioned in 7.1 actions have been taken to improve the timescales associated to securing legal agreements and it is anticipated that further improvement from the 45 week figure will be seen in 2013-14.
- 7.3 Evidence is provided in relation to pre-MIR engagement with communities and business bodies, but not in relation to elected members. Although evidence in relation to engagement with elected members was not provided, there is an established process of engagement undertaken. This includes: member briefings at each key milestone in the LDP process, where all members are invited; the last two being in Spring and October 2013; there is also an open door policy such that any members can contact the LDP team to discuss any issues; a particularly current issue relates to member concern in relation to city centre issues, which has seen city centre / retailing presentations and workshops arranged for January 2014 and to be attended by members, the Retail Study author, businesses and agencies with a city centre remit; otherwise members are kept informed of any community engagement exercises and meetings and there is a weekly briefing meeting held with the Committee Convenor. It is not considered that any further procedures are required and these processes will be set out, as evidence, in the PPF submission relating to 2013-14.
- 7.4 Continuous improvements are required, particularly in those areas identified above. The PPF process will record year on year areas where progress is being made or where actions are required, these matters will be reviewed at regular intervals such that areas requiring action are identified and service improvements undertaken.
- 8.0 IMPACT
- 8.1 Community Plan – The PPF fits well with the two main aims of Community Planning which are described as: making sure people and communities are genuinely engaged in the decisions made on public services which affect them; allied to a commitment from organisations to work together, not apart, in providing better public services.
- 8.2 Single Outcome Agreement – The improvement of planning performance will support the aims of outcomes 1, 2, 10, 12, 14, and in particular 15 which relates to high quality, continually improving and efficient public services which are responsive to local people's needs.
- 8.3 5 year Corporate Business Plan – The PPF recognises the priorities of Aberdeen City Council and takes account of budgets. It also recognises the skills, expertise and experience the Council needs, and that staff are our most important asset. In terms of business planning long term planning and review of past years means that planning can occur in anticipation of external pressures on service delivery. In terms of the priorities stated for 2012-13 the PPF

particularly supports Aberdeen's 'Smarter Economy', which works towards ensuring the economic future of the city. Additionally it assists in maintaining financial stability via the elements identified in the business plan: achieving financial targets; using priority based budgeting to guide service delivery; engaging with staff, the public, businesses, local communities, the voluntary sector and partners in service delivery; seeking more ways to work with the community; and working with the Scottish Government and COSLA to achieve funding which affects the contribution the city makes to the Scottish and UK economy.

- 8.4 Service Plan – The PPF will support the priorities and outcomes of the service plan by: encouraging future economic and business development; delivering an up to date development plan for the city; protecting and enhancing our high quality natural and built environment; delivering our statutory responsibilities effectively and efficiently; ensure that the ACSEF strategic priorities in relation to the city are developed; facilitate the continuous improvement of service delivery; and engage effectively with our partners, stakeholders, service users and staff.
- 8.5 Interest to the Public – The PPF aims to facilitate a high quality service that meets peoples needs and makes a visible difference to the quality of the city's urban and natural environment by promoting high quality development and providing an effective infrastructure to make Aberdeen a world class strategic location.
- 8.6 This report is seeking agreement to undertake further work and consultation and there is no impact on equalities and human rights resulting from this report.

9 BACKGROUND PAPERS

Planning Performance Framework - Annual Report 2012-13:

<http://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/nmsruntime/saveasdialog.asp?IID=53292&sID=13449>

10 REPORT AUTHOR DETAILS

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