

Planning Services: Covid19 service position statement

Community & Regeneration Scrutiny Committee

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1. What is the purpose of this report?

The purpose of this report is to provide Scrutiny members with a high level summary of the impact COVID 19 has had on those specific elements of the Planning Services covered by this Scrutiny Committee over the last 8 months from a service user, staff and Council perspective. Those elements relevant to this Scrutiny therefore are:

- Planning Policy;
- Minerals & Waste (excluding the enforcement function);
- Development Management & Built Heritage (excluding the enforcement function);
- Building Control; and
- Street Name and Numbering.

The report also looks ahead in terms of what are the potential implications moving forward as well as key lessons learnt.

It is not the intention of this report to cover every area of the service but instead it will focus on some of the key issues:

All other functions NOT listed above but covered by the Planning Division fall under the remit of the Environmental and Public Protection Scrutiny and form the basis therefore of a separate report.

2. What has been the impact of Covid on services and what changes have we seen?

Some of the above elements of the Planning Service have remained fully open during the COVID period – however the staffing levels available to man those services were significantly reduced as a result of re-deployment (see workforce section below). Other areas were operational in part or suspended (see further detail per Unit below).

A number of Welsh Government guidance letters have been received since the start of the Covid period setting out procedures and temporary legislation to follow around some aspects of the Planning Services (namely Policy, Development Management and Building Control). Some advice was received in a timely manner, others seemed to take a long time to come through and impacted on the effectiveness of services going forward. The updates below reflect any of the guidance received.

All Officers in relation to the services listed above worked from home from the first day of lock down and continue to do so. All non-urgent site visits (urgent being those with risk to life and limb) were suspended and some but not all have been reconvening gradually from July onwards as per detail below with regards each Unit. The temporary suspension of site visits has had an impact on each service area – leading to inevitable delays and build-up of a Covid backlog of works.

Overall

the efficiency of the whole service delivery has also been affected as 50% of staff were partly/fully redeployed during the first 4 months of Covid. Services therefore remain in a position of catching up with a backlog of work that has built up during the Covid period to date – this affects all 5 areas listed below.

In addition to these general points, the following provides a further update re each of the 5 service areas (Units) listed at the start of this document:

a) **Planning Policy Unit**

When we first went into lockdown the Authority was in the final 2 weeks of its Deposit Consultation for the Revised Local Development Plan (LDP) (closed 27th March 2020). In its Revised LDP Delivery Agreement the Council⁵⁰ agreed to make consultation documentation available for inspection at various public locations, including libraries and Council offices. The lockdown meant that this element of the Delivery Agreement could not be met for the last part of the consultation. To avoid any potential challenge the Authority undertook a further 3 week consultation 11th September to 2nd October 2020. This means that in total the LDP has been on Deposit for just over 8 weeks with documents available to view as per the requirements of the Delivery Agreement.

The need to re-consult along with the need to re-visit evidence in light of the impact of Covid today and moving forward will result in up to a 7-month delay to the delivery of the LDP, which has been acknowledged and agreed by the Executive Board. A revised Delivery Agreement with an adoption date of July/August 2022 is being taken through the democratic process. WG have now clarified that Carmarthenshire's LDP is NOT affected by the 'drop dead date' set in legislation and therefore the current LDP will remain in force until the new one is adopted.

S106 work – whilst the general administrative work has been maintained the monitoring and compliance of developments has been disrupted through the limitations on site visits. The impact on developers/applicants particularly

small local builders has been noted. Consequently, the invoicing for contributions has been paused where there is a financial impact arising from Covid – 19 and the lockdown.

Just under 50% of the team were involved in redeployment activities.

b) Development Management Unit (excluding the enforcement function)

All planning application functions remained open at the start of lock down other than; site visits, site notices and new consultations (incl. on new planning applications).

There was also an initial suspension of registering new planning applications until receipt of further Welsh Government Guidance.

These factors combined have resulted in a backlog of cases being brought forward from the first 3 months or so of Covid.

In addition, the staffing capacity was reduced from end of March to end of June by redeployment duties affecting 50% of DMO Unit.

Planning Committee was suspended from mid March and reconvened remotely on the 30th June. To catch up with the back log of applications Committee meetings have since been held twice a month.

Site visits by the Planning Committee were also suspended mid March and remain as such. Officers are supplementing their reports with additional visual aids and where appropriate drone footage is being used. As a result no applications have to date been deferred to a site visit during the Covid period.

Application numbers although reduced slightly in April/May have otherwise been at similar levels to previous years.

All on-site built heritage training ceased at the Tywi Centre until the end of September. Some training was instead undertaken remotely however others require on-site presence to demonstrate students' physical heritage skills and allow for appropriate assessment.

Overall, the service has been significantly hampered during the first 4 months of Covid (longer in terms of the Tywi centre Training element) leading to a delay in service request being dealt with. This has been at a time when a recent Strategic Review of Planning highlighted the resource pressures faced by the service, and the lack of resilience to deal with additional and unexpected demand.

c) Minerals & Waste Unit (excluding the enforcement function)

The team cover 10 authorities including Carmarthenshire in terms of a combination of planning application determinations and monitoring of dormant and live sites.

Desk top work regarding live applications continued throughout although as per the Development Management team there were restrictions in relation to any new applications received and they have been delayed for the same reasons.

Monitoring activity, which requires physical site visits, was suspended and recommenced on 1st October across Carmarthenshire and all other Authorities whom we undertake such work for. This was largely due to H & S issues and site operators not being able to allow the monitoring to be undertaken safely as it requires physical site presence to undertake. Although visits have recommenced localised lockdowns mean that not many visits have been able to happen to date. Additionally as monitoring is an annual requirement with several visits per site being required per annum it is not acceptable to condense all those visits into the remaining part of the year. Therefore those monitoring visits due in the first 7 months of the year cannot be recouped.

The issues around site visits significantly affected the ability of the Unit to undertake most of its duties and therefore this team was one of those that remained involved in redeployment activity the longest with up to 5 of the 8 person team volunteering at any one time.

d) Building Control

All site visits other than those regarded as essential in relation to Dangerous Structures were suspended. Various types of visits have since been switched back on during July and August – however not all types of visits have recommenced. Internal inspection of occupied properties remains suspended with a view of these recommencing by the end of November.

In line with LABC guidance issued in the Spring Officers where possible have replaced site visits with virtual tours with the client via various media formats. However, this has proven ineffective in many cases particularly in relation to completion notices which require an internal inspector of property in more

detail than can be gleaned from a virtual walk through. Overall the service has been significantly hampered during the first 4 to 5 months of Covid. Of the Officers 5 out of 7 were involved in redeployment on a daily basis for the first 4 months with some team members still engaged in August.

e) **Street Name and Numbering**

This function carried on remotely throughout, although all non-urgent site visits were suspended for the 3 months.

3. What have been the workforce implications?

Staff have been outstanding throughout the pandemic, in continuing to support the service but also in their flexibility and enthusiasm in embracing new challenges and assisting with other essential services at the outset. This has no doubt resulted in staff gaining new skill sets as well as having created great opportunities for team building both with officers within the Division and with those from other Divisions & Departments

All Officers in relation to the services listed above worked from home from the first day of lock down and continue to do so. There isn't any office presence at present though some functions do now require minimal presence and work is underway to ensure that such access can be secured in a safe manner by the end of November with the relevant building checks, risk assessment and safe systems of work currently awaiting sign off.

From the outset Planning was identified as a service with suitable customer skills to help with other services considered, at the time, far more essential. A Corporate decision was taken for as many officers as possible to be re-deployed with regards the food hub (packing and distribution) for families qualifying for free school meals and those who were shielding, delivery of essentials to vulnerable households and training of the fast growing requirements of the cleansing team. Up to 50% were volunteering daily or part of the day until the end of June and some continued to mid-August which is when shielding finished. This meant that many of the planning service functions, though still open to operate in principle, did not have the staff resources to continue a normal level of service. This is true across all the 5 service areas above.

The Head of Service (HoS) and Business Managers have been engaged in various response and recovery groups/discussions/planning throughout and continue to work on a number of cross departmental groups on at least a weekly basis. The HoS continues to coordinate the recovery authorisation

process for Capital Programme schemes which became the focussed priority in June/July with a large number of restart's and continues to require weekly input.

During the course of the crisis and as officers have returned more to the day job and moved away from the redeployment the work pressures and Covid resulting backlog issues on staff have become increasingly apparent. Well-being going forward will be a big issue and a driver for better managing workloads.

We are conscious that this has been a hugely difficult time for staff managing both work and challenging situations at home, and staff have been exemplary in the commitment and dedication they have shown. Many have struggled with the work environment – and Managers have assisted where possible to ensure that appropriate standards exist for this temporary home working. Others have struggled with childcare and again Managers have assisted where they can in terms of signposting for additional help. One of the key challenges moving forward will be managing staff well-being in the winter months which brings its own issues. Home working moving forward has its benefits and disbenefits and these need to be balanced in any future agile working policy by the Authority. It is clear there are significant benefits for the service and Authority as a whole to continue some form of home working but for it to work at its best it will need to be balanced with some office presence – a hybrid approach - which is generally supported by staff in this Service moving forward.

With a high percentage of staff on redeployment duties for the first 4 months staff have from August onwards being catching up with taking much needed and deserved leave. This again has affected and will continue to affect service delivery and is another factor to note in that service delivery is not back to normal levels it was pre Covid.

4. What have been the key financial issues identified?

The following are some of the key issues/implications which have been identified to date:

- Planning fees were down in Q1 compared to Q1 last year by a third (£93,470 compared to £143,340). Most of the impact was seen in April/May with income returning to that similar to last year by June. In Q2 fees were broadly in line with the year before at £207,579 (£213,430 last year). However, this was, in part, due to fees received in Q1 but not registered until Q2 so the overall picture remains one of a

decrease in fee income.

- Building Control income was down between April and August this year by £48 k compared to the same time last year. This is a direct result of inspections being suspended during early Covid (some still suspended) and the fact that the construction industry too slowed during that early period whilst they found their way in terms of new Covid working practices and also dealt with supply issues. The further localised lock downs will affect this in the third quarter too as will any further lockdowns going forward.
- Mineral fees for the first half of the year are down roughly £30,000 in terms of monitoring and £30,000 in potential planning application fees. The monitoring money cannot be clawed back as only a certain number of monitoring visits can occur in relation to each site per year and WG guidelines require that these are evenly dispersed throughout the year. The further localised lock downs have affect this in the third quarter, as has the national lockdown too. Any further lockdowns will continue to diminish the window of opportunity for monitoring visits and therefore income. The of loss income from planning applications depends on whether those applications have been delayed or whether they now get pulled due to economic viability issues and therefore the exact loss of income is more difficult to quantify.
- Tywi Centre training income is also down as on-site training was suspended until late September. However a successful bid to WG for loss of income due to Covid impact for just under £30,000 has been successful. A second bid has been submitted for Q2 for £37,000.

5. How have we approached Communication and Engagement?

Regular contact has also been maintained between the Head of Service and the Executive Board Member and Chair of Planning Committee, to ensure everyone is up to date on what is happening.

E-mail updates have been provided to Planning Committee Members.

E-mail updates have also been provided to Agents – which included passing on relevant information from WG.

Update have been included on the Planning website and through social media with Marketing Team as to delays early on and this banner is kept up to date.

Press releases, e-mails and social media have also been used to publicise the additional LDP consultation.

Weekly Business Managers meetings have occurred (daily in the first month or so) and updates sent to staff as appropriate of changes affecting the service during the pandemic.

6. What are the key implications moving forward?

We must make sure that we learn from this unprecedented experience as we reintroduce our services and re-set our strategic and operational priorities. It is not going to be a case of restarting and getting back to the way we were. This is an opportunity to refresh and renew.

In terms of any future lockdowns, the toll taken on planning services generally the first time around have been Corporately acknowledged. The redistribution of resources to assist other essential services (although essential and the right move at the time) has left a new backlog of work to be dealt with. This will affect the Division's ability to respond in a timely manner to assist with economic recovery. Most of the planning services listed at the start of the document are therefore now seen as essential not only to keep operational for as long as possible but to also keep fully resourced for as long as possible.

Specifically moving forward we will:

- Continue to implement the recommendations of the Strategic Planning Review, and continue with the work undertaken as TIC projects
- continue to challenge and adapt the way we work.
- Further embrace agile working and consider how this is best taken forward to achieve best working practices whilst at the same time improving the well-being of our staff;
- Continue with the reduced travel principle:
 - Make more use of remote meetings or at least hybrid meetings
 - Critically assess the need for site visits – exhausting all other means prior to that (social media walk through etc.) – in line with WG guidance.

- Make better use of drones for Committee purposes but also look at Minerals monitoring etc. There is already a scoping exercise being completed and this will be looked at now at a corporate level.

7. What lessons have we learnt?

- How critical digital solutions have been and will be going forward. As a Service we were lucky in that almost all staff already had most of the equipment to work more agile. This ensures that Services did not completely shut down during the Covid period.
- To continue to question ways of working – it is too easy to carry on with the norm. Covid 19 has shown us that there are always ways of doing things better or simpler. As part of the on-gong service improvement discussions we will continue to look at making the service more effective.
- In a crisis the One Team approach comes through very strongly. Barriers that may have existed get removed and officers work alongside colleagues of different grades and different divisions at ease. This needs to be nurtured and carried through rather than lost as some sense of normality returns in due course.
- Staff Resilience has been exceptional during Covid with people undertaking their day jobs and taking on additional tasks at the same time. This has been at a time when the resilience of the service in terms of resource is being challenged. However, this is a marathon and not a sprint and we need to be careful that the fatigue which is already showing is appropriately managed. We need to make sure that staff are encouraged to take leave (both in terms of leave and breaks in the working day) despite the inability to travel. Time off is even more important during a pandemic such as this. We also need to assist staff to better manage their workday – building in appropriate breaks and addressing any long hours going forward.

To consider and comment on:

- 1. The parts relevant to this Scrutiny Committee to the Planning Division's response to COVID**

