

Name of meeting: Personnel Committee

Date: 6 June 2023

Title of report: Planning Service – workforce issues

Purpose of report:

This report is prepared to help the Personnel Committee understand the pressures within the Planning Service over the last 2 years and how they relate to the workforce.

Key Decision - Is it likely to result in spending or saving £250k or more, or to have a significant effect on two or more electoral wards?	Yes/ no or Not Applicable No
Key Decision - Is it in the <u>Council's Forward Plan (key decisions and private reports)</u>?	Key Decision No This is only applicable to Cabinet reports Private Report/Private Appendix – Yes/No
The Decision - Is it eligible for call in by Scrutiny?	Not Applicable Provided for information rather than decision
Date signed off by <u>Strategic Director</u> & name	David Shepherd 15/6/23
Is it also signed off by the Service Director for Finance?	Consulted 26/5/23
Is it also signed off by the Service Director for Legal Governance and Commissioning?	Consulted 26/5/23
Cabinet member <u>portfolio</u>	Cllr Turner, Regeneration

Electoral wards affected: All

Ward councillors consulted: None

Public or private: Public

Has GDPR been considered? Yes – no personal data

1. Summary

This report is prepared to help the Committee understand the pressures within the Planning Service over the last 2 years and how they relate to the workforce.

- There are substantial challenges in the built environment labour market. There is a lack of engineers and town planners nationally and competition for professionals at all levels is fierce amongst Councils, the private sector and the independent consultant market.
- Staff turnover in Kirklees is high - over a third of the service have been with the Council for less than 2 years.
- The reasons for leavers vary - from obtaining new jobs elsewhere for better pay, the end of temporary contracts for student placements, moving into the private sector consultancy market (which has grown in response to local authority need), retirements and career changes.
- Pay is a barrier to attracting and retaining experienced staff. This is evidenced by discussions with leavers, particularly above Grade 10 roles. Discussions with prospective applicants also indicate pay is a barrier to applying for posts.
- In addition, Kirklees has a reputation of being a challenging place to be a town planner compared with other districts where there is seen to be less pressure and less opposition to development from the public.
- A number of roles have been hard to fill and vacancies are being actively managed to off set falling income. Gaps between posts becoming vacant and new staff arriving places ongoing strain on the service.
- Customer satisfaction as a result is low based upon the length of time applications can take to be concluded. This is a function of very high case loads per case officer.
- A service wide Action Plan is being developed which includes a broad range of actions necessary to support effective delivery of the planning service.

2. Background

Staff have worked relentlessly since the adoption of the Local Plan in 2019 and throughout the pandemic period, when planning applications numbers spiked at over 4,000 per year.

Kirklees is the 20th largest Planning Authority in the Country with around 2,450 planning applications received in 2022. In comparison, Wakefield received 1,550 applications per year and Calderdale around 1,100 in 2022. It should be noted these figures are just for planning applications; the service also deals with well over 1,000 other types of consent and applications, such as works to Trees, pre-application enquiries, appeals and drafting and monitoring Legal Agreements (S106).

The Government's position is that Planning Authorities should be largely funded through planning application fees, although overall the hours taken to validate, assess, consider, negotiate and amend planning applications is not covered by the fees received. This makes the Planning Service extremely reliant on external, macro economic conditions. In challenging economic times (like now) when the number of larger applications falls, income levels drop rapidly. This means we are unable to afford to fill vacancies that do occur without over spending.

The budget target for fee income in 2022-23 was £2.4M, over which only around £1.3M was achieved. The service is therefore holding any vacancies it can to reduce staffing costs (by far the biggest expenditure). The result is higher case loads for existing staff and slower determination of applications.

To support and retain staff, a retention payment scheme was created and introduced in 2022. This places roughly £230,000 per year additional budget demands upon the Planning and Development service.

Unexpected periods of extended leave for staff due to sickness or personal circumstances have also had a detrimental effect upon staff wellbeing by adding to workloads. Customer satisfaction with the planning service is variable with concerns regularly raised relating to timeliness of responses and decision making.

Morale in Development Management in particular is low due to staff changes, high workloads per officer, challenging relationships with some customers and extensive requests for amendments to plans or supporting information. Allied technical services across the council who are often consultees on planning applications face similar challenges, meaning they are often not being able to provide timely responses or find pragmatic solutions to engineering challenges which all presents to the public as delays with “planning”. Public participation in the planning process is often extensive and often from a position of opposition to applications. All these factors cause fatigue and erosion in staff welfare. These factors also affect the council’s reputation with investors when considering decisions on new developments in our district.

3. Staffing

- There are 49 FTE posts in Development Management, across the 6 teams, comprising 3 planning officer teams, one compliance team, a highway development management team and a Conservation, Design, Trees and Ecology Team.
- In the Planning Policy and Strategy group there is approximately 15 FTE members of staff
- There are currently 8 vacant posts (all in Development Management) with 3 more critical posts soon to leave, including the Group Leader for Planning Policy and Strategy, a senior planner from the Majors Team and one of the two experienced Tree Officers.
- There is also one Area Planning Team leader on long term leave and one member of the team has just returned from long-term sickness
- Around 25 members of the Planning Service have left the Council during the last 2 years and 28 new members of staff being recruited in this time period.
- In response to national shortages of experienced planners, Kirklees has been successful in ‘growing its own’ staff from apprentices through to Group Leaders but this approach is very demanding on existing experienced staff who need to train and mentor new starters, whilst also handling their own case loads.
- So whilst overall headcount is roughly comparable, periods of vacancies the impact of inexperienced staff being recruited in most instances to replace more experienced leavers places strains on a stretched service.

Beyond the sheer number of leavers, a critical factor for the service is the experience of the staff we have been able to recruit to replace them with.

- The 17 staff members in Development Management who’ve left between March 2020 – Oct 2022 had an average of 15.5 years of experience per officer. In addition to the length of experience, many of the officers also had extensive local knowledge of both sites and the wider area which takes a significant amount of time to replace.
- The 17 staff members who have joined in Development Management between March 2020 – Oct 2022 have an average of 5.3 years of experience per officer.
- Within the Area teams within Development Management, 54% have less than 5 years’ experience.

4. Service improvement

A number of linked actions have been taken or are being developed to help respond to these unprecedented challenges:

- **Staff retention payments:** The retention payment scheme was introduced to rebalance the disparity in pay and to make Kirklees a more attractive employment location for professional planners. This has been successful to a point. Staff have felt supported and more inclined to progress their careers at Kirklees in general but there are still significant numbers leaving for better paid roles elsewhere in Local Authorities and concerns that this payment will need to be withdrawn to meet budget pressures.
- **Governance reforms:** The service is examining ways to make the decision making process quicker and more efficient, thereby releasing officer time that can be redirected to improve the through put of planning decisions and allow officers more time to focus on ensuring quality decision are made, sites are monitored and S106 obligations are received and services across the council who deliver the schemes from the S106 money received are supported to bring forward the benefits of the planning gain.
- **Civic Centre 1 reopening:** Bringing staff back into a 50-50 hybrid way of working between office based and remote working will be a positive step to ensuring staff are appropriately supported and able to work in person with colleagues. This will allow leaders and managers the opportunity to support staff development, work through put and enable collaboration and, critically, promote greater collaboration with other professional teams that are critical to the planning process such as Highways. The accommodation provided by the improved and refurbished CC1 will also make prospective candidates to Kirklees Council more attracted to our Council.
- **Local Plan Review:** The current Local Plan is required to be reviewed by the end of 2024. It is expected that the Government's impending reforms to Planning will clarify the new requirements for setting housing and job targets by the summer 2023. This will help the Council understand what is required to produce a future Local Plan. Once a new Local Plan is produced, it will stimulate a new wave of development sites in Kirklees and provide clarity on applications that are in conformity to the Local Plan and associated adopted planning guidance documents.
- **Staff welfare:** The Council is a good employer with opportunities to learn, train and succeed. Our apprenticeship programme is well established and the 'grow your own' strategy to developing our staff into experts in their technical disciplines and leadership roles is well established.
- **Effective consultees:** We are working with the internal consultees, most importantly Highways Service to ensure their contribution to the planning process is not out of step with the practises and approaches of other councils. The time spent on condition discharge process, comparable to the small fee received for the application to discharge conditions means fees do not cover the officer time spent.
- **Attracting investment:** In combination with a range of Council services, the Planning Service supports the Council's ambitions to create the homes our communities need and the good job opportunities our residents and business need to thrive and succeed. Working with partners in the district and across the region the Council is attracting inward investment opportunities and working collaboratively with our business community, large and small, to support their aspirations and retain businesses within our district wherever possible. Engaging with stakeholders is vitally important, from architects, consultants, local builders and landowners and businesses to try to help them get the best from our services.

5. Conclusion

There is no one single solution to improve service delivery and staff retention. Pay is currently the biggest barrier to attracting experienced staff or retaining individuals and uncertainty in budget forecasting weighs on staff when they are deciding where to work.

Public participation in the planning system is a key component and is not an area which should be diluted or discouraged. However, changing the narrative around the benefits of new development, regeneration, house building, and job creation would significantly help to improve the attractiveness of working in Kirklees.

6. Implications for the Council

The planning service is a critical interface with residents and businesses in Kirklees and is a fundamental function of local democracy. It is therefore vitally important that we are able to discharge the functions of the Local Planning Authority in a robust and transparent manner.

6.1 Working with People

The planning process provides a crucially important role for public engagement. We receive over 8,000 individual comments or inquires from residents each year, each of which needs to be processed and weighed in the planning process.

6.2 Working with Partners

An efficient and transparent planning system in Kirklees is important for partner organisations. A good reputation for planning helps partners plan effectively and have the confidence to invest. As a result, the issues outlined in this paper are of relevance to a wide range of partners in Kirklees.

6.3 Climate Change and Air Quality

Tackling the climate emergency, reducing emissions and improving air quality are key long-term priorities for the Council to improve the quality of life for our residents and create a borough that is healthier, more sustainable and fairer for everyone. The planning system has a key role in creating the policies that will help deliver this change as well as shaping and approving applications for the built environment.

6.4 Other (eg Integrated Impact Assessment/Legal/Financial or Human Resources)

There are no direct legal or financial implications of this report. No decisions are being sought, however it is important to recognise that some of the issues outlined in this report are affected by financial considerations. As outlined in the report, falling fee income associated with a slowing macro economy impact on the service's ability to cover its costs. As a result, a high number of vacancies are being held which has a knock on impact on delivery. An Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) has not been completed for this report since it is an update for Personnel Committee and no decision is sought.

7. Consultees and their opinions

We have not directly consulted on this report since it is an update and is not seeking a decision. The Planning service has a range of forums to seek the opinions of customers. The report references customer opinions in a number of places.

8. Next steps and timelines

The report is presented to Personnel Committee for discussion and comment. The wider, ongoing actions for the service are set out in section 4

9. Officer recommendations and reasons

- The committee are asked to note the challenges of the local and national job market The committee are asked to note the work that the department has done to mitigate against these challenges.
- The Planning Service will continue to work with Workforce Strategy to explore opportunities to addresses the issues set out in this paper.

9. Cabinet Portfolio Holder's recommendations

Whilst many of the issues as to why the planning service is under strain are not matters which Personnel Committee can control, it is hoped this report is helpful to set out the context under which staff in the Planning Service are required to operate.

Cllr Turner, Regeneration

10. Contact officer

Edward Highfield, Service Director, Skills and Regeneration

11. Background Papers and History of Decisions

None

12. Service Director responsible

Edward Highfield, Service Director, Skills and Regeneration