



<b>Title of Report:</b>	<b>Planning Department Business Plan 2026/27</b>
<b>Committee Report Submitted To:</b>	<b>Planning Committee</b>
<b>Date of Meeting:</b>	<b>27 May 2026</b>
<b>For Decision or For Information</b>	<b>For Decision</b>
<b>To be discussed In Committee YES/NO</b>	<b>No</b>

<b>Linkage to Council Plan (2026-31)</b>	
Strategic Theme	Governance, Quality & Continuous Improvement
Outcome	Council maintains its performance as the most efficient of NI's local authorities
Lead Officer	Head of Planning

<b>Budgetary Considerations</b>	
Cost of Proposal	26/27 budget
Included in Current Year Estimates	<b>N/A</b>
Capital/Revenue	both
Code	5301
Staffing Costs	included

<b>Legal Considerations</b>	
Input of Legal Services Required	<b>NO</b>
Legal Opinion Obtained	<b>NO</b>

<b>Screening Requirements</b>	Required for new or revised Policies, Plans, Strategies or Service Delivery Proposals.		
Section 75 Screening	Screening Completed:	N/A	Date:
	EQIA Required and Completed:	N/A	Date:
Rural Needs Assessment (RNA)	Screening Completed	N/A	Date:
	RNA Required and Completed:	N/A	Date:
Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA)	Screening Completed:	N/A	Date:
	DPIA Required and Completed:	N/A	Date:

## **FOR DECISION**

### **1.0 Purpose**

**1.1** The purpose of the Planning Service Business Plan is to set out the key business focus for Planning over the next business year for consideration and agreement by Members.

### **2.0 Details**

**2.1** The Planning Department Business Plan 2026/27 sets out the key objectives for the business over the next business year. It takes account of the current position at end of 2025/26 and builds on this performance for the incoming year.

**2.2** The key functions of the Planning service area are:

- Local Development Planning – creating a plan which will set out a clear vision of how the council area should look in the future by deciding what type and scale of development should be encouraged and where it should be located to create a sustainable environment; designation of conservation areas; issuing Building Preservation Notices and Tree Preservation Orders.
- Development Management – determining the vast majority of planning applications and other planning consents, including waste and minerals applications, conservation area consents, advertisement consents, certificates of lawful development, non-material changes, and discharge of conditions.
- Planning Enforcement – investigating alleged breaches of planning control and taking action where it is considered expedient to do so; issuing of Urgent Works Notices.

**2.3** The business plan objectives are:

- To improve performance in relation to processing of planning applications
- Preparation of Council's draft Plan Strategy
- To manage finance, staff, information and other resources effectively within the corporate governance framework

**2.4** The Planning Department financial budget for 2026/27 has been agreed at £1.95m supported by predicted income of £1.32m bringing the total expenditure to £3.27m. The Planning Department staff structure comprises of 51.74 FTE staff which accounts for 92% of the overall expenditure.

**2.5** The Planning Service Business Plan is attached at Appendix 1.

### 3.0 Recommendation

- 3.1 **IT IS RECOMMENDED** that the Planning Committee APPROVE the Planning Department Business Plan 2026/27.

**CORPORATE SERVICES**  
**DIRECTORATE**

**PLANNING DEPARTMENT**

*BUSINESS PLAN*  
*2026-2027*

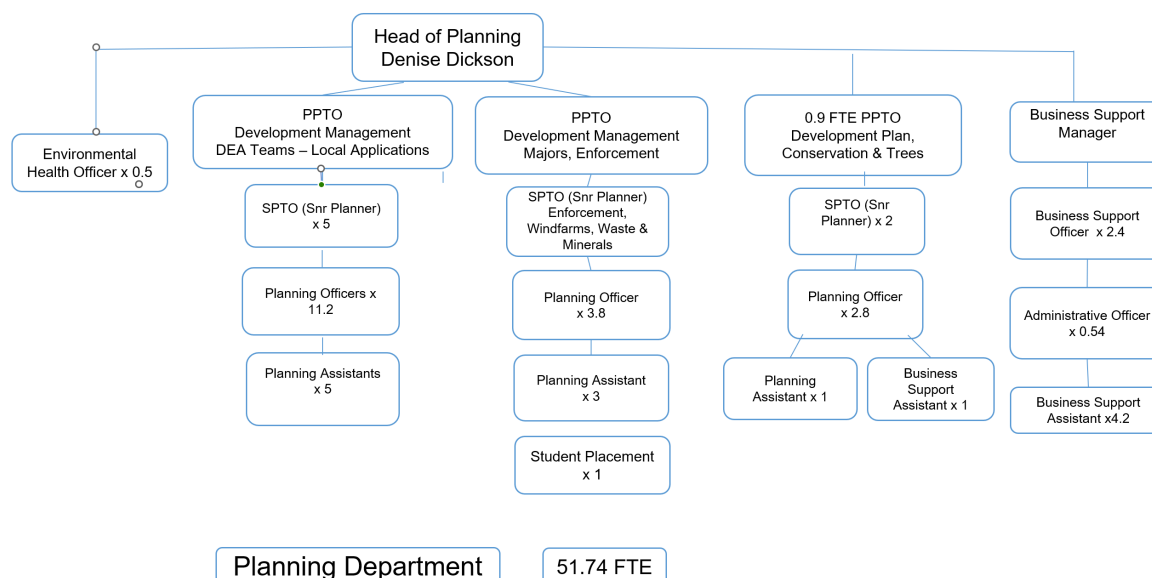
## **SECTION 1:     SETTING THE CONTEXT**

### **1.1   FUNCTIONS OF THE PLANNING DEPARTMENT**

The key functions of the Planning service area are:

- Local Development Planning – creating a plan which will set out a clear vision of how the council area should look in the future by deciding what type and scale of development should be encouraged and where it should be located to create a sustainable environment; designation of conservation areas; issuing Building Preservation Notices and Tree Preservation Orders.
- Development Management – determining the vast majority of planning applications and other planning consents, including waste and minerals applications, conservation area consents, advertisement consents, certificates of lawful development, non-material changes, and discharge of conditions.
- Planning Enforcement – investigating alleged breaches of planning control and taking action where it is considered expedient to do so; issuing of Urgent Works Notices.

## 1.2 DEPARTMENTAL STAFFING STRUCTURE



In 2025/26 a new post was introduced for undergraduate/postgraduate work experience with successful candidates receiving maximum one year paid work experience at any time. This post replaced a vacant Business Support Assistant. It is proposed that this post will continue.

## 1.3 STRATEGIC CONTEXT

### Strategic Priority – Creating Conditions to Deliver Opportunities within Borough

The Local Development Plan is a spatial landuse plan that guides the future development within our Borough. It balances competing demands for development and the protection of our built and natural environment. The LDP is prepared within the context of both the Corporate Plan and the Community Plan. The Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 sets out the statutory link between the LDP and the Community Plan. The LDP must take account of regional policy and guidance issued by central government and contain policies and proposals developed on a clear evidential basis. When adopted it will replace the Northern Area Plan 2016 and the suite of regional planning policy statements.

Until such times as Council adopts its LDP, planning decisions are made in accordance with the current Northern Area Plan 2016, the Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland, and the suite of regional planning policy

statements. Decisions should be consistent with LDP and relevant policies. Planning decisions will be made in balancing the 3 pillars of sustainability - the social, economic and environmental needs of our society and embedding mitigation and adaptation to climate change, where relevant.

### **Strategic Priority- Governance, Quality & Continuous Improvement**

The Regional Planning Portal continues to provide the technological platform to improve open and transparency in decision-making. Increased levels of information relating to planning applications are uploaded onto the system for the public to view. Majority of planning applications are submitted on-line resulting in processing efficiencies. Ongoing updates to the system are implemented as necessary to ensure continued improvement and experience for all users.

A Tree Preservation Order interactive map viewer was introduced on 23 May 2024. This makes it easier for the public to determine if an area of land is currently affected by tree protection. The feasibility of adding the maps showing the specific trees subject to protection (Map B) is to be explored through this business year.

Annual monitoring of the Borough's Housing, Retail and Employment land continues to be undertaken. This provides the public and key stakeholders with up-to-date information on the Borough and provides a robust evidence base that informs the preparation of the LDP.

A new interactive map viewer is now available (live since December 2025) to enable the public to access the Council's Annual Housing Information. This makes housing uptake and land availability information more accessible to customers.

The Statutory Validation Checklist was implemented on 09 June 2025. This followed the introduction of the non-statutory validation checklist on 01 September 2024. The introduction of the Validation Checklist has been beneficial by reducing application processing times.

A new Development Management Information Note (DMIN) about Self-Catering and Short-Term Stay Accommodation was published on 04 November 2025. This mainly provides information to customers on the circumstances where planning permission is required for this use. It is proposed to extend the DMIN series to provide further information and guidance to customers.

A new Protocol on the Efficient Processing of Planning Applications has been developed. The purpose of the Protocol is to set out the procedures to deliver a more efficient processing system and assist in meeting the statutory planning performance targets. The Protocol sets out a commitment to working together to front load the planning process and provide a more proactive approach in delivering improved planning processes. The Planning Committee has agreed to the adoption and publication of the Protocol subject to building in a review process. The Protocol will be operational in the 2026- 27 Business Year.

### **Strategic Priority- Engaging & Communicating with Our Customers**

Planning decisions will be made balancing the 3 pillars of sustainability - the social, economic and environmental needs of our society and embedding mitigation and adaptation to climate change, where relevant. The Statement of Community Involvement sets out how the Planning Department intends to engage with the public, stakeholders and Government Departments in exercising its planning functions.

The Statement of Community Involvement, updated in February 2025, remains in place.

Meetings continue to be held on a quarterly basis with members of the RSUA and RTPI to increase engagement and seek input into service improvements.

### **Strategic Priority- Sustainability & Managing Our Natural & Built Environment**

Planning decisions will be made balancing the 3 pillars of sustainability - the social, economic and environmental needs of our society and embedding mitigation and adaptation to climate change, where relevant. The Council is preparing its own Local Development Plan (LDP) that will take account of regional legislation, policy and guidance relating to mitigation and adaptation to climate change. When adopted, all planning decisions must have regard to the policies contained therein, guiding development proposals across the Borough in a sustainable manner.

A senior officer within the Planning Department continues to sit on Council's Climate Action Team and contributes to Council's input into DfI's Annual

Reporting on its ‘Sustainable Water: A Long-Term Water Strategy for Northern Ireland (2015-2040)’ Implementation Plan’.

## 1.4. SWOT ANALYSIS AND PESTLE ANALYSIS

<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Greater engagement with Elected Members in the Local Development Plan process bringing greater awareness for staff of local needs pertaining to the Borough through the LDP process.</li><li>• Greater engagement with Elected Members in the decision-making process for planning applications.</li><li>• Agreed Protocol and Scheme of Delegation with Planning Committee in place and regularly reviewed.</li><li>• Positive engagement with internal and external stakeholders.</li><li>• Teams established to deal with specific application types provides consistency and efficiency to development management process.</li><li>• Ongoing training of staff assists in developing their skills and knowledge</li><li>• Staff have developed detailed local knowledge of the areas within which they work resulting in greater consistency and efficiency in decision-making.</li><li>• Flexibility and commitment of staff to adapt to change and continue to deliver services in challenging circumstances.</li><li>• Experienced and resilient staff employed on permanent basis with wide range of knowledge and skills.</li><li>• Positive attitude throughout the office.</li><li>• Clear assigned roles in relation to Development Management, Development Plan and Enforcement.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Loss of experienced staff and knowledge through sickness and resignation.</li><li>• Increasing complexity of legislation and environmental areas/issues.</li><li>• Detailed policies within SPPS constrain Council's ability to develop policies specific to needs of Borough within its new Local Development Plan (LDP).</li><li>• Application processing constraints due to delays resulting from late submission of information and representations, and external discussions with stakeholders not agreed prior to submission of application.</li><li>• Delays to processing of planning applications due to delays in consultation responses outside of control of Council.</li><li>• Delays to processing of planning application due to quality of some consultation responses.</li><li>• Inability to make changes to planning legislation to improve processes in LDP and development management processes.</li></ul>

<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Threats</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Further develop better partnership working between internal and external stakeholders to improve working relationships and service improvements.</li> <li>• Improve performance by reviewing procedures for processing planning applications.</li> <li>• Continue to input into amendments to planning legislation to bring about improvements to the planning function.</li> <li>• Refinement of local plan policies to reflect local circumstances.</li> <li>• Improvements to the new Planning Portal IT System ensuring up-to-date stable system with improved customer interface.</li> <li>• Delivery of topic specific training.</li> <li>• Improved openness and transparency of Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs) through the introduction of online GIS facility.</li> <li>• Filling of vacant posts provides opportunities for career development and helps to motivate staff.</li> <li>• Publish information leaflets to develop greater understanding of the development management process.</li> <li>• Collaboration with stakeholders to develop standing advice to streamline the planning process.</li> <li>• Implementation of Dfl's Independent Inspectors Project to progress local development plans.</li> <li>• Introduction of measures from the Planning Improvement Programme (PIP), a collaborative initiative between Dfl and NI councils, offers a range of operational benefits including efficiency and capacity building.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Excessive caseloads reduce performance.</li> <li>• Infrastructure constraints and material costs resulting in decrease in planning applications submitted and associated income.</li> <li>• Loss of experienced staff resulting in increased pressures on remaining staff and delays to delivering the planning function.</li> <li>• Greater risk of challenge through Judicial Reviews/Ombudsman on planning decisions and impact on staff resources and budget costs.</li> <li>• Risk to breaches of confidentiality/data protection due to high volumes of correspondence received and uploaded onto the Planning Portal.</li> <li>• Impact of Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) Resource issue/timetable on LDP Independent Examinations.</li> <li>• Delay to Council agreement on publication of draft Plan Strategy due to continual input from elected members.</li> <li>• Having to take account of new Plans and Policies (e.g NI Marine Plan and updated SPPS policies) due to the delay in publication of the draft Plan Strategy</li> <li>• Potential for fraudulent information to be submitted in support/objection to a planning application.</li> </ul>



## PESTEL ANALYSIS

<b>Political</b>	Local accountability as Elected Members have responsibility for decision making for those non-delegated decisions and for agreeing the new LDP. The ability to influence DfI to make legislative changes will impact on delivery of amendments to legislation required to improve the planning function and reduce costs to Council in delivering the service.
<b>Economic</b>	Receipts are closely related to general economic activity in the Borough. Planning can be an enabler of development and can be viewed as an income generator to the overall benefit of the Council. The Causeway Coast and Glens Growth Deal has moved from agreement into delivery. This will drive economic growth across the Borough. The Coleraine Future Town Fund (CFTF) will likely deliver economic benefits specifically to Coleraine.
<b>Social</b>	Opportunity to improve the wellbeing of citizens of the Borough through the linkage with the Community Plan and greater community involvement in the development plan process. Continue to implement the agreed Statement of Community Involvement. Continued engagement with internal and external stakeholders will assist in improving service delivery.
<b>Technological</b>	Operation of the Planning Portal contributes to improvement in customer accessibility and engagement in the planning functions and open and transparent decision-making. Hybrid meetings provide an opportunity to continue engagement in with remote access and potential for greater attendance at meetings and workshops. Introduction of the online GIS facility for TPOs and Housing Monitor data contributes to improved accessibility to this information, improving openness and transparency.
<b>Environmental</b>	Ability to protect the environment and encourage economic development through a balanced delivery of the planning function. The new development plan process will provide the opportunity to encourage greater political and community involvement in the process with each option appraised through the Sustainability Appraisal and other Assessments. Continuation of the collaboration with other council staff will improve knowledge and evidence to produce sound planning policies to promote sustainable development.
<b>Legal</b>	Working in a complex legal environment increases the risk of challenge through Judicial Reviews/Ombudsman cases. Large number of European designated sites in the Borough and increased scrutiny through The Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2017 and the Council Directive 92/43/EEC raising complex issues.

## 1.5. PRE-REQUISITES AND EXTERNAL DEPENDENCIES

Planning is a demand-led service and we are affected by the wider economic factors which determine the level of applications received. Enforcement is a similarly reactive process as most complaints are received from the public.

The Planning Department cannot control the number of planning applications or enforcement cases opened as this is driven by the needs of the wider public and strength of the economy.

Planning is largely constrained by complex legislation, policies and guidance published by central government. The risks involved in failing to comply with these can result in a significant financial cost, delay and reputational damage to Council. It is therefore important to ensure that Planning has sufficient staff resources with the necessary skills and knowledge to make sound planning decisions thereby reducing the risks of administrative errors.

The significant challenge ahead for Planning is maintaining a stable workforce and reducing challenges to decision-making. The carrying of vacant posts significantly increases caseloads for staff and impacts on staff morale, customer service and performance against statutory targets. It is important that when vacant posts arise that they are filled as expeditiously as possible to reduce caseloads and ensure efficient processing of planning applications.

The ability to influence central government to make legislative changes continues to impact on the delivery of improvements to the efficient delivery of the Planning function. Collaborative working between Councils and DfI through the Performance Improvement Plan (Phases 1 and 2). Working with other stakeholders through quarterly meetings is important to ensure key issues impacting on the Planning function are addressed in a collaborative manner with those who have the ability to influence changes to legislation and working practices outside of Council.

Council is responsible for the publication of a new Local Development Plan that will, when adopted, form the basis of planning decision making within the Borough. The draft Plan Strategy was presented to full Council for ratification at the meeting held on 01 November 2022. At that time Members resolved to defer ratification in order for further workshops to be held to discuss specific areas of concern. Workshops were held in August, September and December 2023 and in January 2024. A LDP Working Group was held in March 2024.

An amended LDP timetable was published on 08 January 2025. The Statement of Community Involvement, last updated in February 2025 and was

presented to the Planning Committee on 26 February 2025, remains in place. At the request of Members, Independent Research was commissioned to undertake research into housing provision and allocation to inform the draft Plan Strategy. This research is now completed and was presented to and agreed by the Planning Committee on 25 February 2026. The housing allocation has been agreed.

An updated Retail and Commercial Leisure Study was commissioned to inform both decision making on relevant planning applications and the draft Plan Strategy. This is now completed.

Positive engagement with stakeholders to the planning function provides the opportunity to collaborate on driving forward improvements to customer service. The new pre-application discussion (PAD) process, introduced on September 2024, continues to operate effectively. Further to the success of the non-statutory validation checklist, the statutory validation checklist was introduced on 09 June 2025.

Discussions are ongoing with statutory consultees to continue to develop Standing Advice to streamline the planning process. Standing Advice has been agreed with DfI Roads and with NI Water. The Standing Advice with DfI Roads was renewed in February 2026.

The Council has implemented the new Northern Ireland Planning Portal with 9 other Councils and DfI. This shared system went live on 05 December 2022 and provides Council with a stable, up-to-date system with an improved customer interface. The system is now operating effectively for development management; continual improvements are being implemented through agreement with the Project Board.

The Planning Portal provides greater access to information on planning applications by the general public. This improves open and transparent decision-making with more information available digitally to the general public on how decisions are reached on planning applications. This increased publication of information also increases the risk of data protection due to large volumes of data being uploaded for public viewing. The increased scrutiny of decision-making also increases the risk of challenges to decisions. The risks involved in failing to comply with the complex legislation, policy and guidance can result in a significant financial cost, delay and reputational damage to Council.

Training of Members and staff is important to ensure timely, quality and consistent decision-making to reduce the risks of challenge. Mandatory training

is carried out with Planning Committee Members annually and other training provided as identified throughout the year to improve decision making. External bodies such as NILGA have been engaged to deliver training to Members in this business year.

## **1.6. FINANCIAL BUDGET**

The Planning Department financial budget for 2026/27 has been agreed at £1.95m supported by predicted income of £1.32m bringing the total expenditure to £3.27m. Most of the budget expenditure is payment of staff wages accounting for 92% of overall expenditure.

<b>Directorate</b>	Corporate Services
<b>Service Area</b>	Planning
<b>Reporting Year</b>	2026/27

<b>Business Plan Objective 1</b>
<b>Improve performance in relation to the processing of planning applications and enforcement cases</b>
<b>Lead Officer(s):</b>
Denise Dickson, Shane Mathers and Jennifer Lundy
<b>Link to Council Plan 2026-31:</b>
Governance, Quality & Continuous Improvement
<b>Link to Community Plan:</b>
A Sustainable Accessible Environment; A Thriving Economy
<b>Link to Performance Improvement Plan:</b>
Council will improve its overall performance by delivering a comprehensive corporate Transformation Action Plan

Work Stream	Actions	Financial Information/ Budget £	Timescale	Performance Indicator(s) <b>APSE Benchmarking Indicators</b>	Progress	RAG Status
<b>Improve processes</b>	Implement Protocol on the Efficient Processing of Planning Applications	Reduction in deferred income	Q1	Protocol implemented		
<b>Reduce processing times for local and major category of planning applications</b>	Develop an action plan to manage and reduce the number of over 24 month applications in the system	No impact on budget	Q1 Q4	Action Plan developed and implemented Reduction in number of over 24 month applications (both local and major category of applications) by 10% by end of Q4 Reduction in number of over 12 month applications (both local and major category of applications) by 10% by end of Q4		
	Monthly report from Principal Planning Officers to Senior Planning Officers meeting analysing the performance in	No impact on budget	Q4	Average processing times for major category of applications meeting statutory target of 30 weeks.		

	processing both local and major category of planning applications		Q4	Average processing times for local category of applications: Q1: 23 weeks Q2: 19 weeks Q3: 17 weeks Q4: 15 weeks		
<b>Reduce processing times to bring enforcement cases to conclusion</b>	Monthly report to Planning Senior Officers meeting analysing the performance in processing enforcement cases	No impact on budget	Q4	Average processing times for case conclusion meeting statutory target of 70% concluded within 39 weeks Q1: 61% concluded within 39 weeks Q2: 66% concluded within 39 weeks Q3: 70% concluded within 39 weeks Q4: 70% concluded within 39 weeks		

### Risk Management

#### Identify Risks and any Mitigating Actions Required:

**Risk 1:** Impact of staff vacancies and increased caseloads will negatively impact on the ability to improve performance.

**Mitigation 1:** Ensure Authorisation to Recruit is actioned prior to post becoming vacant to ensure vacancy is filled as expeditiously as possible.

**Risk 2:** Fraudulent information submitted in support/objection to a planning application may impact on performance due to verification of information/investigation

**Mitigation 2:** Ensure procedures are in place for staff to raise concerns regarding potential fraudulent information.

<b>Directorate</b>	Corporate Services
<b>Service Area</b>	Planning Department
<b>Reporting Year</b>	2026/27

<b>Business Plan Objective 2:</b>
<b>Preparation of Council's draft Plan Strategy</b>
<b>Lead Officer(s):</b>
Denise Dickson, Sharon Mulhern
<b>Link to Council Plan 2026-31:</b>
Creating Conditions to Deliver Opportunities within Borough and; Sustainability & Managing Our Natural & Built Environment
<b>Link to Community Plan:</b>
A Sustainable Accessible Environment; A thriving Economy
<b>Link to Performance Improvement Plan:</b>
Council will improve its overall performance by delivering a comprehensive corporate Transformation Action Plan

Work Stream	Actions	Financial Information/ Budget £	Timescale	Performance Indicator(s)	Progress	RAG Status
<b>Publish Draft Plan Strategy</b>	Update robust evidence base to inform the LDP.  Agree any new/revised policies with Members.  Update the SA/SEA Scoping Report and consult NIEA.  Keep LDP Timetable under regular review.	£10,000 (critical friend for SA/SEA update)  £10,000 (dPS design & print and advertising)	Q4	<b>APSE Benchmarking Indicators</b>  In line with published LDP Timetable (autumn/winter 2026)		
<b>NIPSO 'Strengthening Our Roots' Recommendations</b>	Action recommendations specifically relating to the Council's planning function.	£10,000	Q4	TPO Surveys to be carried out by an arboriculturist and submitted to the Council by end of Q3.		

				TPO Confirmation Reports to be presented to Planning Committee by end of Q4.		
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**Risk Management**

**Identify Risks and any Mitigating Actions Required:**

**Risk 1:** Members disagree with officer recommendations.

**Mitigation 2:** SMT kept up-to-date with progress at key stages and workshop held to agree way forward.

<b>Directorate</b>	Corporate Services
<b>Service Area</b>	Planning Department
<b>Reporting Year</b>	2026/27

**Business Plan Objective 3:**

**To manage finance, staff, information and other resources effectively and efficiently within corporate governance framework**

**Lead Officer(s):**

Denise Dickson

**Link to Council Plan 2026-31:**

Governance Quality & Continuous Improvement

**Link to Community Plan:**

A sustainable accessible environment; a thriving economy

**Link to Performance Improvement Plan:**

Council will improve its overall performance by delivering a comprehensive corporate Transformation Action Plan

Work Stream	Actions	Financial Information/ Budget £	Timescale	Performance Indicator(s)  APSE Benchmarking Indicators	Progress	RAG Status
<b>Ensure all Audit/Ombudsman recommendations are implemented</b>	Monitor and implement Ombudsman recommendations	No impact on budget	Q4	Number of cases where Ombudsman determines maladministration is less than 0.4% of all decisions made		
			Q4	Implement recommendations within 6 months of receipt of final report.		

<b>Manage staff recruitment to ensure vacant permanent posts filled within 3 months</b>	Ensure Authorisation to Recruit form completed and sent for agreement to SLT	Posts already accounted for within budget and structure	Q2	Long term vacant permanent posts filled or determined no longer necessary within 3 months of post becoming vacant		
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<b>Risk Management</b>						
<b>Identify Risks and any Mitigating Actions Required:</b>						
<b>Risk 1:</b> Overturns at Planning Committee are contrary to LDP and planning policy increasing risk of challenge through the High Court and Ombudsman						
<b>Mitigation 1:</b> Planning Committee Members undertake mandatory training on code of conduct, decision making and audit recommendations prior to sitting on Planning Committee.						
<b>Risk 2:</b> Decisions made by Planning Committee Members impact on resources not previously accounted for i.e. budget/staffing.						
<b>Mitigation 2:</b> Members reminded of budget/resource implications of decisions before final decision taken.						
<b>Risk 3:</b> Turnover of staff due to sickness/resignation impacts on workload of remaining staff impacting on performance.						
<b>Mitigation 3:</b> Ensure authorisation to Recruit is completed and sent to Senior Leaders Team within 2 weeks of post becoming vacant.						