

Councillor John Evans

Portfolio Holder for the Planning, Stansted Airport, Infrastructure & Local Plan

Full Council report – 21 March 2023

Progress with Staffing and Resources

It has been a difficult year in terms of attracting and retaining staff in the Planning Service. High quality, dedicated staff underpin all of our service areas. A number of councils across the country have also reported extreme difficulties in this sphere over the past year. Indeed, the latest Local Government Association Workforce report cites planning as the single most difficult local government profession to recruit to. This is reported by RTPI and RIBA too.

Recruitment and retention of staff has been a top priority in the Planning Service for some time now, particularly so in our Local Plans Team.

So, I am pleased to report that by next month we will have a full complement of staff in the Local Plans Team, all bar one of which will be on a permanent contract. In the past two months we have attracted two career-grade policy planners (one of which we will be supporting through a planning master's degree using Apprenticeship Levy funding), a transport planner, and a highly experienced principal planner. We have also appointed an interim team manager to help lead us through to our regulation 18 consultation. In addition, we have appointed a Conservation Officer, engaged after working with Public Practice (a not-for-profit public sector recruitment company).

Elsewhere in the Planning Service, we have just appointed an additional, part-time planning enforcement officer for a one-year fixed-term period. Planning enforcement, while not a statutory function of local government, **is** critical to maintaining confidence in the planning regime and the additional officer will enable evermore site inspections to be carried out.

Whilst we will still have some agency staff (seven) across the Planning Service going into the next municipal year (all of whom make a substantial and valued contribution to the council), 86% of posts will then be filled by those on permanent or fixed-term contracts, compared to just 14% via agency provision – our lowest proportion for some time.

In terms of the budget, the legacy of a reliance on agency staff has had cost implications on expenditure. However, this additional expenditure has been effectively 'cancelled-out' by a similar increase in income, over and above that predicted at the start of the year.

Local Plan

It has already been reported (Local Plan Leadership Group and Local Plan Scrutiny meetings of 13 March) that, as a result of staffing challenges, work on the local plan timetable has slipped.

In the last quarter the team consulted on, amended, and has taken the developer contribution SPD through for adoption. This will greatly assist in securing planning obligations (via S106) in the period until a new local plan is adopted.

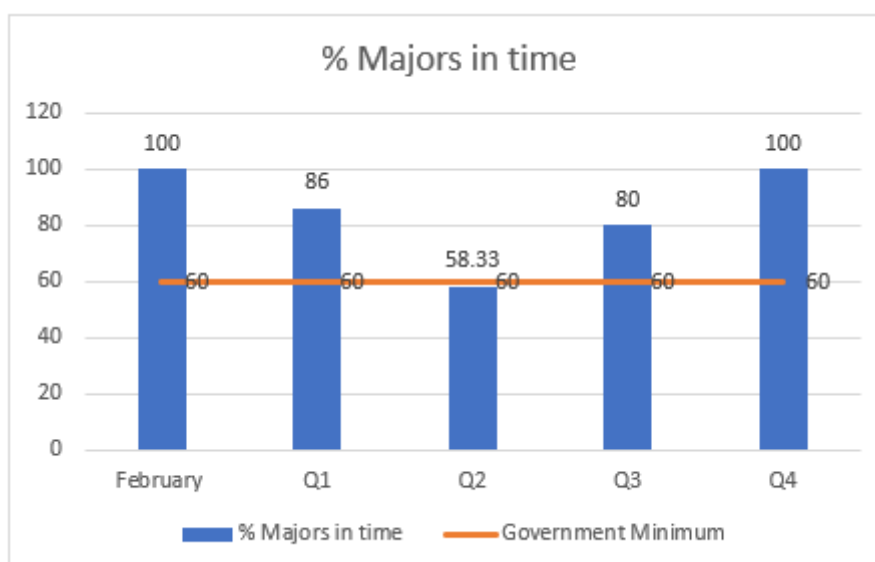
Officers and member of the LPWG also formulated a detailed response to the government’s consultation on planning reforms and the NPPF. The government’s response to the consultation and shaping of future reforms may be favourable to Uttlesford in terms of plan-making.

Throughout January and February the depleted local plan team assessed more than half of the approximately 300 sites submitted in the ‘call for sites’. The assessment work continues rigorously. Further work has been undertaken in terms of putting a local plan document structure and draft policy chapters together, as well as revisiting the settlement hierarchy for the district and ensuring information is accurate, factoring in feedback received from Parish Councils. Work on developing a Design Code for Uttlesford has also been ongoing. A site tour was organised for members on 6 March.

With reduced staff numbers, and the briefing and training of new recruits, it has been difficult to mitigate against slippage to the timetable. Officers have suggested a revised Regulation 18 consultation date towards the end of October. Once all new staff are in post a more precise work programme and timetable will be brought to members.

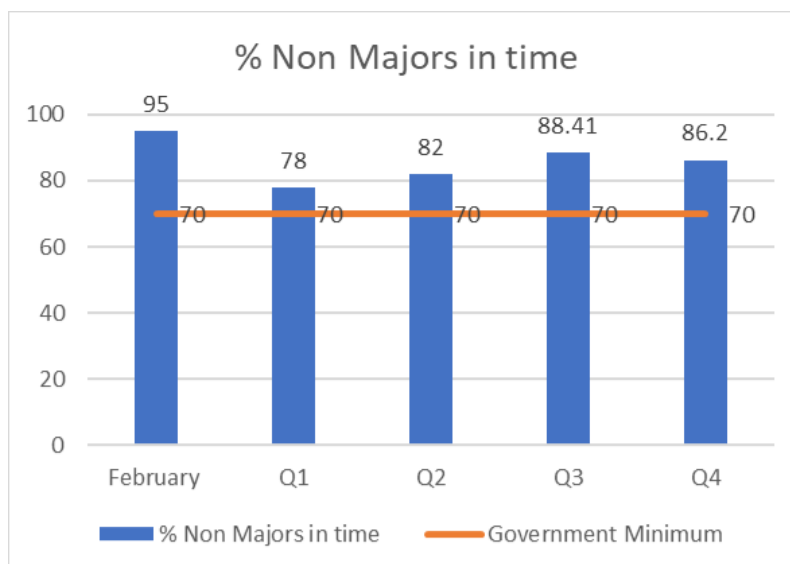
Development Management & Enforcement

The development management team has issued decisions on 2,891 applications this year (to 10 March 2023), including 40 major planning applications. 85.7% of major planning applications have been dealt within target timescales this year – 100% were in time in Q4 of this year, significantly above the government target of 60%.



% Major Planning Applications decided within target timescales by quarter

Similarly, non-major applications performance has improved throughout the year, from 78% in time in Q1 to 86.2% in the current quarter. This results in a cumulative statistic of 84.8% for the year to date.



% Non-major Planning Applications decided within target timescales by quarter

This year the council responded to 99 appeals against its planning decisions. In terms of major appeals (the measure for which Uttlesford is designated) performance has improved from 17% across 2018-2020, to 10.45% in 2022, and at time of writing to just 5.56% (% of lost appeals set against overall number of major applications). We have 6 major application appeals pending and it remains to be seen whether this figure will increase by year-end, depending on the outcomes of those appeals. In terms of non-major appeals, performance has improved from 2.91% lost in 2019/21 to just 1.22% as of March 2023.

The Planning Validations Team has validated 100% of planning applications within 5 working days again this quarter and have been consistently high-performing throughout the year.

I am pleased to report encouraging signs in our planning enforcement performance this year. So far this year the team opened 228 new enforcement cases and closed 255. The team's backlog has thus been demonstrably reduced. So far this year we have served six planning enforcement notices and two breach of condition notices (all within the past six months). All of these reflect a significant increase in activity on previous years.

As previously reported, the Planning Service submitted its draft Performance Improvement Action Plan to the Secretary of State and officers met with DLUHC Officials in December. DLUHC have asked to meet officers in April in order to finalise an agreed set of performance metrics which will be monitored to establish levels of improvement going forward. These metrics will include:

- Percentage of applications submitted to UDC as opposed to PINS (i.e. an indication of developer confidence in UDC).
- Measure of PPA / pre-apps numbers via UDC as opposed to PINS (indicates developer confidence in our pre-app service)
- Speed of major applications decisions (indicates general performance on major apps and is currently 85.7%)
- Percentage of UDC response to PINS on S62a applications within time (currently 100%)
- Planning Committee over-turns (indicates elected Member performance)
- Hours of member training programmed / undertaken
- Staff turnover and vacant posts
- Quantitative measures, such as feedback from PINS and service users is also likely to be relied on.

Building Control

Our Building Control Team has maintained a market share of 80% of all building control contracts in the district throughout the year. This is exceptionally high for a council building control function that operates in a competitive market where there are 28 'Approved Inspectors' also operating in the area (i.e. private companies licensed to provide Building Control services). This year, we have supported one career-grade officer, who is local to Uttlesford, in gaining a building control degree with a second due to graduate later this year. The team further remains on call 24 hours a day, 365 days a year in respect of urgent and dangerous structure callouts (e.g.. bridge strikes, building collapses etc).

General – Stansted Airport and Northside

Engagement and regular meetings have taken place with MAG in the past months regarding future development plans for Stansted Airport and their detailed plan is anticipated in the next few months. Likewise, engagement with the developers of Northside will be arranged on an on going basis in both the planning as well as the economic contexts. Members will be advised further regarding these matters.