

## Report of the Head of Planning and City Regeneration

Special Planning Committee – 22nd October 2021

### Planning Annual Performance Report(APR) - 2019-20 & 2020-21.

#### 1.0 Background

- 1.1 The Planning Annual Performance Report (APR) is seen by Welsh Government as an important mechanism for monitoring Local Planning Authority performance against a key set of National performance indicators and as a means of driving its agenda for modernising the planning system in Wales. It also represents an important tool for benchmarking the performance of Authorities across Wales and importantly must also be seen in the context of Welsh Government proposals to intervene where Local Planning Authorities exhibit consistent underperformance.
- 1.2 On 6<sup>th</sup> October 2020, I advised Planning Committee that due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and in recognition of the pressures on Local Planning Authorities, Welsh Government had confirmed that they did not require Annual Performance Reports (APRs) and Sustainable Development (SD) indicators to be submitted for 2019-2020 year. Instead, they expected the reports submitted in October 2021 to cover the 2 year period, April 2019 to March 2021. Welsh Government has now indicated that they do not require APRs to be submitted again this year. However, if Local Authorities wish to prepare them, then they can be submitted to Welsh Government as in previous years. In view of the significant impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on the Planning Service, I consider it appropriate to prepare an APR that covers the period April 2019 to March 2021 which will allow the Authority to assess performance in light of this impact.
- 1.3 As I have indicated above, the APR is seen as an important tool for benchmarking the performance of Authorities across Wales. However, comparison data is not current available. This report therefore will set out the departments performance for 2019-20 and 2020-21 and where relevant, provides comparison data to the department's performance for the last APR produced for 2018-19.

#### 2.0 Context

- 2.1 The Authority has undergone a significant change process in recent years, partly as a result of budgetary pressures, and partly in response to Welsh Government changes to the planning system as part of the "Positive Planning" agenda and the Planning (Wales) Act 2015.
- 2.2 The Council's Committee structures and scheme of delegation were amended in January 2015 to broadly align with Welsh Government recommendations and has proven to be a robust mechanism upon which to deliver sound and efficient decision making.
- 2.3 The Swansea Local Development Plan was adopted in February 2019 and now provides an up to-date policy framework, based upon placemaking principles,

upon which to base decision making and facilitate the delivery of the Council's corporate priorities and regeneration agenda.

- 2.4 The Section has also been restructured, agile working arrangements have been introduced and processes and procedures have been subject to continuous review, facilitating a paperless office environment and delivering efficiency savings.
- 2.5 The Coronavirus Pandemic has meant that since March 2020, officers have worked from home rather than in the office. The agile working arrangements that had been introduced previously meant that the department was already able to access its Planning IT systems from home. However, various Government restrictions introduced to prevent the spread of Coronavirus meant that the way in which the department worked had to change to take into account these restrictions and new processes had to be introduced to allow the Authority to continue to deliver the Development Management Service

### **3.0 Performance**

- 3.1 The positive changes introduced in recent years have significantly improved the Authority's performance in both qualitative and quantitative terms. When assessed against the last Planning Performance Framework, the Council represents one of the best performing Local Planning Authorities in Wales.
- 3.2 The percentage of all applications determined within required timescales has also shown a significant and consistent year on year improvement increasing from 71% in 2014-15 to 99% for the last three years. This is well above the Welsh average in 2018/19 when figures were last produced.
- 3.3 Significantly, for the delivery of the Council's regeneration agenda, the percentage of all major planning applications determined within required timescales has consistently increased year on year from 6% in 2014-15, which was the lowest performance in Wales, to 88% in 2018-19, 96% in 2019-20 and 86% in 2020-21. In 2018-19, the Welsh average was 68%.
- 3.4 The area which has been most affected by the Coronavirus pandemic has been enforcement. In 2019-20, 74% of all enforcement cases were investigated in 84 days compared to 46% in 2017-18. However, the impacts of the pandemic meant that this figure dropped to 51% in 2020-21.
- 3.5 The percentage of Member made decisions contrary to officer advice has also reduced from 24% in 2016-17 to 6% in 2019/20. This equates to just 3 applications out of a total of 50 decisions made by Planning Committee in 2019/20 and just 0.15% of all decisions made by the Authority. In 20-21, no decisions were made against officer advice. This performance is below the Welsh Government target of 5%. In 2018-19, the Welsh average was 9%. A summary of relevant appeals in 2018/19 relating to Member made decisions is provided at Annex A for Member consideration.
- 3.6 The overall quality of decision making when assessed against the percentage of appeals dismissed was 74% in 2019-20 and 64% in 2020-21. With the adoption of the Swansea Local Development Plan in February 2019 the Council now has a robust and up-to-date policy framework upon which to defend its decision making at appeal and deliver the Council's corporate priorities and

regeneration agenda. As detailed in the APR, most appeals were allowed on subjective grounds.

#### **4.0 Conclusion**

- 4.1 The APR provides a useful overview of the Council's performance over the last two financial years. Due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, comparison data to allow an assessment between local authorities has not been provided. However, the report demonstrates that despite the pandemic, and pressures caused by increased workload and staff vacancies, the service has continued to perform at a high level. Enforcement has been affected by the pandemic and there will be challenges for the service in tackling the backlog that has grown over the last year.
- 4.2 There are also significant challenges ahead in the face of continued budgetary pressures and acknowledged resilience issues and specialism gaps. At a time of transformational change for the City and its region it is inevitable that further difficult decisions will continue to be made over priorities and service levels in the future.

#### **Background papers:**

City & County of Swansea APR 2018-19:

[Agenda for Planning Committee on Tuesday, 1 October 2019, 2.00 pm - City and County of Swansea](#)

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