

STRATEGIC PLANNING COMMITTEE Monday, 10 October 2022

Report by Councillor David Ritchie	Nonitoring of
Cabinet Member with responsibility for Planning and Coastal	Coastal
Supporting Officer Ben Woolnough Planning Manager (Development Management, Major Sites and Infrastructure) 07833 406681 Ben.woolnough@eastsuffolk.gov.uk Katherine Scott Principal Planner (Technical Lead, Development Management) 07867 155568 Katherine.scott@eastsuffolk.gov.uk	

Is the report Open or Exempt?	OPEN
Category of Exempt	Not applicable
Information and reason why it	
is NOT in the public interest to	
disclose the exempt	
information.	
Wards Affected:	All Wards

Purpose and high-level overview

Purpose of Report:
This report provides an overview of the proposed plan of action for resolving issued highlighted within the Audit Report of the delivery of Planning Enforcement.
Options:
None.
Recommendation/s:
That the content of the report be noted.
Corporate Impact Assessment
Governance:
Not applicable.
ESC policies and strategies that directly apply to the proposal:
Not applicable.
Environmental:
Not applicable.
Equalities and Diversity:
Not applicable.
Financial:
Not applicable.
Human Resources:
Not applicable.
ICT:
Not applicable.
Legal:
Not applicable.
Risk:
Not applicable.
External Consultees: None

Strategic Plan Priorities

Selec	Select the priorities of the <u>Strategic Plan</u> which are supported by Primary Secondary			
-	proposal:	priority	priorities	
	Select only one primary and as many secondary as appropriate)			
T01	Growing our Economy			
P01	Build the right environment for East Suffolk	\boxtimes		
P02	Attract and stimulate inward investment			
P03	Maximise and grow the unique selling points of East Suffolk			
P04	Business partnerships			
P05	Support and deliver infrastructure		\boxtimes	
T02	Enabling our Communities			
P06	Community Partnerships			
P07	Taking positive action on what matters most		\boxtimes	
P08	Maximising health, well-being and safety in our District			
P09	Community Pride		\boxtimes	
T03	Maintaining Financial Sustainability			
P10	Organisational design and streamlining services			
P11	Making best use of and investing in our assets			
P12	Being commercially astute			
P13	Optimising our financial investments and grant opportunities			
P14	Review service delivery with partners			
T04	Delivering Digital Transformation			
P15	Digital by default		⊠	
P16	Lean and efficient streamlined services			
P17	Effective use of data		\boxtimes	
P18	Skills and training			
P19	District-wide digital infrastructure		\boxtimes	
T05	Caring for our Environment			
P20	Lead by example		⊠	
P21	Minimise waste, reuse materials, increase recycling			
P22	Renewable energy			
P23	Protection, education and influence			
XXX	Governance			
XXX	How ESC governs itself as an authority		☒	
How does this proposal support the priorities selected?				
To pr	ovide information on the performance of the enforcement sect	ion		

Background and Justification for Recommendation

1	Background facts
1.1	This report provides details on the role and activities of Planning Enforcement at East Suffolk Council, the current situations and actions that are proposed to improve the way in which the service functions.
1.2	The key points raised within this report have been identified over the past year following management changes in the Development Management, Major Sites and Infrastructure Team. This includes commencement of Katherine Scott as Principal Planner (Technical Lead) overseeing the enforcement service. The report has also been informed by comments raised by the Planning Committees over the past year and comments raised in the June 2012 Scrutiny Committee. A significant influence has been given to the findings of an Audit Report produced in 2018/19 with outstanding Planning Enforcement actions and a more recent Audit report focussing on areas of progress and intentions in that respect. Other matters that have been identified by members of the team that can be addressed concurrently are also outlined within this report, for example, improvements to the way in which the software is utilised.
1.3	This report sets out the current position, and then how we plan to address the current situation in the form of an annual Planning Enforcement Action Plan. This plan is based upon Audit Reports from earlier this year and 2018/19, and discussions at Scrutiny Committee.
1.4	The key outstanding findings of the Audit Report from 2018/19 are: Improvements to the use of software and monitoring, primarily the need to use the system software effectively to improve electronic and efficient working, and data quality concerns existed.

- 1.5 The findings of the Audit Report from earlier this year are: It remains the case that improvements to the use of software and monitoring, are required primarily the need to use the system software effectively to improve electronic and efficient working, and data quality concerns existed, with specific reference to: o the enforcement module of Uniform is currently underutilised, Monitoring against the Enforcement Performance standards is not in place and there is doubt over whether the data inputted is sufficient to be relied upon in quarterly reports to members without manual checks, which means the service is unable to measure its own success, The 'access reports' that pull data from the system do not currently pull data for the last day of the month, so require manual adjustments to be made to quarterly reporting to Strategic Planning Committee, Accidently created duplicate cases cannot be closed off as such so on the rare occasions these are logged, they cannot be easily identified and/or removed from overall case numbers.
- The minutes of the June 2022 Scrutiny Committee are included as Appendix E to this report.

uniform system do not align.

Lack of formal review/signing off process prior to closer of cases.
 Reasons for closure and reasons for decision options within the

2 **Current position** 2.1 In considering the role and activities of Planning Enforcement at East Suffolk Council, key consideration should be given to paragraph 59 of the NPPF which states: "Effective enforcement is important to maintain public confidence in the planning system. Enforcement action is discretionary, and local planning authorities should act proportionately in responding to suspected breaches of planning control. They should consider publishing a local enforcement plan to manage enforcement proactively, in a way that is appropriate to their area. This should set out how they will monitor the implementation of planning permissions, investigate alleged cases of unauthorised development and take action where appropriate." 2.2 An Action Plan monitoring table has been produced and is included as Appendix D to this report. It will be updated and presented to each Strategic Planning Committee until all actions have been concluded.

2.3 ACTION 1 : Caseloads and Resources

As reported in Appendix M to the Planning Performance Report to Strategic Planning Committee in June 2022, and in the quarterly Enforcement Performance Reports to each Strategic Planning Committee, East Suffolk Council continues to receive a significant number of reports of potential breaches of Planning Control. The number of cases/reports received each month is shown per month in Figure 1 below.

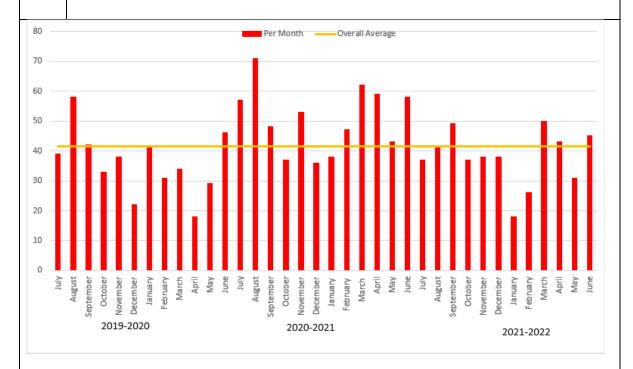


Figure 1: The number of cases reported to Planning Enforcement each month from July 2019 – June 2022.

- Whilst in some cases the matters on which enforcement reports are made, are not matters that there are any planning controls over , a number are not planning related, or turn out not to be breaches of planning control, they all have to be logged and investigated by the team, which in the majority of cases includes a site visit, after which an assessment has to be made as to whether there is a planning breach and if so if it is expedient to take formal action.
- 2.5 Each of these steps along with the associated process logging on every case, takes significant officer time. This means that often the process generally takes a few weeks to complete, even if there is no breach and the process runs smoothly, which in turn means that often even the simplest cases cannot closed within the same month that they are received, and therefore these potentially simpler cases accumulate along with those that are more complex requiring longer investigations, more communication with site owners and complainants etc and potentially leading to formal action, meaning that the number of cases open at any one time is significant greater than the number of cases reported in that particular month.

2.6 As the Enforcement Team currently comprises of just three full time members of staff, comprising a Senior Planning Enforcement Officer, one Assistant Planning Enforcement Officer for the north Area and one Assistant Planning Enforcement Officer for the South Area. This means that the majority of the current Planning Enforcement Caseload is split across just three officers. As of 1 September 2022, the two Assistant Planning Enforcement officers had 165 and 233 cases open each, with a further 10 cases yet to be logged. 2.7 By comparison, details of caseloads and officer numbers have been provided informally by colleagues at other Local Planning Authorities from across the country, who attended a course with our Assistant Enforcement Officers. Of the six authorities who have shared their figures, the majority of the full-time members of staff have caseloads ranging from 35-100 cases each. There is one authority who has reported, that their full-timer member of staff has 212 cases but that they are also in the process of reviewing their enforcement team and process. Although this is not an extensive survey of caseloads at other authorities, it provides a useful snapshot, and confirms what officers already suspected, that caseloads need to be significantly lower than they are currently in order to be more manageable. 2.8 The audit report highlighted a number of older cases which were allocated to officers outside the Enforcement Team (e.g. those within Development Management). Whilst the team are attempting to review these cases and close them where appropriate, their ability to undertake this task is limited by their workload capacity. 2.9 ACTION 2: Use of software and digitisation It is recognised by officers that the database software and the associated document management software are not being used to their full potential. For example, emails and letters to site owners/developers and complainants are often generated manually outside the system. 2.10 It is also recognised that there has been some inconsistency in the past in the way in which certain tasks have been logged within the database, for example notes on a visit to the site, were logged by some but not all officers within the database, with some making notes elsewhere. This has been resolved in terms of current and new cases as they are only allocated to officers within the enforcement team, and the members of that team have a consistent approach to such matters. 2.11 The current document management system which sits alongside the database is also not particularly user friendly, and it takes significant time for documents to be added to it and labelled appropriately. The enforcement officers have not had time to perform these tasks with their current caseloads, and the team has been without administrative support for many years. Therefore, the majority of documentation relating to current enforcement cases, and recently closed cases, is being held securely elsewhere, outside the database document management system.

2.12	Enforcement Notices are currently produced outside the uniform system, and therefore providing quarterly reports to members on the number of notices served is a manual process.
2.13	The priority levels for enforcement cases that can be selected within the uniform software do not currently align with those within the Enforcement Policy , which means data on cases of different priority levels cannot be pulled directly from the system.
2.14	Officers also acknowledge that there are a significant number of historic enforcement cases that remain open on the system. These cases require review, before it is decided how to proceed (i.e. whether further investigation is required and the following steps that might result or whether the case should be closed).
2.15	ACTION 3: Signing off Process The audit report raised concern that enforcement cases can be closed by individual case officers without formal record of independent review by an authorising officer. The three enforcement officers meet weekly to discuss live cases and another weekly meeting takes place with the Principal Planner (Technical Lead) and Development Management Officers of the 'Enforcement and Technical Team', during which cases are also discussed. Therefore, cases that the case officer is uncertain of in terms of either it being a breach of planning control, and/or if it is expedient to take action are discussed before being closed, and cases on which we are proceeding towards or through formal action are also discussed, but there are no written minutes of those meetings, and the cases are not currently formally signed off by an authorising officer on the database system through a formally adopted process.
2.16	ACTION 4: Reporting of updates on cases to members It is recognised that there are issues with the way in which the "East Suffolk Enforcement Action – Case Update" report to Planning Committees is set out, which results in the information on some cases stretching across several pages, and it is not always immediately clear what the current status and/or latest action on the case is.
2.17	ACTION 5: Questions from members on enforcement cases Officers have concerns with some of the questions asked during Planning Committee's on enforcement cases that are under investigation but have not reached a point whereby they would be included on the "East Suffolk Enforcement Action – Case Update" report to Planning Committees.
2.18	Whilst the members wish for an update on such cases recognised, the information provided in a public forum such as Planning Committee, has to be carefully considered in a sensitive manner. In some circumstances, particularly if a case has only recently been received/logged, contact with the site or property owner may not have been made and therefore they may not be aware that there is a potential issue, prior to it being raised in this public forum.

2.19	Discussing cases that are not in the Enforcement Report could also result in data protection breaches, as details can be revealed that should not be in the public domain, particularly when reference is made to named individuals and/or their addresses. Other potentially sensitive data can also be revealed which should not be discussed in a public forum, on cases at all stages of investigation.
2.20	It should also be recognised that if certain details are revealed about a case. it can potentially affect how any action can proceed, particularly if we reveal that formal action is about to take place or that certain legal advice on how to proceed has been received. Therefore, officers are limited in what information they can provide in such a forum.
2.21	As explained earlier in this report, the officers dealing with enforcement have a significant number of cases. Therefore, whilst there will be some cases they recall in great detail, given the volumes of cases, they cannot reasonably be expected to recall the precise details of every case currently assigned to them. This means that they may well not be able to answer unexpected questions on the cases not on the "East Suffolk Enforcement Action – Case Update" report to Planning Committees.

3	How to address current situation
3.1	Caseloads and Resources In order to address the issue of high caseloads and to provide and efficient and customer focused enforcement service, two additional posts are proposed to be created. The first would be an Enforcement Officer level position, and the second would be an administrative support position.
3.2	The additional Enforcement Officer level position would support the Senior Enforcement Officer and the wider team. A copy of the proposed structure chart is included as Appendix C.
3.3	The additional administrative support position will assist the Team in providing additional help by way of logging cases, data support and generally assisting the team. It is proposed that this is delivered as part of the Planning Support and will be provided as part of a wider range of small changes to that team to ensure that it service the planning service as a whole, not just Development Management and Building Control as it currently does.
3.4	This report here presents the initial business case for these two further roles, with the recruitment of an Enforcement Officer to be an immediate action and the support officer to be provided as soon as possible thereafter. It is recognised that the presenting of this recommendation for increased staffing resource cannot be solely agreed by Strategic Planning Committee, and is dependent upon agreement from elsewhere including in terms of financial agreement to fund the post. Therefore, whilst there is full intention to create and fill such a post, it must be

	recognised that there remains some uncertainty as to if and when this can be achieved.
3.5	Whilst increasing the number of staff will reduce the number of cases on hand with each officer (i.e. their individual caseloads), which should enable the workloads to be more manageable, it is important to recognise that the formal logging, investigation and communication processes will still have to be adhered to, even on cases that do not then result in formal enforcement action, and all of these processed take time. A number of actions proposed in this report will also add responsibilities and additional administrative work to current enforcement officers.
3.6	A further area of work where officers are keen to increase attention is on the monitoring of the implementation of development. This is in respect of how developments progress in accordance with approved plans and how conditions are complied with. It is not the role of the Local Planning Authority to closely monitor and undertake checks on development and the majority of development does get undertaken completely in accordance with approved plans and conditions. However, there are cases where the Council can take a more proactive stance in reviewing implemented and completed development, particularly major development.
3.7	This includes the implementation of landscaping and tree planting, where the Council controls the need to replace any planting which has failed in the first 5 years. With the last very dry summer and climate change there are risks that planting, particularly trees and hedges, can fail and we need to be ready to request their replacement. Furthermore, as part of developing skills of officers and having wider awareness of design quality, visiting developments which are underway and completed is incredibly valuable to development of planning and design skills and hold developers to greater account over design quality. This will need wider planning service involvement took take forward aspirations as it remains difficult to accommodate a proactive alongside the current reactive approach to this in terms of resources and demands of day-to-day decision making. But with the heightened importance of high-quality design and challenges of climate change, monitoring is an increasingly important part of development management.
3.8	For the reasons outlined in pargraphs 2.4 to 2.6 of this report, enforcement cases will still take time to deal with, and therefore even with additional resources, it will not be possible to close the majority of even the simplest cases within a period of less than 3-4 weeks (21-28 days). Therefore, it is also recommended that the timeframe bands used to monitor time taken to close enforcement cases, are adjusted to be a truer and fairer reflection of realistic potential timeframes for the process to be undertaken.

3.9 These bands are currently set in 9 day intervals (i.e. 1-10 days, 11-20 days, 21-30 days, 31-40 days and 40+ days), which means that often cases fall into the 31-40 days and 40+ days categories, because as explained above the process by its very nature takes at least a few weeks to be completed even on the most straightforward cases where there is no breach. This means that there is a lack of detail on the actual length of time that those taking the longest time actually take to close or resolve. Therefore, it is proposed to alter the time-taken monitoring bands to 19 day intervals of 1-20 days, 21-40 days, 41-60 days, 61-80 days, 81-100 days, 101-120days and 121 days +. 3.10 The monitoring bands for the closure of cases are not formally defined within the Local Planning Enforcement Policy, and therefore they can be adjusted without any further formal process. Use of software and digitisation 3.11 It is recommended that we seek to utilise the software to improve processes and save time where possible. For example, in order to reduce the need for officers to manually input certain information to letters and emails that are being sent out, the software can be set up with templates, that automatically pull through certain details such as the customers contact information and the enforcement case reference number and address. Whilst this may not save more than a few minutes each time a letter or email is created, cumulatively this could save the officer's significant time. 3.12 In time, it is also hoped that the system can be set up with templates for enforcement notices, stop notices etc. Although such documents will likely still require manual review and potential editing by the Enforcement Team and/or the Legal Services Team once generated from the system, if they can be created through the system and their service logged in a consistent manner within the database, it should also reduce the work required in terms of manual calculations to produce the quarterly updates on numbers of notices served etc. 3.13 The priority levels for enforcement cases need to be amended within the uniform system so that they align with those in the East Suffolk Local Planning Enforcement <u>Policy</u>, so that data on number of cases of each priority level and whether targets are being met etc can be pulled directly from the system, and in time lead into the PowerBi software. 3.14 The way in which 'events' such as site visit are now being logged within the database, should enable statistical reports to be set up to pull information from the system, as a means of monitoring officer workloads, time taken for a certain action to take place on each case etc, which in theory should be able to feed into the PowerBi software that is beginning to be utilised across East Suffolk Council. The intention to utilise this software to enable closer monitoring of general process and caseloads, with the aim of understanding where the potential pressure points are in our process, and overall workload numbers etc.

3.15 A new document management system is currently in the process of being set up and rolled out across the council. This is produced by the same company as the database system we already use for planning applications and enforcement cases, and therefore is designed to work with it in a more cohesive manner than the current document management system. The new software is also more user friendly in terms of the way files are labelled and organised. Therefore, the Enforcement Team aim to utilise this software once in place, however, this will be in part dependent upon having administrative support to assist them with logging new cases and adding documents to the document management system as and when they are received or generated. 3.16 Alongside this, there will also be a need to transfer documents, photographs, letters, emails etc on current live cases and previously closed cases into the new document management system, which will take significant time. This process maybe aided by administrative support, but given the volumes of data involved, addition support from the wider planning support team and/or elsewhere maybe required. 3.17 The review of the historic enforcement cases on the system will take time, and much of this process needs to be undertaken by officers with Planning Enforcement and/or Development Management experience. However, once the reviewing process has been undertaken there may be associated tasks that could be undertaken by administrative support officers. Therefore, it is hoped that with the additional resource of an additional Enforcement Officer and a specific Enforcement Administrative Support Officer, progress can be made on clearing down the backlog of historic cases. 3.18 Whilst it would be advantageous to commence the digital changes as soon as possible, the timing will be very dependent upon the recruitment of officers to fill the two new posts within the Planning Enforcement Team and also be dependent upon the ICT changes that are currently underway across the authority, and then the capacity of officers within the Enforcement Team and ICT to create and set up automated processes within the software and other things such as letter templates. 3.19 Signing off Process The lack of formal written audit trail of the review of cases by an officer other than the allocated case officer is recognised. It is therefore proposed that a formal signing off process will be put in place, so that cases are reviewed by an authorising officer (a senior or a principal) as part of all cases being closed. Whilst some cases have been reviewed and 'signed off' since 1 August 2022, which demonstrates that a formal review and signing off procedure can be undertaken through the uniform system, the process undertaken so far is reliant upon reviewing officers looking in the system for cases that have been 'closed' by cases officers. A more formal process needs to be created so that files automatically pass to a 'available tasks' list for reviewing officers. 3.20 Introducing this process will ensure that electronic case files pass from case officers to reviewing/signing off officers at the appropriate time, with no chance of

	them disappearing into the ether. It will also mean that those cases requiring review can be seen as items that need doing and thus stay on the radar of reviewing officers, which reduce the risk of them being overlooked due to other competing workload pressures.
3.21	The timing for this process to be formerly introduced will be dependent upon changes to the electronic system, so that trigger points are set up so at the required time, the electronic case files pass from the case officers workload list to the reviewing/signing off officer's 'available tasks' list.
3.22	However, in putting in place this process, it should be recognised that this means all such cases will need to be reviewed and signed off, primarily by the Senior Enforcement Officer and the Principal Planner (Technical Lead). This means the timing for closing cases through the review process will be dependent upon their availability. Alongside reviewing and signing off enforcement cases, they also have many other elements of their roles including their own caseloads, mentoring team members, the serving of notices by the Senior Enforcement Officer, and the review and signing off of planning related applications, team leader responsibilities and technical tasks by the Principal Planner (Technical Lead). Therefore, other elements of their role may have to take priority at certain times, in order to meet other targets and deadlines including government targets on the formal applications. In addition, there will be times when officers are unavailable due to annual leave. Therefore, there is likely to be a delay in some enforcement cases being reviewed, which in turn will likely affect the numbers of cases being closed within certain time frames, and in turn skew the statistics for the number of cases dealt with within certain timeframes.
3.23	The introduction of this reviewing and signing off process, is important in order to address the concerns raised in the Audit Report. However, in the view of officers, it should not be seen as the end of the improvements to the way in which officers utilise the system, and therefore in the longer term, the intention is to also look at means by which other trigger points can be set up and utilised, not only to enable certain tasks to automatically complete such as the transfer of case files between officers, but also as means of monitoring the enforcement process with reference to our Enforcement Policy such as the time taken for the first site visit to take place, Alongside this as mentioned elsewhere in this report we will also seek to set up means by which the system can be used to automatically complete certain content on letters, notices etc.
3.24	Reporting of updates on cases to members As outlined in the 'current position' section of this report, it is recognised that the existing "East Suffolk Enforcement Action – Case Update" report to Planning Committees is not set out in the most user-friendly manner. It is therefore recommended that the template used for this report is altered.

3.25	The new format in Appendix A includes a copy of a blank table which will be completed for each case and examples of the table completed for two existing cases to illustrate how it would appear. The contents of those tables are a copy, paste and reorganisation of the data published in a recent report to a Planning Committee, so the same level of information is still being provided.
3.26	This format is proposed with the aim of presenting the information in an easier to read format, making it clear at which stage a particular case has reached, whilst ensuring the level of detail provided to members is not diminished by this new approach.
3.27	Questions from members on enforcement cases As outlined in the 'current position' section of this report, there are significant concerns with questions being raised by members in the public forum of Planning Committees on cases that are yet to reach the "East Suffolk Enforcement Action – Case Update" report. These are matters that should be raised outside the public meeting.
3.28	However, it is recognised that members will wish to ask questions and receive updates on cases that are not on the "East Suffolk Enforcement Action – Case Update" report. As outlined in paragraph 3.20 of this report there are significant concerns with answering such queries during public meetings, including those related to data protection and potential implications for future legal action. Therefore, members should raise queries on such cases outside those meetings and it is proposed a new protocol for raising these queries is followed, which will comprise the steps detailed in Appendix B, which will be shared with all members following this Strategic Planning Committee Meeting.

4 Reason/s for recommendation

4.1 That the report concerning the overview of the proposed plan of action and recommendations for resolving issues highlighted within the Audit Report of the delivery of Planning Enforcement and key issues identified by officers within the team is noted, and support is provided to its implementation.

Appendices

Appendices:		
Appendix A	New Committee Report template style for the reporting of formal Enforcement Action on cases.	
Appendix B	Protocol for Members to raise queries on cases	
Appendix C	Proposed Team Structure	
Appendix D	Enforcement Action Plan Timeframes	

Appendix E	Minutes of Scrutiny Committee 16 June 2022

Background reference papers:

None