

Land Charges Service Update for the Chair of Place and Resources Scrutiny Committee

Chairman's announcement:

Over the last 12 months the Committee has received updates about Land Charges Service response times.

As a reminder, the Council is responsible for processing land charges search requests, which are commonly made as part of property purchases.

The government has a target of a maximum of 10 working days within which these searches should be returned to applicants.

I am pleased to inform you that for the first time since October 2020 searches are being returned to applicants within 10 working days. The average response time for October 2022 was 8 working days. 82% of searches were returned within target. This has taken a huge effort by the team, supported by colleagues particularly in planning and transformation.

To remind you of some context, I first reported to your Committee in September 2021. At that time a delay in response times had built up due to a combination of an unexpected and sustained surge in the housing market and staff vacancies, while the service was migrating to a new system. At the time of my report, vacancies had already been filled, additional staff had been employed and were being trained, and response times were published on the Council's website.

Your Committee agreed with proposed actions to reduce waiting times, and since my first report I have provided regular updates to your Committee on progress; including updates on response times, the completion of system migration, refinements to search processing and creation of a single email address for enquiries.

Shortly after my first report to your Committee in September 2021 response times hit their peak of 62 working days. However, since October 2021 response times have reduced as planned and are now at 8 working days.

The Committee may be interested to know that in each of the last 3 years we have received and processed at least double the number of searches per year than pre-Covid. We have not yet seen signs of search numbers dropping.

The team also continue to look for improvements to search processing. They work closely with the Planning Transformation Project, and in the coming months will be arranging for searches requests to be submitted and paid for online and to review, converge, and harmonise the legacy land charges registers.

I again apologise to those people whose searches were delayed. I want to thank the officers in the team and colleagues in other services for their work and support to improve response times and make improvements to the service and I hope that those buying and selling houses and the Committee are reassured by the progress that has been made.