

Place and Resources Scrutiny Committee

28 March 2024

Planning Convergence and Transformation Programme

For Review and Consultation

Portfolio Holder: Cllr D Walsh, Planning

Local Councillor(s): N/A

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Report Status: Public (the exemption paragraph is N/A)

Brief Summary:

This report sets out an overview of Planning Convergence and Transformation, a 5-year programme designed to help shape, and support, the restructure of planning following the transitional arrangements put in place as part of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). Key objectives that have driven the (ongoing) project include: creating a planning service that is fit for purpose; performing in accordance with statutory and legal requirements; providing a service that is customer-focused; and facilitating the delivery positive of outcomes – in other words, sustainable development.

Recommendation:

That Place and Resources Scrutiny Committee note the contents of this report and endorses the continued implementation of the transformation work, including a commitment to continuous learning and improvement.

Reason for Recommendation:

Planning Convergence and Transformation was envisaged as a five-year project, but in reality, a number of its strands are designed to continuously evolve beyond the formal life of the project. Working as a multi-disciplinary project team has been essential to its success and will continue to be required to maintain the momentum of the project.

2. Introduction and context for transformation

2.1 On 1 April 2019 the new unitary authority of Dorset Council assumed all statutory planning responsibilities under the provisions of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (and associated legislation for planning and other statutory functions within the service). The new authority replaced four district councils, one borough council and a county council, merging six sovereign authorities into one. Being a unitary authority, our planning portfolio is broad in scope, including the following duties:

- i) full statutory planning duties, including the preparation of development plans, determination of planning applications, minerals and waste planning, and enforcement;
- ii) building control, including applications for building regulations approval, plan inspections and dealing with dangerous structures;
- iii) maintaining the definitive map of rights of way, with responsibilities for modifications, diversions, common land and town and village greens;
- iv) acting as the charging and collecting authority for the Community Infrastructure Levy and planning obligations, with responsibility for allocating funds towards essential infrastructure and affordable housing – this involves working with partner delivery bodies such as town and parish councils, registered social housing providers and our own Council services (such as Highways and Education);
- v) a community planning role to support town and parish councils with neighbourhood plan preparation (part of the statutory development plan once made) and deal with assets of community value;
- vi) dealing with applications for listed building consent, advising on heritage assets (including listed buildings, scheduled monuments and conservation areas), and proactively responding to heritage at risk issues;
- vii) dealing with tree work applications for protected trees (those covered by individual or group Tree Preservation Orders and trees within conservation areas), as well as high hedges complaints;
- viii) providing specialist advice across a range of matters that relate to planning, including heritage, urban design, landscape, trees, environmental impact assessments and ecology.

- 2.2 Dorset Council covers a large geographical area with 375,000 residents. The combining of 6 former councils has created a much larger unitary council, recently listed as 7th out of over 300 authorities in England in terms of the number of planning applications being submitted and determined each year, placing it in the top 2% nationally. It also inherited 6 separate statutory legacy local plans covering different geographical areas, as well as three local plans for minerals and waste, jointly covering Dorset Council and BCP Council (two of which were formally adopted by the new authorities in 2019). In addition, each legacy authority had different software systems, processes and authority-specific decision and letter templates, as well as differing terms and conditions for employees.
- 2.3 Soon after the inauguration of Dorset Council, three key steps were taken to help create a fit-for-purpose planning authority. These were:
- a) Embarking on an immediate restructure of the service (implemented in April 2020) to move from the transitional arrangements in the aftermath of LGR, to one that was able to meet the new authority's guiding principles:
 - Employer of choice
 - Customer focused
 - Sustainable organisation
 - Effective and modern
 - b) Successfully securing transformation resource to help us deliver our ambitions to be a high-performing planning service;
 - c) Inviting the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) to conduct a peer review, in the midst of the restructure, so that PAS's recommendations could inform the wider restructure and transformation.
- 2.4 Soon after LGR, Dorset Council also made a commitment to prepare a new local plan for Dorset which would replace the myriad of legacy plans. It was therefore important to ensure the wider convergence and transformation programme facilitated its preparation. At the time of writing this report, the local plan's timelines are due to be considered by Cabinet at its meeting of 12 March which are proposed to be updated to align with the changes to the national planning system, thereby making sure our local plan is fully up to date when it is adopted.
- 2.5 The Change Management Case for restructuring the planning service (published in January 2020) set out the justification for change, including the changes required in Business and Technical Support, as this provided

core specialised support for planning (including building control). In summary, the restructure was necessary to do the following:

- i. organise teams and management structures that recognise the new geography of Dorset Council (with three planning committee areas) and reflect organisational design principles and new priorities for the Council, including preparation of a new local plan;
- ii. ensure there was sufficient staff resource and the right structure to deliver a good service and create the capacity to add value through a high-quality of service and scope for discretionary fee income generation;
- iii. in order to operate effectively, the planning service needed to move to a single software platform, which would take time and resource to procure, implement and embed;
- iv. stronger alignment of technical and administrative roles was essential in order to provide efficient, effective and front-loaded support from skilled officers trained in dealing with technical plans and documents, thereby maximising our ability to deliver a high-quality service and meet national statutory performance targets;
- v. creation of greater capacity for planning officers to focus on work commensurate with their professional qualifications and RTPI/professional accreditation, in the interests of delivering a good service and high-quality outcomes for Dorset;
- vi. to improve consistency and efficiency to reduce dependency on agency staff, increase the quality and timeliness of decision-making, and reduce risks of reputational damage caused by capacity issues;
- vii. to create greater clarity around roles and career development opportunities through the introduction of a single set of terms and conditions across the team. This was important for morale, fairness and recruitment and retention;
- viii. well-being of staff was seen as paramount, and the review aimed to achieve a structure that enables staff to operate effectively.

2.6 These objectives were in alignment with the recommendations of the PAS peer review. The Convergence and Transformation programme has

provided essential capacity needed to deliver, given the scale and ambition of the change.

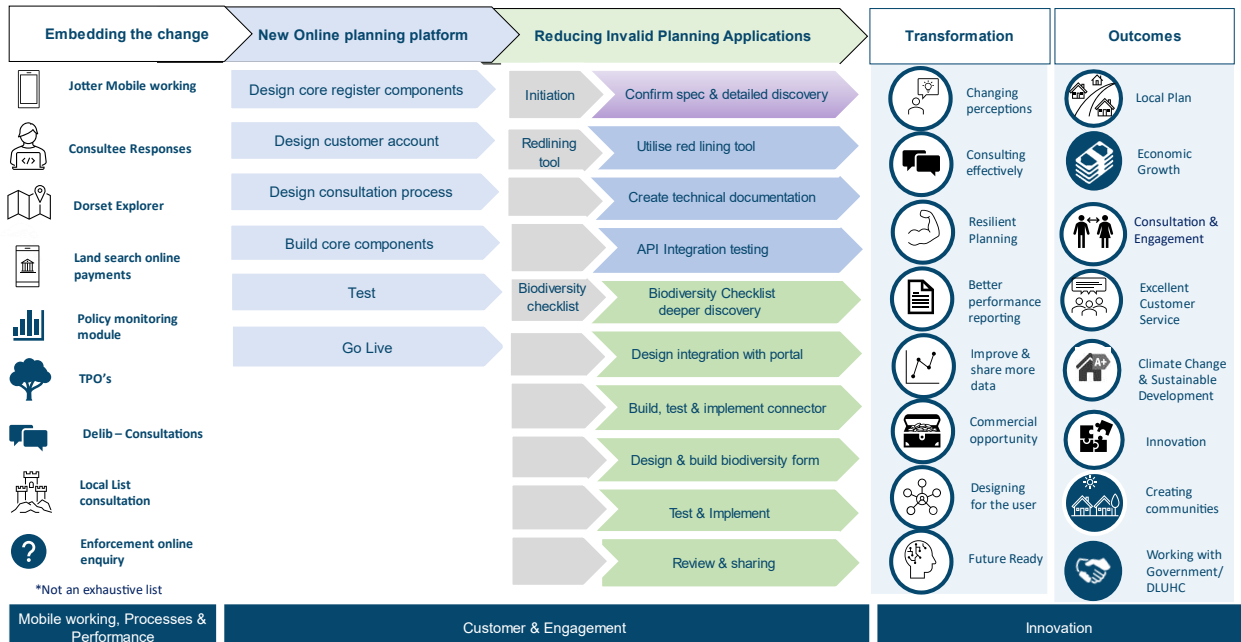
3. Convergence and Transformation – Progress to Date

3.1 The convergence and transformation programme has looked at systems, processes and culture and therefore was an integral part of the service restructure. It began with a three-month discovery phase (in September 2019), working with staff, members, town and parish councillors and key customers of the service. This included a request to PAS to conduct a peer review.

3.2 The project is supported by a multi-disciplinary team, and much of the success to date is attributable to integrating software suppliers, project management, and technical leads in the team. The planning portfolio holder and corporate director provide key leadership roles as part of the project team and steering group. The project team includes colleagues from planning, enforcement, building control, conservation and trees, spatial planning, highways and land charges teams, alongside colleagues from digital & change, ICT and GIS.

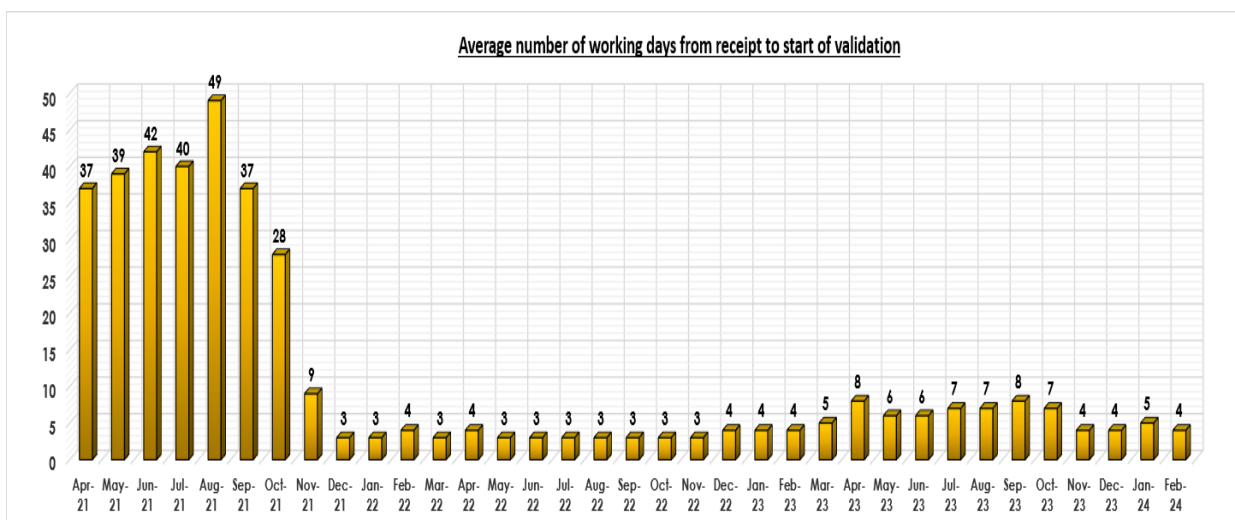
3.3 The transformation programme has two key phases: convergence (with embedding the change being part of this) and transformation. These elements are discussed below.

Planning Transformation – roadmap



3.4 **Phase 1: Convergence:** this involved legacy planning authorities, building control and affiliated systems (Land Charges and GIS) being converged onto a single software platform, with alignment of processes, templates, records and a public-facing planning register. It was vital that this was integrated with the restructure so that working practices, team structure, recruitment and working (one council) culture were aligned with the convergence. The convergence has included:

- bringing all software systems for planning, building control, land charges and GIS onto a single platform (DEF MasterGov);
- the transfer of over 4.3 million documents onto the new platform. This amounts to 47 years-worth of data and 285 people registered onto the new system. Convergence has been complex, requiring careful management of system down-time to avoid planning committee periods and other operational challenges;
- clearance of substantial casework backlogs caused by disruptive effects of LGR and loss of staff in the transitional period, the impact of the pandemic lockdown, and running of several different software platforms prior to convergence. The backlog has now been cleared, applications are validated within statutory guidelines, and planning performance has shown continuous improvement. This can be seen from the graph below – this shows the period from which the backlog for validation of planning applications reached a peak but was targeted and cleared.

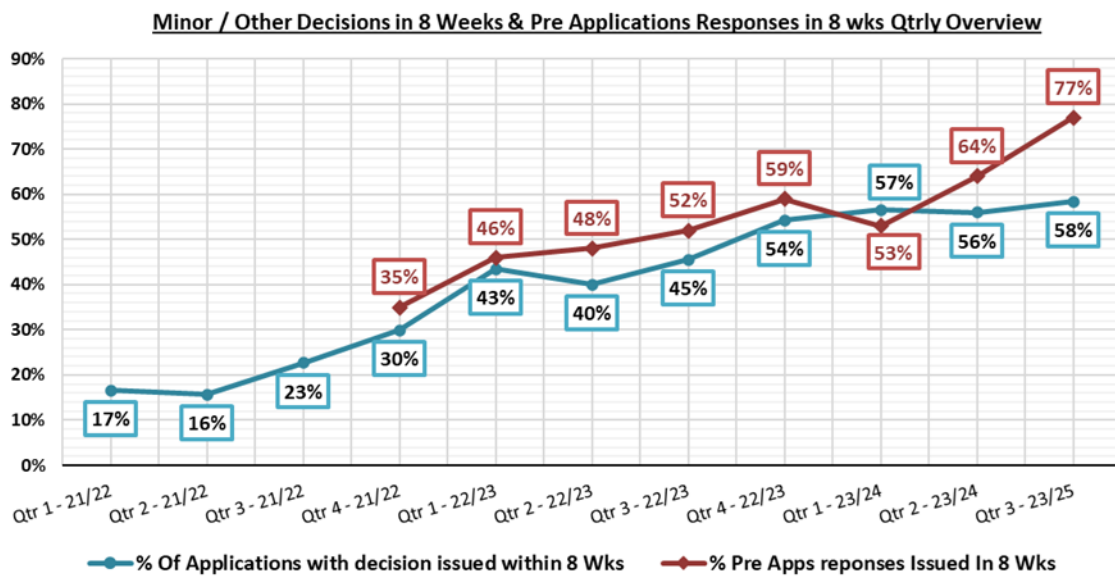


3.5 **Embedding the Change:** Following convergence, the aim has been to instil consistent and effective working practices and a culture of continuous improvement. This has involved the creation of a service-wide change group to build a one-team approach, provide a community of support (including digital champions) and prepare the way for sustainable change during and beyond the formal transformation project itself. This includes:

- i) system and process improvements: consolidation and improvement of around 200+ report and letter templates, with the introduction of automated workflows in MasterGov (improving consistency and efficiency), and crossover benefits for planning with the integration of GIS and automation of most land search questions;
- ii) more integrated working with other service providers (one council approach) to deliver the Council's aspirations and make effective use of the unitary authority's wealth of expertise – vital in preparing the evidence base for a new local plan and supporting decision-making;
- iii) mobile working is being rolled out for teams where this delivers efficiency benefits (e.g. building control), increasing productivity by enabling staff to work and check plans on site;
- iv) the service has promoted chargeable pre-application advice, together with planning performance agreements, as a means of improving the quality and timeliness of decision-making while securing discretionary income for value-added services;
- v) Planning has developed an internal consultation protocol to support other services in understanding what is expected when they are consulted about a planning application. This improves consistency and timeliness of responses;
- vi) to reduce time and resource pressures on consultees, there are regular casework surgeries for conservation, trees advice and legal, which helps speed up turnaround times and builds skill levels;
- vii) the service hosts regular engagement events with parish and town councils and planning agents to inform them and update about progress with new changes, such as biodiversity net gain and improvements to our planning register;
- viii) ongoing training of members of the planning committees is carried out to ensure decision making remains robust.

3.6 **Phase 2 - Transformation:** this is ongoing and involves redesigning our online planning register, working with the national Planning Portal to reduce the number of invalid planning applications we receive, and future transformation and place-shaping to build a planning system for the future to underpin the growth and economic regeneration of Dorset. Some of the key elements and benefits include the following:

- i) the development management service has continued its drive to efficient turnaround of planning applications and effective use of pre-application advice. The following graph illustrates the continued trend in improved performance (excluding agreed extensions of time to give a real-time account of performance):



- ii) our Building Control service has to compete with private inspectors and has a strong reputation for high quality service, securing approximately 70% market share in Dorset (this is exceptional when compared with Local Authority Building Control nationally);
- iii) with DLUHC PropTech funding, the Transformation project team has been working alongside other planning authorities on a Digital Planning Platform (Online Registers) project, targeted at public engagement and establishing best practice – one that achieves appropriate levels of engagement in a way that recognises the importance of targeted, efficient and cost-effective service delivery. As part of this work we have prototyped a way for customers to track planning applications and have a choice of how they receive updates;

- iv) work is continuing on designing a more intuitive online register to improve the way our customers can interact with the planning service (including planning/listed buildings applications, Building Control, Enforcement, and Trees). The new platform will allow for greater self-service with the documents and data we hold, and improve how the public, consultees, town and parish councils can review, monitor and comment on applications they are interested in. The platform will also streamline the process so that comments can be reviewed and processed much more efficiently by our technical support teams and planning officers. Much of the discovery phase has been completed, with input from users, and we are working with software providers to start to build, test and develop the new platform;
- v) we have been successful in receiving DLUHC funding as one of the pilot authorities for digitising the planning system. This has included an award of £95,000 to develop an improved online planning register, and a further award of £250,000 to reduce the rate of invalid planning applications received via the Planning Portal. This is complex, as some of the latest statutory requirements such as biodiversity net gain are proving technically challenging to manage through online platforms. This continues to be investigated, but is an example of the difficult but important purpose behind the work that is taking place;
- vi) the team is exploring the scope to make greater use of technology to assist in visualising development and place shaping tools;
- vii) tackling recruitment and retention is seen as an important element of transformation, and we are looking at learning and development, skills retention and promoting the planning service in terms of career opportunities. This has included use of apprenticeships, embracing new professions with transferrable skills into the service and making use of in-house expertise to provide training. This is supportive of the Council's aim to be an employer of choice.

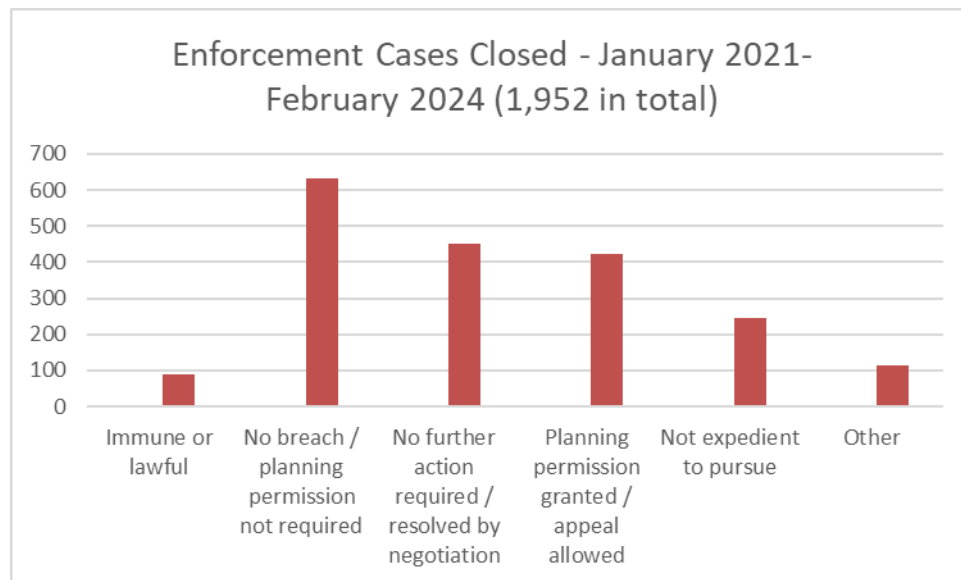
4. Planning Enforcement audit

- 4.1 Planning Enforcement deals with breaches of planning control, and it is an integral part of having an effective planning system. Much of the team's work involves investigating alleged breaches to determine whether or not they actually require planning permission in the first place and, if so, whether any harm is occurring that would require a remedy. Resolutions

can be many and varied, ranging from no further action (e.g. if there is no breach of planning control), seeking to regularise through a planning application, getting the owner/developer to rectify the breach, through to formal enforcement action. Workloads are unpredictable and some cases can be extremely resource-intensive.

4.2 Planning enforcement is part of the wider transformation programme and will benefit from the software, system and process changes that have been taking place. The programme has focused initially on planning applications due to the scale of convergence, and so rolling out the improvements to enforcement will be needed. This includes converging records, systems and templates and a key challenge has been to review historic legacy enforcement cases which have detracted officer time from the most pressing enforcement cases. The team is in the process of reviewing the enforcement policy and our online portal provides the most effective way for customers of the service to report alleged breaches of planning control.

4.3 Significant steps have been taken to clear backlogs of enforcement cases and to prioritise those cases where risks of harm are significant. The following graph shows that a high proportion of cases are resolved without the need for formal action.



4.4 However, enforcement is by its nature unpredictable in terms of work demands and pressures, while resolution can be complex and time-consuming. As a consequence, there can often be a mismatch between customer expectations and what is achievable, and this can adversely

affect perceptions about the effectiveness of the service. In the interests of helping us to manage this situation more effectively, we have invited the South West Audit team to conduct an audit on our enforcement service. The audit is reviewing the following:

- how the Planning Enforcement policy is followed and applied;
- the decision-making process for review of complaints/cases, including the amount of formal action taken as a result and efficiency of service response;
- how performance of the service is monitored and reported, including the review of working practices;
- the effectiveness of governance arrangements, such as oversight by senior managers, in ensuring consistency across the Enforcement service sub-teams;
- benchmarking with other local authorities.

4.5 Once complete, the audit will provide us with some valuable recommendations and guidance on priorities for improving the service further. This will help inform our review of the enforcement policy and build upon the transformation work that has been taking place.

5. **Financial Implications**

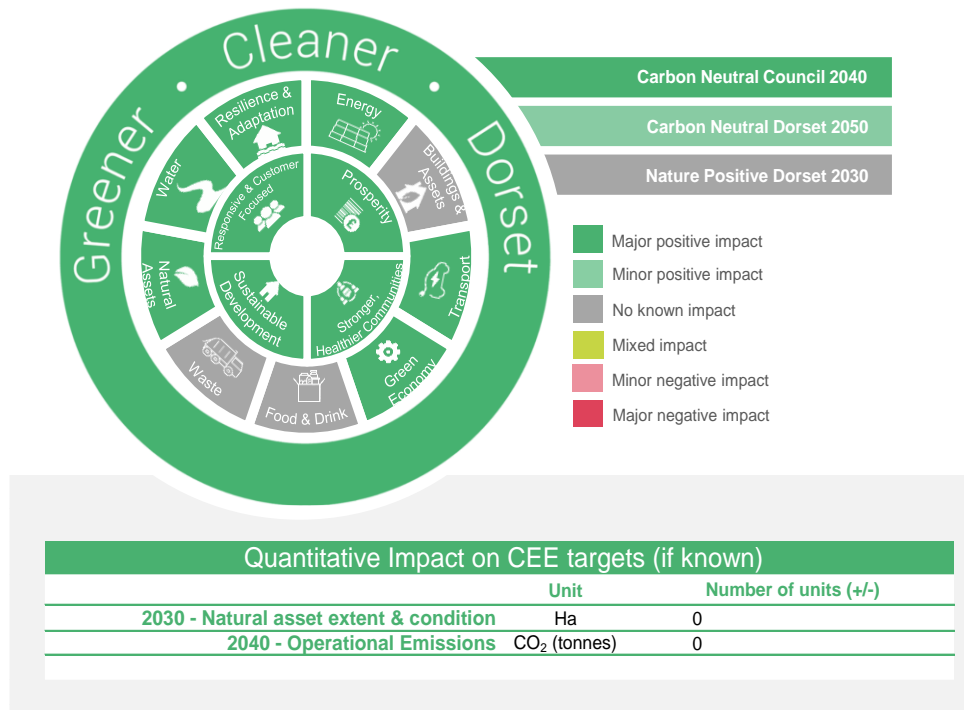
5.1 The Convergence and Transformation project was allocated funding of £1,122,682 (excluding additional DLUHC funding for pilot schemes Dorset Council is engaged in). This has been used for software amalgamation, migration and infrastructure costs associated with the setup of MasterGov (covering design, build, testing and go-live). Part of the project also recognised the importance of managing impact of disruption of the change and the need to clear backlogs in validation/minor planning casework as a key part of facilitating a transformation. Other elements include consultation and engagement and committed spend for future transformation, which will include planning register development, automated solutions and other elements to the project. Approximately £860,000 has been spent, with the remainder committed for ongoing transformation work. The project team includes a finance accountant who reports to the steering group. The project is forecast to be on-budget.

5.2 Phase 1 of the transformation project (convergence) brought about initial cashable savings of approximately £490,000 principally through system savings and consolidation onto a single platform. These were incorporated into the base budget, due to the impact of covid creating additional work

pressures (a 30% increase in planning applications). On top of this, an estimated £240,000 of non-cashable savings could be attributed to the programme, from improved productivity and greater service resilience, including a significant reduction in officer time involved in having to switch between different systems. This created greater capacity for discretionary income generation. In 2022/2023 the Local Planning Authority secured approximately £480,000 in pre-application services or planning performance agreements over and above statutory application fee income.

6. Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Implications

6.1 The planning system’s main purpose is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development. This means meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.



6.2 Sustainable development includes environmental, social and economic objectives and this starts with putting in place statutory plans and policies which address these objectives. These policies then steer the consideration of planning applications, while our Building Control service ensures new buildings meet the latest energy performance standards. The Planning Service has also taken steps to implement biodiversity net gain for all developments, achieve nutrient neutrality within affected

catchments, meet the requirements of Habitats Regulations Directive and Environmental Impact Assessment, and support the delivery of the Council's Climate and Ecological Emergency Strategy. The planning transformation is key to facilitating this.

7. Well-being and Health Implications

7.1 The planning restructure and transformation programme have had staff well-being at their core, as expressed in the Planning Service Plan. This is promoted through supportive working environments where systems are in place to support officers in their day-to-day tasks and create the necessary time for them to apply their valuable skills and expertise to securing better planning outcomes and offer value-added services which generate additional income.

7.2 An outcome-focused service, which the transformation programme supports, also creates more sustainable, healthier places where people have better access to supporting infrastructure, high quality and affordable homes, good schools and open spaces, and where homes are accessible to places of work, leisure, shopping, healthcare and education.

8. Other Implications

8.1 The transformation programme is an intrinsic part of creating an effective, resilient and outcome-focused planning authority. However, it is not complete, and work is ongoing to deliver some of the customer-facing aspects of the service, including more intuitive web-based services and improved systems, including the use of technology where it adds value to the services we provide. This will require continued officer time and support to ensure the work done to-date is able to provide the necessary platform for the undoubted benefits that the transformation will bring.

9. Risk Assessment

9.1 **HAVING CONSIDERED:** the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: LOW

Residual Risk: LOW

10. **Equalities Impact Assessment**

- 10.1 The Transformation programme is not considered to have an impact on any groups protected under the Equalities Act. All services within planning will be subject to any requirements as necessary under the Equalities Act, and an Equalities Impact Assessment has been prepared for the emerging Dorset Council Local Plan.

11. **Appendices**

- 11.1 None.

12. **Background Papers**

- 12.1 None

13. **Report Sign Off**

- 11.1 This report has been through the internal report clearance process and has been signed off by the Director for Legal and Democratic (Monitoring Officer), the Executive Director for Corporate Development (Section 151 Officer) and the appropriate Portfolio Holder` (s).