

S7. Local Government Benchmarking Framework Indicator: Cost per planning application - Update report

The committee considered a report by the Director of Development Services providing an update on the Local Government Benchmarking Framework (LGBF) indicator ECON2 on the cost per planning application which was requested by the Committee at its meeting on 5 April 2018.

The committee had called for a report on the LGBF indicator ECON2 – the cost of planning following its consideration of the LGBF suite of indicators in August 2017(ref S6). This had ranked Falkirk Council as 32 out of the 32 Scottish Local Authorities in regard to the cost of a planning application. The report on 5 April 2018 had set out:-

- details of the component costs which make up the ECON2 indicator;
- comparative information for all Scottish Local Authorities;
- contextual information and information to show recent costs and the trend;
- a detailed explanation of the planning process (including timescales) and its costs;
- an overview of Audit Scotland audit of major planning applications; and
- an overview of the national Planning Review and the recent Planning (Scotland) Bill.

The report stated that there would be a review of the cost of service provision in response to the LGBF indicator and as part of work by the Scottish Government in regard to the Planning Bill. It was recognised nationally that the methodology for calculating the cost of planning was inconsistent and unreliable. The committee had requested an update on the work undertaken in regard to the review. The report set out:-

- a summary of the findings of the cost of planning exercise carried out by the Heads of Planning Scotland and the Improvement Service;
- an update on the Council's most recent Planning Performance Framework; and
- a summary of work undertaken to identify potential service improvements to reduce the cost of the planning service and the intended actions.

Further work would be undertaken, as part of a Council of the Future project. This work would consider the planning process in regard to:-

- Local Development Plan
- strategy preparation
- technical and systems support
- development management

The latter would include a review of the Council's Scheme of Delegation with a view to reducing the costs relating to taking applications to the Planning Committee.

Members of the committee commended the work undertaken and the information provided. In regard to ECON2, members noted the improvement in the Council's ranking, to 16 out of 32, but suggested that should all Councils apply the same methodology in calculating the indicator then there was a probability that all would see an improvement in performance and as such the ranking may still not reflect the Council's position. Nonetheless the review had driven cost improvements and efficiencies in the Council's process and this was welcomed. The Head of Planning and Economic Development concurred, noting that the LGBF process was neither robust nor consistently applied. There had been improvements identified in the Council's processes which had resulted in efficiencies in costs and improvements in service and the Council of the Future project would progress these further. It was questionable whether other Local Authorities had reviewed their processes as vigorously as Falkirk Council had. The Development Manager concurred. He gave examples of various workstreams which would identify efficiencies in the process. These included a review of the process leading to consideration by the Planning Committee. The cost to the Service of taking a report to the Planning Committee was £2,000 and it was anticipated that this could be reduced. Additionally the review would consider the provision of a planning service. This was a service which applicants and potential applicants welcomed and which was well used, but which was expensive and currently provided free of charge to the customer.

The committee discussed the report. Members highlighted the need to share best practice with other Planning Authorities. Mr Dryden explained the process of taking a planning application to the Planning Committee, detailing the work required to assess an application and to prepare a report for the committee the work could be complex and required input from other services such as Governance. The fee for an application was £250 - £400. There was therefore no cost recovery if an application goes to Committee and the cost is borne by the Authority. In response to a question Mr Dryden confirmed that the applicant's fee is set nationally. He also confirmed that there was scope to introduce a fee for the cost of the planning service.

In regard to the cost of preparing committee reports Mr Dryden, following questions, explained the process – from submission of an application to deliberation by the Planning Committee. He suggested that a review of the Scheme of Delegation may result in fewer application types being considered by Committee. Members of the committee expressed concern that a review could diminish the role of the elected member in the process. Mr Dryden stressed that this was not the intention. Some types of applications did not require Committee approval in other Authorities and the aim of the review was to look at all options. Its aim was to look at what should be considered by the Planning Committee and what could be delegated to officers to determine.

The Head of Planning and Economic Development supported the proposed review recognising that members played an important role in the planning process. There was a drive nationally, he explained, to improve and streamline the process for the applicant, by for example, moving the process on-line where possible. In regard to technology it was suggested by members, that the need for site visits could be reduced if the Planning

Committee was better able to view sites at the Committee meeting and suggested using Google maps and images taken by drones as possible solutions. The Democratic Services Manager agreed that these could be looked at. There had been a reduction in the number of additional meetings on site. This was due to work by Governance and the Committee to better understand the role of site visits. In conclusion Mr Duff stated that further work would be taken forward by the Council of the Future project. He also stated that it was likely that the introduction of the Planning Bill could have a major impact on the workload of the Planning service.

Decision

The committee noted:-

- (1) the feedback from Scottish Government on the Council's Planning Performance Framework submission 2017-18;**
- (2) the results of the cost of the planning exercise conducted by Heads of Planning Scotland and the Improvement Service, and**
- (3) the work undertaken to identify potential service improvements to reduce the cost of the planning service and the intended actions for the service.**