



Doncaster  
Council



# Annual planning performance report 2020-2021

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# Introduction

I am pleased to introduce the sixth Annual Performance Report for Doncaster Councils Planning Service.

Doncaster – a geographical area of 219 square miles and a population of over 300,000. UK's best connected location with excellent road, air, rail and sea infrastructure. A growing economy with strong growth in Rail, Engineering, Tourism and Logistics.

It's location and connectivity makes Doncaster a great place to live/learn and work

Doncaster Growing Together (DGT) is our current borough strategy. Team Doncaster has started to develop a new borough strategy due to be completed later in 2021 and will replace the DGT plan, building upon DGT's achievements, including partnership working that has been essential in responding to Covid. For more information <https://www.teamdoncaster.org.uk/>

As a Planning Service we play an essential part in delivering Directorate priorities achieving the Councils ambitions, some of these priorities for 2020/21 were:

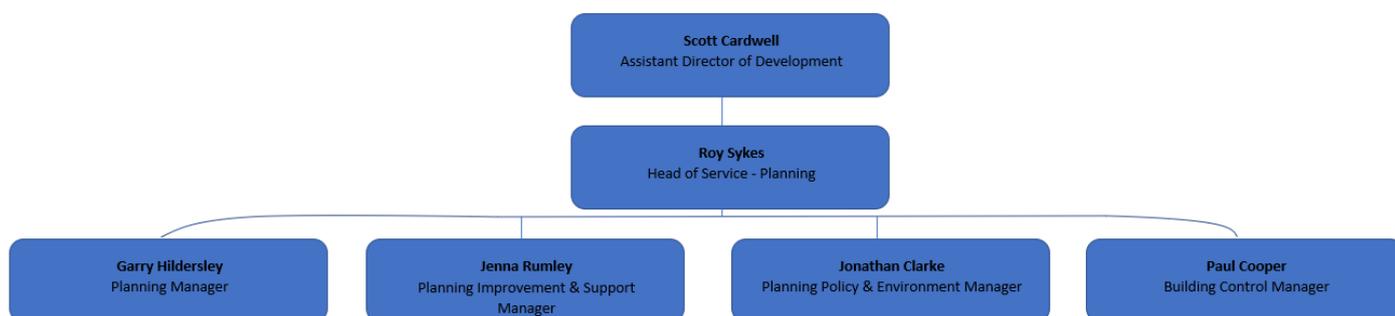
- ✓ Enable people and businesses to enjoy improved prosperity by participating in a growing and productive economy.
- ✓ Embed sustainability into all that we do for a cleaner and greener borough and in doing so responding positively to the Council's Climate Emergency
- ✓ The Local Plan is developed to facilitate Doncaster's economic, housing and population growth in a sustainable way.
- ✓ Create vibrant town centre(s) that people want to visit, work and live in.

## Planning Services – Setting within the wider organisation

The statutory planning function in Doncaster sits within the Directorate of Economy & Environment. The Planning Service is one of four business units that sits under the Assistant Director of Development, these being; Major Projects and Investment, Business Doncaster and Property Services.



The Planning service consists of 4 teams, namely, Development Management, Technical Support & Improvement, Planning Policy & Environment and Building Control.



All teams play a key part in delivering many Borough wide and corporate objectives: Helping to create a strong local economy; healthy, safe and vibrant communities; Ensuring the quality of Doncaster’s built and natural environment is enhanced and protected; the number and quality of homes in Doncaster meets housing needs. Also delivering a modern, efficient and flexible workforce providing modern business and customer interactions.

# How are we performing?

This past year has been unprecedented times for all. At the start of the pandemic the planning service initiated an ongoing communications commitment to our regular agents, initially via email, then via website [updates](#). The news bulletins highlighted how our service areas were responding to the ever-changing climate and what our customers could do to assist us in keeping applications and our processes moving forward. Alongside this Government introduced a raft of emergency legislation, further relaxations were made to permitted development as well as the announcement of Government's white paper and proposed changes to the planning system.

Despite all of this, all staff have continued to deliver the best possible service to all of our customers whilst grappling with the challenges 2020 has brought.

The applications and enquiries certainly didn't quieten down, seeing an overall increase of 14% on applications and enquiries compared to 2019/20 and with householder enquiries increasing by 32% for the same period.

Whilst meeting targets has been challenging, the future of Doncaster is positive. The town has undergone a period of great transformation with regeneration projects being delivered and significant growth in the housing sector. Officers are committed to continuing this journey and will endeavour to provide an efficient and effective service.

## Planning application and decision statistics

We need to report to Central Government on a quarterly basis the number of planning applications made and permissions decided.

Applications are categorised in to Major, Minor and All Other Developments.

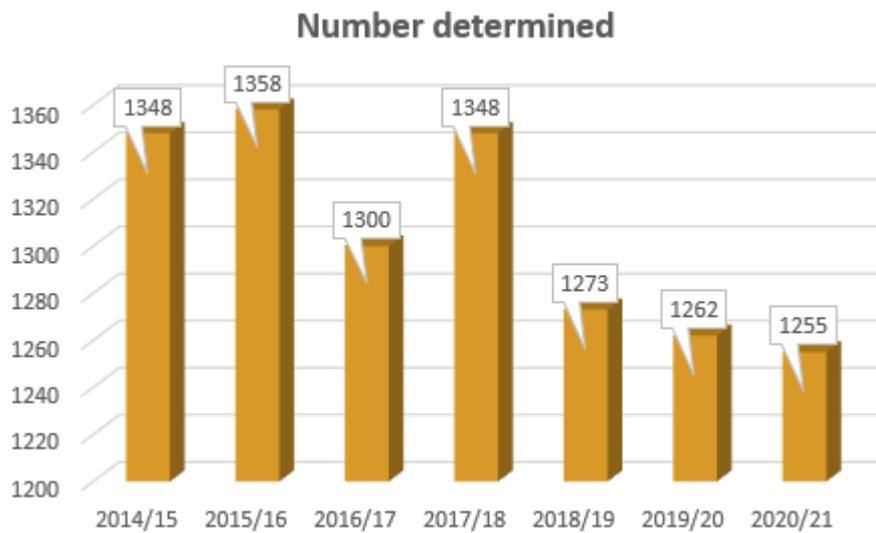
Once a planning application has been validated, the local planning authority should make a decision on the proposal as quickly as possible, and in any event within the statutory time limit unless a longer period is agreed in writing with the applicant.

The table below shows how we did in 2020-21.

	Major	Minor	Other
No. of decisions issued	54	387	814
No. issued within target or agreed extension	49	342	760
<b>Government target</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>70%</b>	<b>70%</b>
<b>Percentage issued within target</b>	<b>90.74%</b>	<b>88.37%</b>	<b>93.37%</b>
<b>Percentage change compared to 2019-20</b>	<b>-4.97%</b>	<b>-4.43%</b>	<b>-1.80%</b>

*The statutory time limits are usually 13 weeks for applications for major development and 8 weeks for all other types of development (unless an application is subject to an Environmental Impact Assessment, in which case a 16 week limit applies).*

## How many decisions have we determined in previous years?



For more information on the performance of local planning authorities visit:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/planning-applications-statistics>

# What are the statistics for 2020/21?

Adhering to government targets is important but we need to understand all aspects of our work that contribute to delivering our service.

The following statistics derive from our performance framework.

The information from the framework enables us to understand our work by: learning from the statistics, providing us with a real rounded performance story, knitting together useful pieces of information and challenging ourselves in how we deliver our service.

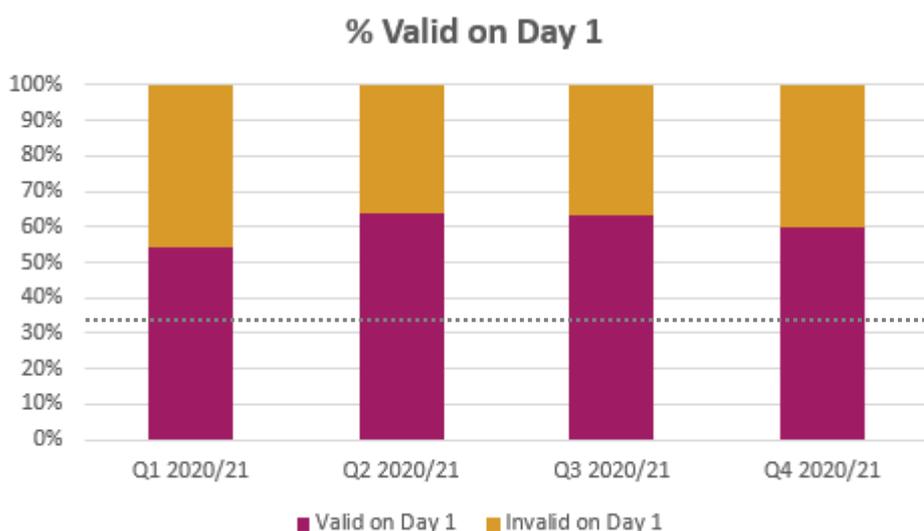
The framework is an ongoing statistical and feedback process, providing a continual assessment and improvement tool which aids our business planning process.

## Key statistics for Doncaster in 2020-21

### How much work is valid on Day One?

The graph below shows the proportion of planning applications that are valid on receipt and could be worked on straight away.

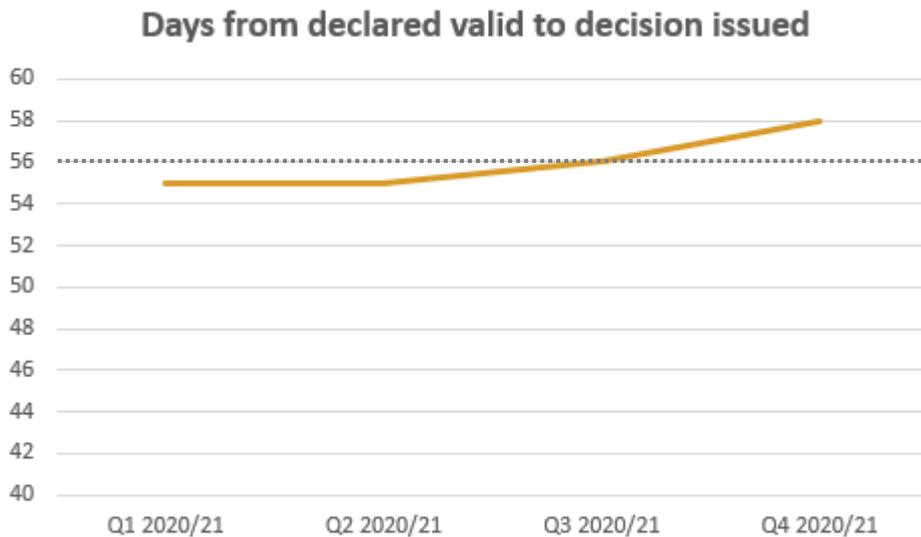
Invalid applications cause unnecessary delay to the applicant and to the Local Planning Authority. This is avoidable time and cost associated with moving the application forward.



*Based on Planning Advisory Service benchmarking statistics the average % of planning applications valid on day 1 is 34%*

## Days from declared valid to decision issued

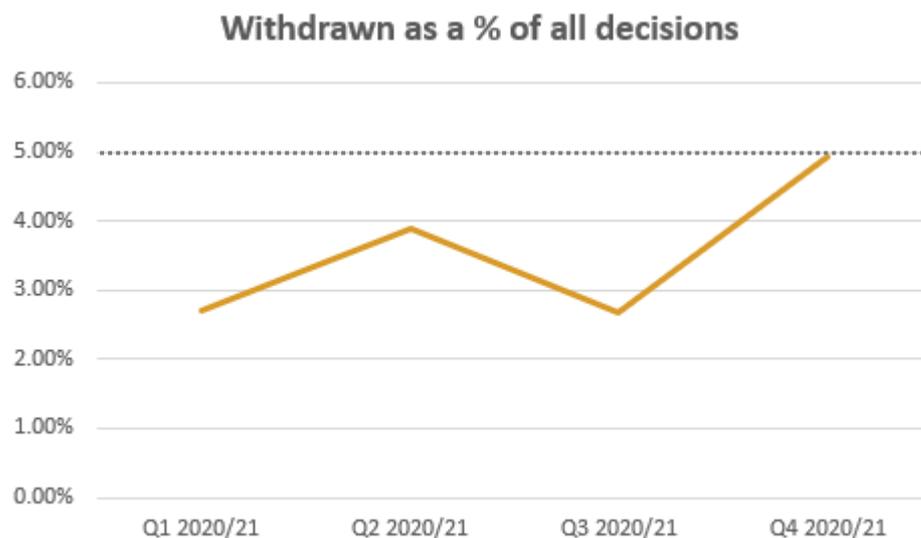
The chart below shows the average number of days between all applications being declared valid and a decision notice being issued.



*The average days between valid and decision has remained within or below 56 days for the first 3 quarters within 2020/21 with a slight increase in quarter 4. Where applications are more complex or require further negotiations the effective use of extension times is used.*

## Withdrawal rates

The graph below indicates withdrawals as a percentage of all decisions. Rates of withdrawal are a 'waste' indicator, and where possible, should be reduced to near zero.

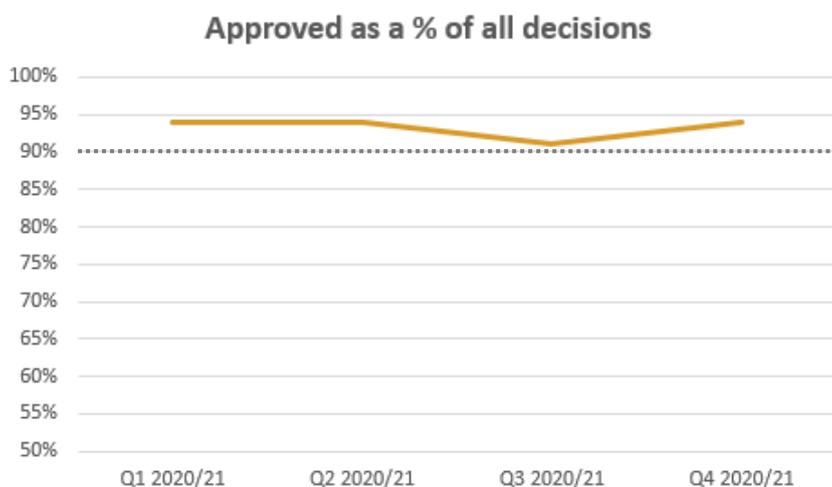


*Based on Planning Advisory Service benchmarking statistics, the average % of planning applications withdrawn is 5%*

*In Quarter 4 we did see an increase of withdrawals, following assessment of these many were withdrawn before the determination process with the development proposals revolving around self-employment/business. This echoes the current uncertain times the past year has brought.*

## Approval and refusal rates

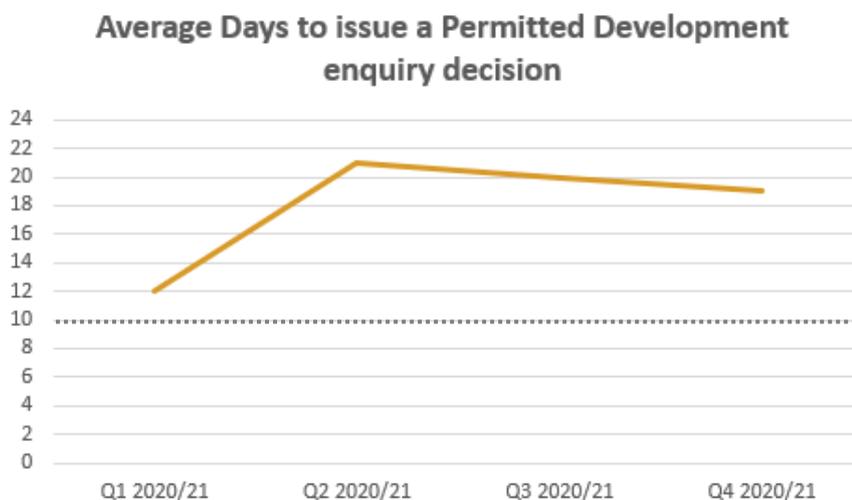
How often are we saying 'yes'?



*Based on Planning Advisory Service benchmarking statistics, the average % of planning applications approved is 90%*

## How quickly do we respond to permitted development enquiries?

We offer a permitted development enquiry service where we provide our customers with a professional opinion as to whether their proposal requires planning permission or not. We aim to respond to all permitted development enquiries within 10 working days.



*2020/21 has seen permitted development enquiries rocket. The main source of enquiries relate to extensions and alterations to domestic properties as a result of the need to increase living space to accommodate home working, in addition to this people have directed their focus on to home improvements whilst we've been spending more time in our homes.*

*It's been a huge challenge for us to maintain our response turnaround period for these additional enquiries balancing this with a 32% increase of householder planning applications.*

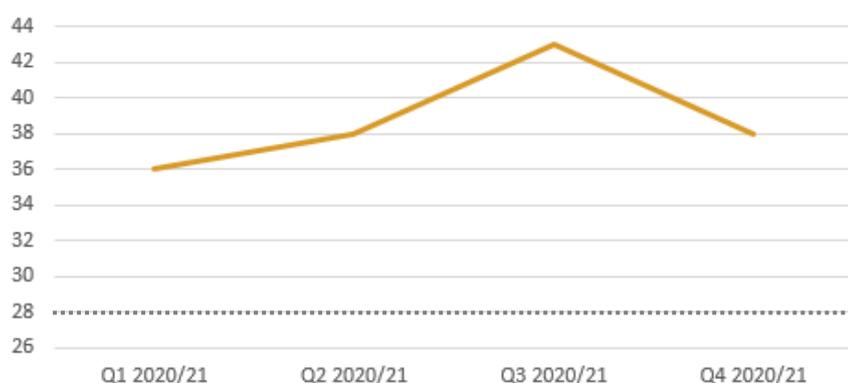
*The management team are aware of the challenges we're faced when responding to these enquiries, it's not just Doncaster, all Authorities within the City Region are in the same situation and it's something we're working together on in regards to how we handle these enquiries moving forward.*

## How quickly are we responding to pre-application enquiries?

We offer a pre-application enquiry service to our customers. We check whether permission is required and if it is, we ensure the customer is on the right lines before applying. By doing this the customer can save time and money and improve the chances of having their proposal approved.

We aim to respond to pre-application enquiries within 28 days although due to the complexity of some applications and the requirement to conduct consultation the process can take longer.

**Average days to issue a pre-application enquiry decision**



*Median is the middle value. The advantage of using such value is that it is not skewed so much by a small proportion of extremely large or small figures, giving a better idea of a "typical" value.*

*Due to the unprecedented situation we've been working within and the increase of planning applications throughout 2020/21 it has been a considerable challenge to respond to our discretionary services within the 28 day timescale.*

*Many of our major pre-applications engage within a free 30 minute consultation which is not recorded and counted within these statistics.*

## How many planning applications are engaging in pre-application advice?

Pre-application is a valuable part of the planning process. Preparing to carry out a development can be expensive. To help minimise the cost of this process we provide a pre-application service. The aim is that engaging in this service will save the developer time and money and a quicker decision once the application is submitted.

Seeking our advice, and following it, does not guarantee that planning permission will be granted. Sometimes other factors, particularly concerning the impact on neighbouring properties, can result in additional issues. However, it will mean that the developer has the best possible opportunity to negotiate a positive outcome.

	% of applications engaging in pre-app	Of those, number resulting in an approved planning application
Q1 2020/21	8%	90%
Q2 2020/21	7%	82%
Q3 2020/21	6%	75%
Q4 2020/21	10%	84%

# What our customers are saying?

Feedback is at the heart of our framework. Alongside the performance information the Council take into consideration survey information provided by people that use the planning process allowing us to build a more rounded picture of performance and quality.

Surveys have been sent to Applicants, Agents and Neighbours (people who have commented on a planning application). The surveys are electronic, are application specific and are about the customers experience on that particular application, not a general satisfaction survey. The questions on the survey differ dependent on the category of customer, providing the Council with vital information to aid improving the service.

# What you told us!

# 343

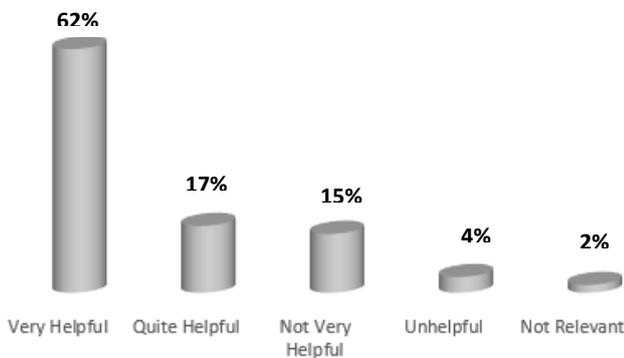
A selection of responses received from our customers.

Customers took part in the survey, which is a response rate of:

# 13%

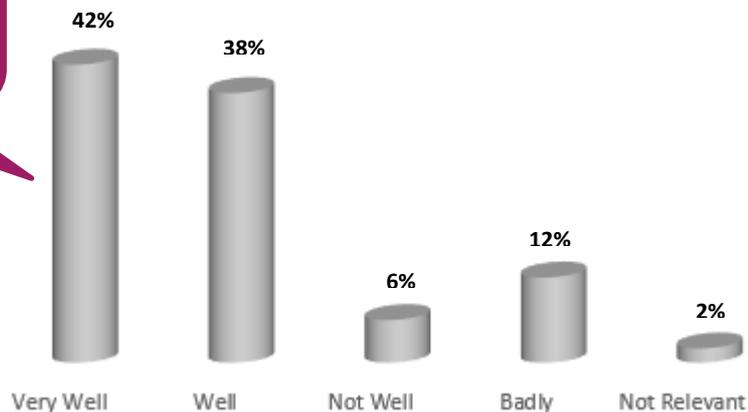
## What our Planning Agents said....

How helpful were the Council?



*"Decision notice was done in an acceptable timeframe"*

How well did the Council manage the time taken to make a decision?



*"Given the circumstances and pandemic. I feel they did the very best and mainly kept us informed and answered the phone almost every time"*

# 90% of agents felt the Council explained its decision clearly

## **We asked the Planning Agents how we can improve our service.**

***“I do not believe that Doncaster could improve their planning service and in fact could provide best practice to other Authorities. All officers I deal with are pragmatic, approachable and extremely helpful. The policies and high design they strive for are clearly set out so we know what we need to aim for from the start and a consistent approach is always taken.”***



***“The service we received was first rate and couldn’t be bettered. Thank you”***

***“Irrespective of Covid the planning team have to be better resourced and better supported in flexible/remote working”***

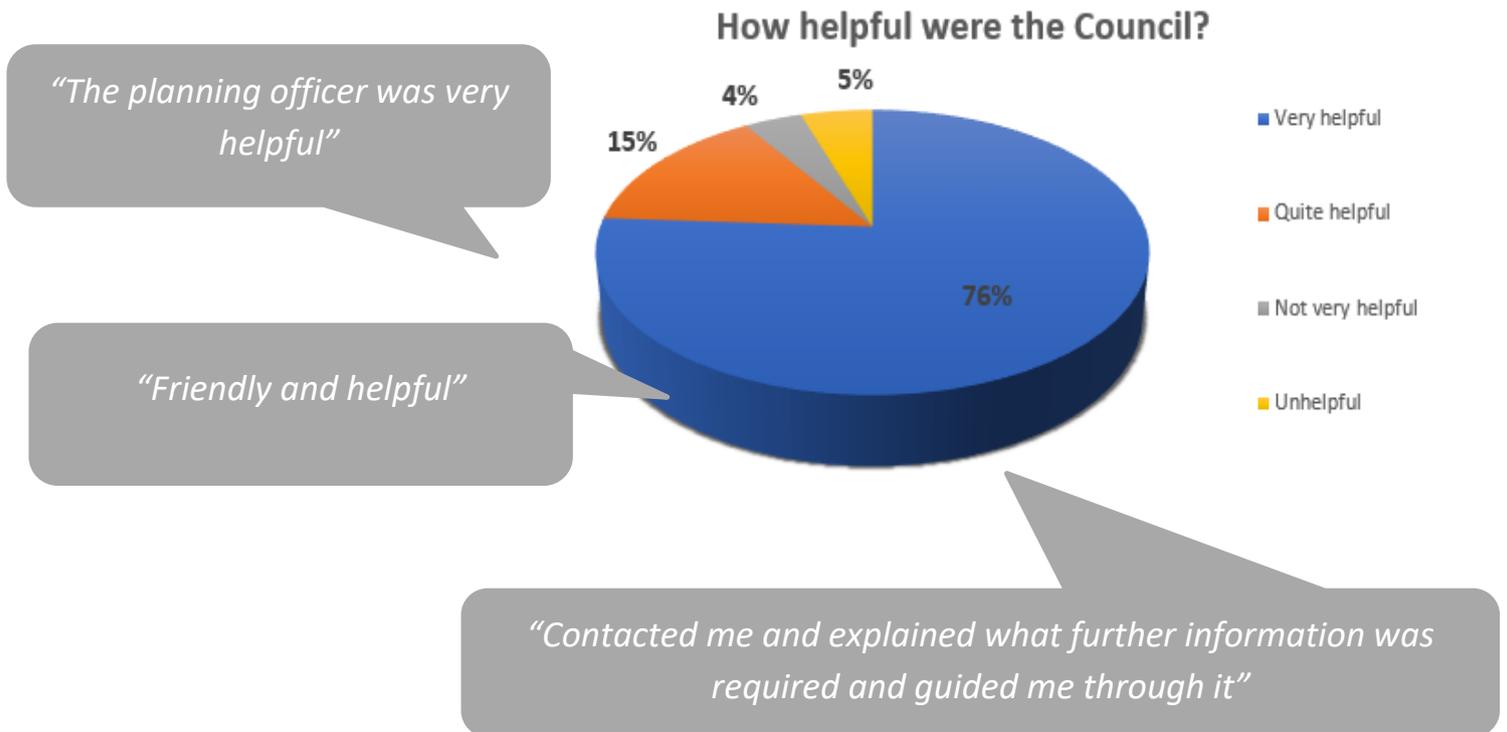
***“Compared with other Local Authorities right now Doncaster is doing very well. I really hope you can keep up the good work and the timescales. Many thanks”***

***“Not happy that the Councils will not now enter into any discussions prior to a submission and a request that pre-app services and fees are submitted.”***

***“Regular update and responding to emails would be helpful. We all know LPA Officers are busy, but what they don’t appreciate are the impacts that delays to commercial decisions and the funding of projects.”***

***“We work with DMBC Planning Dept regularly and rarely have any issues. We feel that the basis to a good application process is good communication made in a timely fashion. Sometimes if there is nothing to report, a short line stating that the planner is on schedule to meet the decision date and has all the necessary information required, that there are no objections etc would be nice to be able to send on to the applicant.”***

## What our Planning Applicants said....



**80%** of applicants felt the Council managed the time taken to make a decision 'Very Well' or 'Well'

**78%** of applicants felt the Council explained the decision very clearly

## **We asked the Planning Applicants how we can improve our service.**

***“....A straightforward process in my case, efficiently handled, thank you”***



***“I found the Planning Portal unduly complex and clearly designed for planning departments rather than the public who are required to use it”***

***“Brilliant, kept us informed on all stages of the process and amendments required were clear including any supporting documentation. The application was completed during the Covid pandemic which I understand made the process more difficult. I’m really happy with the support and service I received”***

***“Telephoning can be problematic but once through to the correct department and email contact established it was fine – but not everyone has access to ‘new technology’”***

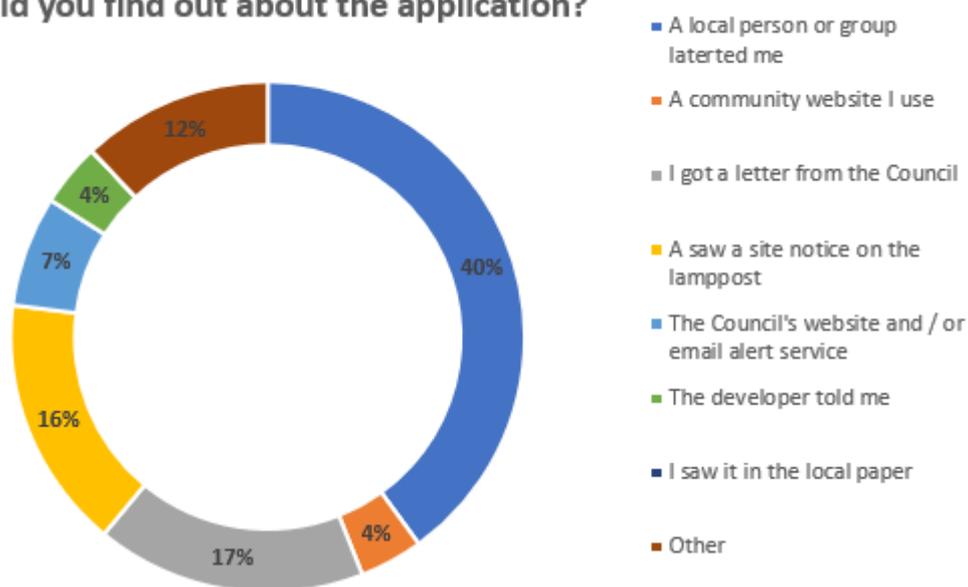
***“Fantastic, always replied to my emails....made the process much easier and a clear path to the end goal...”***

## The views of Neighbours (people commenting on a planning application)

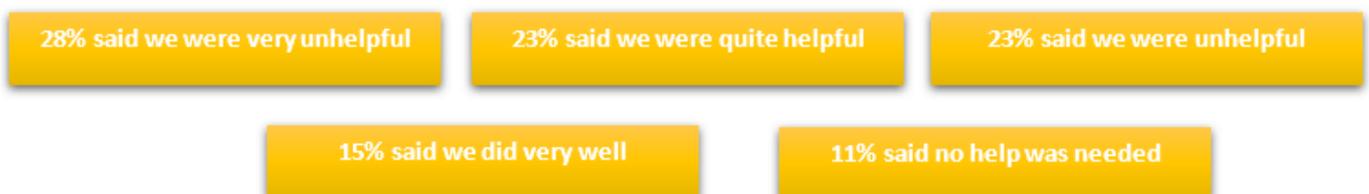
It is important for the Council to understand how people affected by a planning application feel. Asking the question of whether they felt they were engaged in the process and how they found out about Planning Applications.

Planning is a very emotive subject and community engagement plays a key part. In regard to feedback the neighbour survey especially picks up on the very strong feelings of the communities with over 90% of the responses being made by members of the public who objected to an approved application. In addition to this, a couple of very controversial applications can make a big difference to the overall feedback received.

How did you find out about the application?



How we assess planning applications can sometimes be difficult to comprehend. How well did we help you understand the planning process and engage with it?



**36%** of neighbours felt we got the balance right in making a decision quickly but also listening to people's views. **64%** state there is room for improvement.

**50%** of neighbours said the documents published on our website helped them to understand the proposal

**We asked the people who commented on planning applications how we can improve our service.**

***“Publish a list of suffixes used with planning application reference numbers e.g. OUTM – Outline Major”***



***“There should be more communication with anyone directly involved.....”***

***“Need better consultation with the community”***

***“Thank you for a job well done”***

***“Adverts in a local newspaper is an archaic way to notify the public of planning”***

## Corporate complaint process

Planning is a sensitive subject, we work extremely hard to provide our customers with the services they need along with the customer service they expect. As part of this process, we encourage feedback from our customers when they feel we have done something wrong.

In previous years we made changes to how we monitored our corporate complaints to enable us to keep track of progress and lessons learnt.

We use this valuable data as a learning opportunity allowing us to scrutinise the services we provide to make our services better in the future.

There are three stages to the Council's Complaints Procedure:

### Stage 1 – Local Resolution

### Stage 2 – Complaint Investigation

If the customer believes that their complaint has not been addressed in full they can be asked for it to be looked at again

### Stage 3 – Local Government Ombudsman

If a customer is unhappy with the stage 2 investigation results they have the right to approach the Local Government Ombudsman who are the commissioners for administration in England.

## The corporate complaint statistics for Planning in 2020/21

### Total complaints - 17

	Upheld	Partially Upheld	Not Upheld
Stage 1	0	2	15
Of the 17 complaints the following numbers progressed to further stages			
Stage 2	0	2	1
Stage 3	0	0	0

It's reassuring to see that there are minimal complaints whereby the outcome was that the service area had failed to deliver on service standards. Nevertheless any complaint that is partially upheld is reviewed by the team to assess the reasons behind such failings and discuss what measures can be put in to place to minimise the risk of the situation occurring again the future.

# Service Improvements 2020-21

Within our 2019-20 Annual Planning Performance Report we identified what our action plan would be for 2020-21. The themes were as follows:

- **Deliver on the Sheffield City Region 5 overarching projects designed to improve performance collectively**  
Continue with our pivotal role in delivering on the Sheffield City Region improvement projects.
- **Completion of the Planning Advisory Service ‘Planning Committee and Associated Processes’ review action points**  
As reported in the 2018-19 annual report, as part of the ‘Planning Committee and associated processes’ review we had some outstanding improvement activities to deliver within 2019/20.

We are pleased to say that the delivery of these actions have continued throughout the year with the following being implemented:

- ✓ **Introduction of feedback questionnaires.**  
The survey focusses on how the meeting is operated, the decision making process as well as the quality of the information made available to the customer prior to, and at Planning Committee. The comments gathered from these surveys are used to help the Planning Service continue to improve the customer’s experience.
- ✓ **New officer report templates** comprising of best practice principles achieving a greater level of consistency in how officers approach reports and the level of details included
- ✓ **Improvements to the Councils website**, ensuring content is clear and focussed
- ✓ **Online guide** to Planning Committee meetings published
- ✓ **New site visit scoping template** supporting the smooth running of planning committee site visits
- ✓ **Debate section** introduced to planning committee proceedings providing a seamless transition from speakers into debate and ultimately the decision

The only outstanding aspect is the introduction of a planning protocol. The protocol will cover numerous activities within the peer review action plan,

these being the review of the site visit protocol as well as including constitutional rules for committee, operational and material matters.

➤ **Deliver Doncaster's Local Plan**

The Planning Policy & Environment Team submitted the Local Plan for its independent Examination in Public in March 2020 and the Examination is now underway. Covid-19 has inevitably resulted in some delay with the process, and the provisional Hearings sessions for June/July have had to be postponed. However, the Council has been keeping up the momentum and progressing with the Examination as far as practicably possible in the meantime.

The Inspector has issued a number of Preliminary Questions which the Council responded to in June, and in advance of the Inspector then issuing his Main Matters & Issues Questions for all participants to respond to.

Revised Hearing sessions are being explored for Autumn 2020 and are likely to be a 'hybrid approach' with some participants attending in person, and maintaining safe distances, with others utilising technology to be involved and observe. All being well, and subject to continued easing of lockdown restrictions, the Council now anticipates that the Hearings will conclude early Winter followed by the Inspector's report (which draws the Examination to a close) and adoption of the plan in Spring 2021.

➤ **Continue to develop and evolve our Key Account offer**

As a service area we will continue to communicate with our industry sectors in regards to how we can support them, encouraging growth and regeneration within the Borough. We shall be doing this on a Sheffield City Region level as well as a local level with the engagement and support from the Doncaster Chamber.

➤ **Continued re-evaluation of our services**

Change is important for any organisation because without change we would fail to meet the needs of our customers, respond to the change in technology ensuring best value is being achieved, enable growth within Doncaster and challenge the status quo on how we deliver our services.

We've carried out a huge amount of work to rethink the way we deliver our services but that doesn't mean we should be complacent. It's time for a re-thinking planning 'refresh', ensuring our technologies and processes are still fit for purpose and that wasteful activities aren't slipping in to our day to day work.

## So, what have we done about it?

### Deliver on the Sheffield City Region 5 overarching projects designed to improve performance collectively

Following a Planning Advisory Service (PAS) productivity and resource review which Doncaster, along with Sheffield, Rotherham and Barnsley were involved in, we made a commitment towards the end of 2019 to embark on our ambition for a shared improvement strategy, collectively delivering consistency in our planning services.

As part of the PAS facilitated resource review we benchmarked and pieced together our data to tell a story about what we're individually doing and what can be further improved, adopting a shared agreement to improvement.

The 5 projects highlighted were:

- **Consistency in planning forms**  
This would look to get planning paperwork, validation etc, to be more similar across Planning Authorities
- **SCR strategic pre-applications**  
This would look to deal with pre-application advice on the larger schemes in a more consistent way
- **True cost modelling**  
This would provide a better understanding on how much planning services cost and how much development and investment value they bring to the city region
- **Consistency in conditions**  
This would reduce the number and type of planning conditions and make them more consistent
- **Annual review**  
An annual improvement event to review progress

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic progress on these projects came to a temporary halt whilst Authorities responding to the crisis by diverting resources on to business critical activities as well as adapting our ways of working to ensure our services could still resume whilst responding to Government guidelines and restrictions. Despite this each participating Authority continued to meet on a monthly basis using this cohort as an opportunity to share best practice and responses to the challenging times that Local Authorities and the economy were facing.

In January 2021 the cohort were able to pick up momentum on some of the projects with the following progress to date:

- **Consistency in planning forms**

A benchmarking exercise has taken place in regards to validation requirements for planning applications with the aim that Authorities review what their standard and non-standard requirements are to validation and the outlook taken upon getting applications moving as quickly as possible with best practice within our Authorities being shared.

The ultimate aim is to align validation lists as much as possible amongst the Authorities.

- **SCR Strategic pre-applications**

A benchmarking exercise is taking place to better understand how each Authority deals with pre-applications as well as uptake and value of the services provided with the aim of all Authorities offering a similar level of service. Approval was given from SCR Heads of Planning in the worth of further investigating the value/quality aspect of the project and aiming for consistency. Asks have been made from Authorities for further benchmarking information with the aim of reporting back to Heads of Planning with the result of the next phase along with recommendations and a proposal for minimum standards/offer moving forward.

As a result of The Planning for the Future white paper published in August 2000 we have made the decision to press pause on this project stream until we receive further clarity from this.

- **Consistency in conditions**

All conditions and informatives from the Authorities have been pulled together to produce a standard conditions library. Authorities are now drawing upon consistency worded and applied conditions moving forward.

## **Completion of the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) 'Planning Committee and Associated Processes' – Introduction of a Planning Protocol**

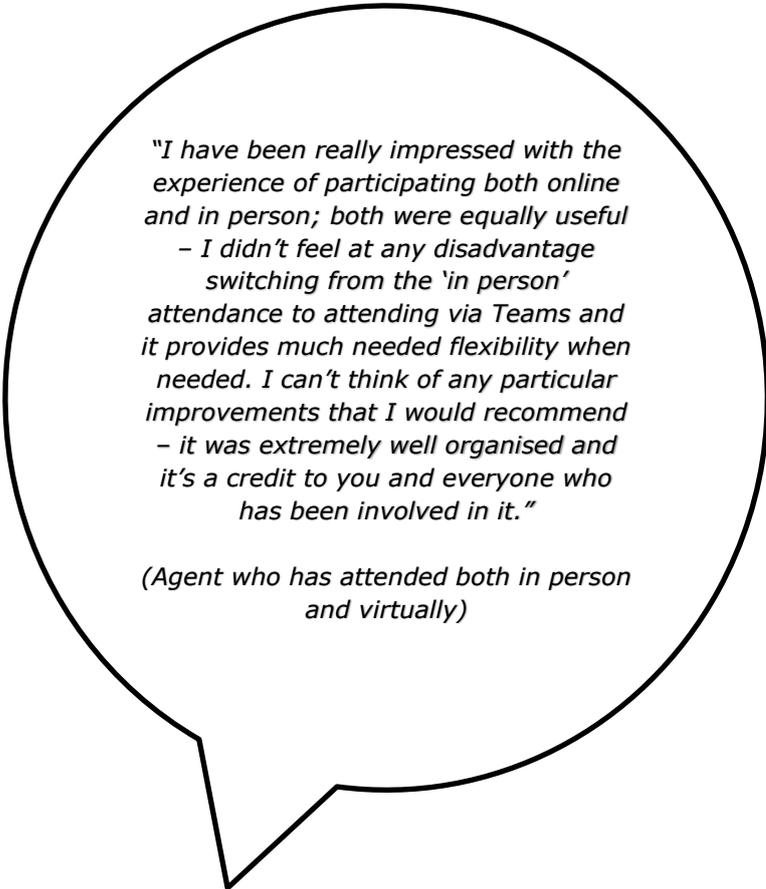
With a new Planning Committee now installed following the 2021 local elections, this final part of the PAS work i.e. the adoption of a Planning Committee Protocol, will be progressed this financial year. This will involve bringing the new Members of the Planning Committee up to speed on the process and the proposed Protocol, which upon adoption will see our Planning Committee process simplified and contained within an easily readable document that is readily available and accessible by all interested parties.

## Deliver Doncaster's Local Plan

The Planning Policy & Environment Team persevered with the Local Plan Examination despite the challenges that Covid -19 presented. We managed to be the first Local Planning Authority in the country to hold 'Blended' Hearing sessions. The Hearings were physically held in the Council Chamber with limited attendees observing strict social distancing and adhering to a raft other measures put in place to make sure the event could be held safely. Others were able to attend and participate through the use of technology and video conferencing. The events were live streamed and recorded for anybody to view either in real time, or to watch at any time afterwards.

Through working closely with the Planning Inspectorate and colleagues across the Council, the Hearings were able to take place October-December 2020 keeping the process roughly to timetable and without significant further delays incurred. The approach provided the much needed flexibility to ensure the Hearings could continue despite the ever evolving national situation with respect to the second wave of Covid-19 cases, cumulating with a second national lockdown in early December 2020.

At an early stage, we sought feedback from participants at the Hearings and it was overwhelmingly positive. Some examples of the feedback being as follows.



*"I have been really impressed with the experience of participating both online and in person; both were equally useful – I didn't feel at any disadvantage switching from the 'in person' attendance to attending via Teams and it provides much needed flexibility when needed. I can't think of any particular improvements that I would recommend – it was extremely well organised and it's a credit to you and everyone who has been involved in it."*

*(Agent who has attended both in person and virtually)*



*"Just to say I'm really impressed with how well the blended hearing went today. It's a credit to you and everyone else who worked on it that there was really no discernible difference whether a participant was in the Chamber or remote. And I know it must have been a massive headache to get to that point."*

*(Stakeholder group attending virtually)*

At the time of drafting, the Hearing sessions have concluded and a consultation in February 2021 has been held seeking feedback on a number of changes identified through the Examination process to date as being necessary to make the Plan 'sound'. We are keenly awaiting the Inspector's Final Report and are looking to adopt the Local Plan this summer.

### **Continue to develop and evolve our Key Account offer**

Each member of Development Management team were assigned a key account holder in 2019 and made contact shortly after. In 2020 following the appointment of several new members of the Development Management team a refresh letter was sent out to all key accounts on the 12<sup>th</sup> March 2020.

Due to the pressures on the planning department, specifically in relation to the continued need to work from home during the pandemic and the significant increase in work, a refresh of the Key Account offer has not taken place in 2021.

Additional work is due to take place with our key account holders between October 2021 and December 2021 in line with the Service Plan for Planning Services

### **Continued re-evaluation of our services**

Within the last year we have had to very quickly re-evaluate many of our processes and procedures as a response to the covid-19 pandemic and government guidance.

We'd like to take this opportunity to say a huge thank you to our Applicants, Agents and Developers for all their support, working with us to keep our services running with the ultimate aim of getting applications through the determination process.

Although the vast majority of improvement work has been reactive to the situation we have found ourselves in we have also taken the opportunity to develop more proactive measures to the continual reevaluation of our services.

### **Reviewed caseload monitoring**

A huge amount of work has been put in to developing revised caseload monitoring reporting to allow officers and managers to have a greater improved grasp on application priorities. This has resulted in a new suite of traffic light triggered workload tasks, highlighting to staff in real-time application priorities as well as real-time reports being available for officers and managers to manage the ever-increasing workload.

### **Improving our social media presence**

Social media is a great way to communicate to our communities and customers, sharing invaluable updates on the planning service. We have developed a team of

social media champions who regularly meet and keep our platforms informative and up to date. Check us out and give us a follow:

***Facebook: @doncasterplanning***

***Twitter: @DMBCPlanning***

***LinkedIn: Doncaster Planning***

# Action Plan for 2021-22



The performance framework Doncaster adopt is not a one off exercise. It's an on-going service improvement tool which will aid the Local Planning Authority to plan how it delivers its service.

Doncaster Council has made clear strides towards improving but there is always work to be done. Performance information as well as feedback from our customers is instrumental in identifying our priorities moving forward.

## Action Points for 2021-22

- **Continue to deliver on Sheffield City Region collective improvement ambition**  
Continue to work with our neighbouring authorities on shared improvement strategies, providing consistency for customers and developers across the region, making the City Region an accessible place to invest.
- **Continue to improve our communications to customers**  
As a response to customer survey feedback we aim to make changes to our website. Publishing additional information to help customers navigate the planning service along with an aim of improving validity, capturing the one-off customers, avoiding delays trying to get the application right first time.
- **Continue our involvement with the Planning Advisory Service, benchmarking our service and engaging in structured thinking and conversations with Government around the proposed planning reforms and how these could be supported and**

delivered smoothly

- **Adopt Doncaster's Local Plan – providing certainty for the Borough**
- **Work with and support communities on Neighbourhood Planning aspirations**
- **Continue to embed sustainability into all future planning decisions – responding positively to the Council's declared Climate Emergency**
- **Embed Biodiversity Net Gain in planning decisions**



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