

Cabinet – 23 October 2019

Walsall Proud Programme: Planning Service redesign

Portfolio: Councillor Adrian Andrew, Regeneration

Related portfolios:

Service: Economy & Environment: Planning, Engineering & Transportation

Wards: All

Key decision: No

Forward plan: Yes

1. Aim

- 1.1 To set out ways in which the Council can improve the Planning Service in line with the Walsall Proud Programme three core aims – improving the customer experience; improving the employee experience; and service efficiency.

2. Summary

- 2.1 The Planning Service (Development Management) plays a critical role in assessing development proposals in the borough, handling thousands of applications and enquiries every year against an ever changing legislative and statutory framework.
- 2.2 Cabinet approved the Walsall Proud Programme (WPP) framework as the council's future transformation programme and in April 2019 work commenced on a rolling programme of service transformations, with Planning being one of the first services proposed for redesign.
- 2.3 Planning was selected as one of the first due to its high level of public and customer visibility. The transformation also proposed an opportunity to assess the way resources are used and identify opportunities to provide a higher quality, more efficient service. The Planning redesign has been developed to fit into the overall design of the future ways of working in the council. For example, the Planning service will be dependent on the proposed new way of managing the council's customers through the new Customer Management capability (which is addressed elsewhere on this agenda – see item 4.11).
- 2.4 Redesign recently concluded and officers have since considered the proposal which has been developed and wish to secure Cabinet support to the high level design to be pursued, with a further report on implementation to come to the next available Cabinet.

- 2.5 This report should also be read in conjunction with the September 2019 Cabinet report entitled 'Walsall Council Income and Commercial Policy'.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 That Cabinet note and endorse the direction of travel for the redesign of the Planning Service.
- 3.2 That Cabinet agree note a further report on implementation of the redesign will be presented to the next Cabinet meeting, December 2019.
- 3.3 That to ensure ongoing service performance during a time of change, time limited funding is released to support extra capacity in the service as set out in section 4.27 of this report. As such, Cabinet are asked to approve the earmarking of £150k of reserves to fund this extra capacity.

4. Report detail - know

Context

- 4.1 The Walsall Proud Programme was launched in April 2019 as the Council's transformation programme and has three core aims: to improve customer experience, improve staff satisfaction, and deliver service efficiencies.
- 4.2 As part of early design work to design the Walsall Proud Programme, a set of process and organisation design principles were developed to ensure that any transformation adheres to the Programme's original vision and achieves its strategic objectives. The transformation is broken down into a framework of 10 core areas that cover the full service from its purpose right the way through to the implementation plan. It consists of the following:
1. Purpose, vision and outcomes
 2. The delivery model
 3. Customer value
 4. Process flow
 5. Process Adherence
 6. Technology landscape
 7. Capability, behaviours and roles
 8. Organisation shape, size and agile operation
 9. Performance management, governance and reporting
 10. Interdependencies and implementation
- 4.3 Planning was selected as an early redesign opportunity as it is a customer facing function, with high levels of customer contact and visibility and elected Member interest. It is also recognised that the service has had a number of challenges over the last 12 months, in particular its ability to deal with high levels of customer demand. The service has also experienced a number of personnel changes and continues to do so.

Current performance

- 4.4 Despite this backdrop, the service continues to perform well when judged against its headline performance metrics. During Quarters 1 and 2 of 19/20 the service's performance was:
1. Q1 (April to June 19): Major – 100%, Minor – 91.80%, Other – 92.22%
 2. Q2 (July to 25/09/19): Major – 100%, Minor – 92.11%; Other – 92.31%
- 4.5 This level of performance against Government expectations for the time to determine applications is good and well above expected minimums. It is accepted, however, to ensure this performance the Council is using some Extension of Time agreements. It is further noted that the positive focus on ensuring the Council complies with statutory deadlines may have compromised the customer experience, employee experience and service efficiency over the past 12 months.
- 4.6 The service is currently under recovering against its Income target, with fewer applications than anticipated reflecting possible uncertainty about the economy among other factors. This is placing a strain on the Economy & Environment projected outturn position for 2019/20.
- 4.7 Furthermore, there has been an increase in complaints about the service's performance, despite the metrics as set out in 4.4. Residents, Developers and Councillors have raised concerns about staffing levels, time taken to register applications and then determine applications, and to see through planning conditions and associated Section 106 agreements post permission.
- 4.8 As an example, our stated customer standard for the registration of valid applications is five working days. During Quarter 1 19/20 this was averaging 2.9 weeks, and after sustained efforts to address this backlog this is now down to 1.8 weeks so far in Quarter 2. This remains far from our stated standard and needs to further improve.
- 4.9 The service is currently carrying a number of vacancies which are being recruited to; it is hoped that when these roles are occupied, performance will stabilise. At the time of writing five roles within the service are vacant, with two roles filled by agency staff pending permanent recruitment. Offers have been made to four roles on a permanent basis and new officers are anticipated to be in place within a month.
- 4.10 As part of a series of immediate actions within the service to address this registration backlog and wider performance challenges (see 4.8), while also better managing customer contact pending the implementation of the redesign, it is intended to increase staff by 3 roles at G6 level to improve efficiency and consistency for registration and validation, general advice and signposting to customers, inbox enquiries, development enquiries e.g. permitted development, and stronger support for Planning Committee.
- 4.11 Other recent actions include an upgrade to the current APAS system used to manage planning casework. We have extended the current contract for a further 12 months pending a longer term procurement in line with the service redesign. As part of our extension the Council have purchased three extra modules giving

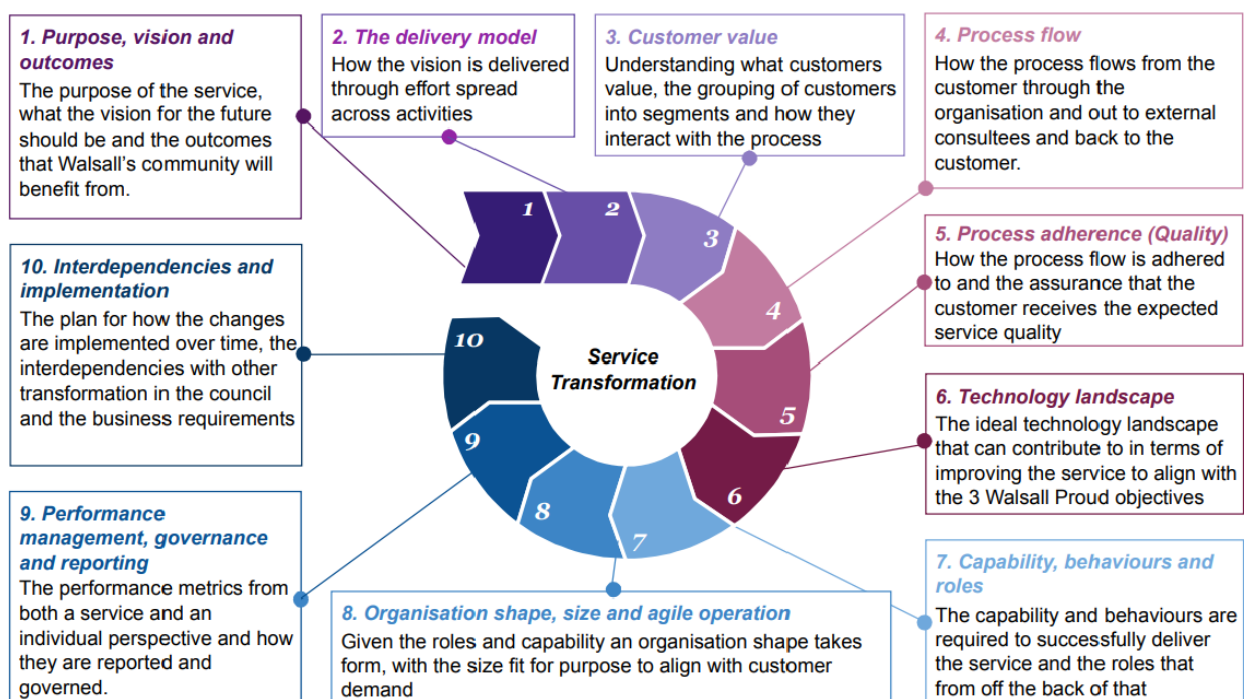
extra digital capabilities to both the team and customers at a cost of £32,000. These modules will improve the efficiency of working and site visits; mapping capability; and digitise comments and objections on planning applications. This will improve officer efficiency whilst also implementing a customer facing improvement to tracking the progress and comments on live applications. Alongside this upgrade, work is underway through the Walsall Proud Programme Customer Access Management workstream to redesign the content and flow of information on the www.walsall.gov.uk planning pages, to immediately improve the customer experience of our online offer in readiness for implementation of the redesign which is proposed.

- 4.12 The other recent action taken concerns changes to Duty officer arrangements, with face to face customer contact available on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings, instead of every weekday, freeing up case officers to progress their cases in a timelier manner.
- 4.13 Work is also currently in hand between Planning and Legal Services to consider how best to progress s106 agreements and expedite legal planning advice to the service. This will consider the cost and options to better support planning outcomes through improved Legal Services capacity. The conclusion of this work will inform the implementation plan for the Planning Service redesign given the strong interdependency between departments.

Service redesign

- 4.14 As explained in 4.2, the Planning Service redesign has organised its work around the 10 processes and principles agreed at Walsall Proud Programme level. Figure 1 below sets this out.

Figure 1:



4.15 Against this framework, the redesign has highlighted a number of areas in the way in which our current service operates which can be improved. These include:

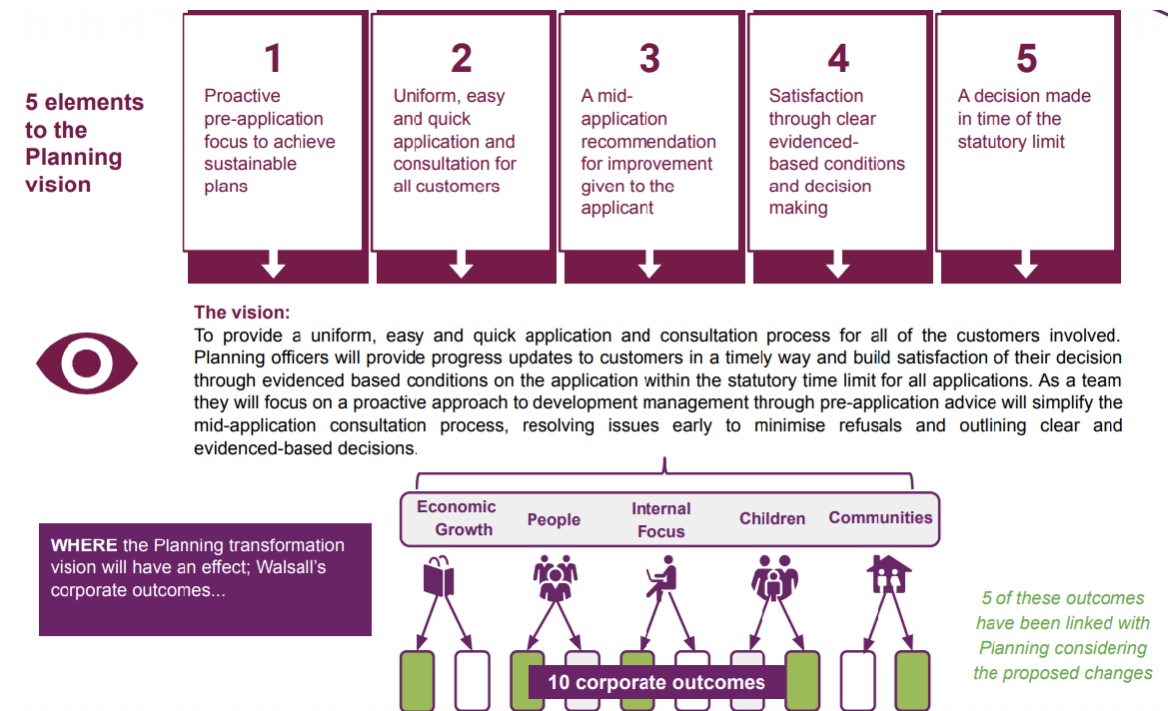
- The council currently doesn't monitor how the Planning service connects to and contributes to Walsall's outcomes (see Corporate Outcomes report, September 2019 Cabinet)
- There is an opportunity to focus on Planning specialist activities, maximise income generation whilst decreasing service cost
- Effort within the team is dispersed across a range of activities, not all of which require specialist planning input. Processing applications takes up the largest amount of time on average, which was found to be 32% of the team's time. Therefore any opportunity to improve the efficiency of processing applications will have a large effect on the teams overall required effort.
- Enquiry handling, managing appointments, customer data entry and other customer related activities add up to 33% of the team's time. Therefore removing or migrating any avoidable customer contact out of the team will have a significant effect on the overall required effort.
- The team spend 11% of their time on general admin related activities, reflecting opportunities to make this more efficient.
- There are inconsistencies within and between teams about how applications are processed, with different standards of assessment reports that outlines the decision and evidence for the reasoning. This reflects an opportunity to standardise and simplify.
- Our current use of technology is not as modern as it ought to be, with some manual tasks slowing down the flow of processes and decisions
- Alongside the customer/developer and Elected Member feedback (as set out in 4.7) we are currently experiencing three other symptoms of a service that can improve on its efficiency and effectiveness:
 1. 30% of appeals lost (last financial year)
 2. 14% of applications are invalid
 3. An application (end to end) currently can progress for months until the customer stops amending and/or submitting additional documents and information due to our current practice, some that are causing the statutory 8/13 week target to be missed.

Future state

4.16 Through process improvement there is a clear opportunity for Planning to both increase income generation and decrease running costs, while significantly improving the customer experience and employee experience. The redesign has offered us an opportunity to thoroughly assess current working practices and draw up a blueprint for a dramatic improvement to service outcomes in future.

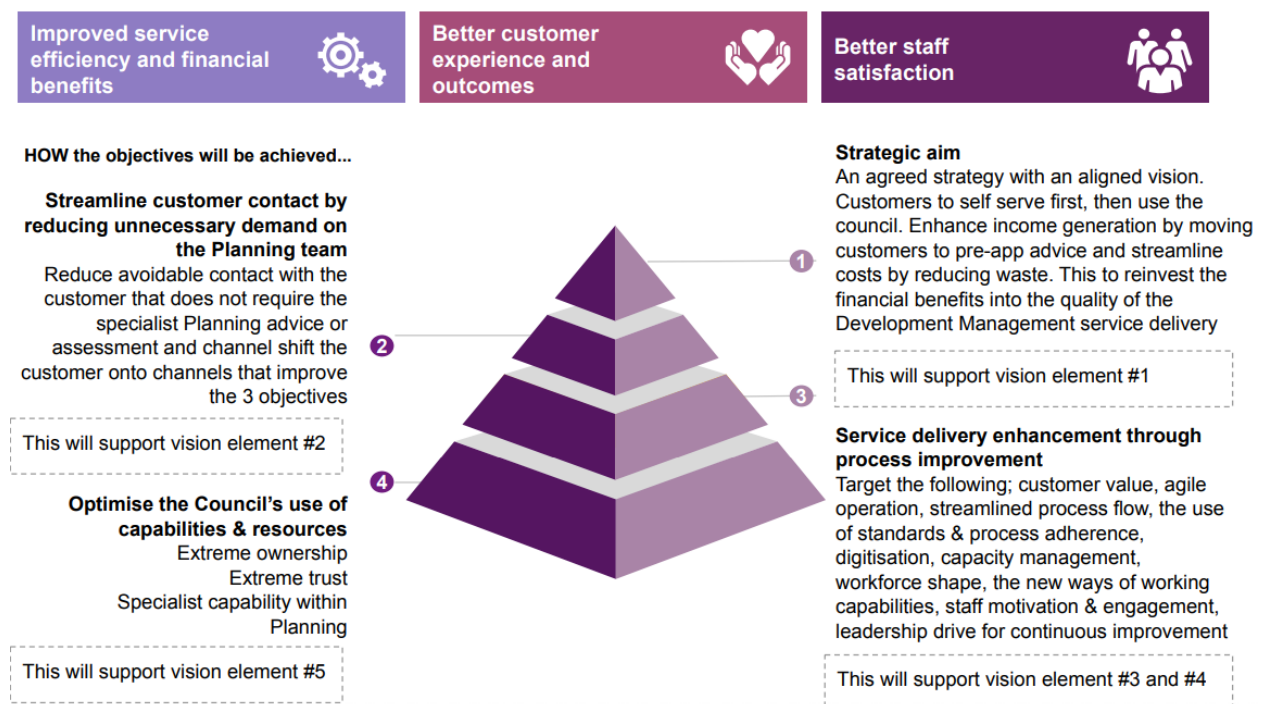
4.17As a result, a new vision for the service has been drawn up, as set out in Figure 2

Figure 2: Walsall Council Planning vision



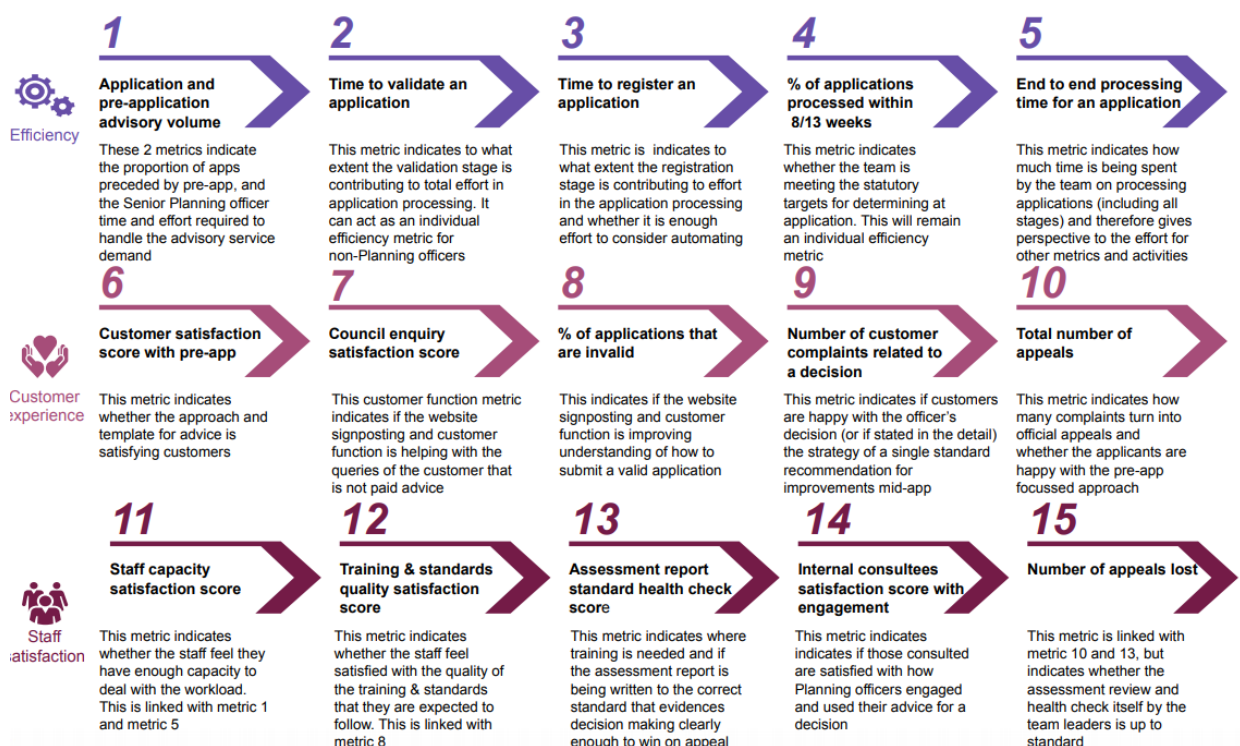
- 4.18 This vision was split into five elements, where each of these elements lead to several new performance metrics, all contributing to delivery of the Walsall Proud Programme core aims. The five elements shift a greater focus to pre-application advice, which is the source of income for many councils (in line with the recently adopted Income & Commercial Policy), and has a strong positive impact on the amount of time and effort to process an application after it has been submitted.
- 4.19 The wider impact in addition to cost and revenue improvements will be fewer invalid applications submitted by the customer, fewer issues and amendments mid application, a smoother consultation process, improved staff morale, more detailed value driven discussions when engaging with the customer proactively, detailed evidence of a single recommendation for improvements to an application (which in the future process will be standardised and transparent, meaning the reasons for the decisions are uniform across all officers and clear to applicants and the consultees).
- 4.20 All the improvements suggestions combined with freed up time for the officer to always meet the statutory time limit, will act as enablers to the vision and can be tracked as part of the newly proposed performance management framework; 15 service wide Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) as set out in figure 4
- 4.21 It is important to pay attention to how we will implement this model in practice. Figure 3 below sets out the features of the new service which will enable its success, in conjunction with wider Walsall Proud Programme changes such as our Customer Access Management work.

Figure 3: the what and how of the new service



4.22 To support implementation and track benefits, a new comprehensive performance management framework has been drawn up to reflect 15 Key Performance Indicators balanced across customer experience, employee experience and service efficiency. This is illustrated in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4: Key Performance Indicators



Next steps

- 4.23 To convert the outcome of the service redesign into a practical action plan for improvements will require an implementation plan and associated resourcing. This will be brought back to the next Cabinet (December 2019) for further decision making prior to its implementation. It is recognised with a change of this nature there will need to be careful management of change with affected employees, and a clear communication plan for customers.

Council Corporate Plan priorities

- 4.24 The Planning Service contributes to several Corporate Plan priorities, namely:
- Economic Growth for all people and communities
 - People have increased independence, improved health and can positively contribute to their communities
 - Internal Focus: all council services are efficient and effective
 - Communities are prospering and resilient
- Furthermore, as noted in Figure 2, the Planning Service contributes to five of the newly adopted 'outcomes' as per the Cabinet Report 'Corporate Outcomes' September 2019.

Risk management

- 4.25 It will be incumbent upon officers to consider and manage risks associated with the implementation of any service redesign. Walsall's Proud Programme is a council-wide transformation programme that is ambitious in its aspiration(s). Its success will depend on the appropriate commitment and allocation of resources, the realism of the timetable, capacity of officers, the time put in and the buy-in of all those involved. Only by taking a whole-council approach can the Proud Programme deliver.

Financial implications

- 4.26 There is a current under recovery of income in the Planning, Engineering and Transportation service. As reported to Cabinet in September 2019, the income shortfall in planning is £375k.
- 4.27 To further stabilise the service in preparation for the redesign implementation plan to be brought to Cabinet and associated changes to then be made, it is requested that additional one off investment is put into the service for the remainder of the financial year 2019/20 and for the full year 2020/21 to support three extra G6 roles as set out in 4.10. It is anticipated that full year costs for 2020/21 will be £100k, with investment needed in the remainder of 2019/20 of £50k. This will require earmarking of £150k of reserves.

Legal implications

4.28 There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

Procurement Implications/Social Value

4.29 Procurement of any future technological improvements to support the intended redesign will take place with the support of professional insight from Procurement colleagues

Property implications

4.30 No implications for the Council's estate strategy

Health and wellbeing implications

4.31 Planning is a key contributor to the health and wellbeing aspirations of the Walsall Plan and this service redesign is designed to improve how the service works to contribute to those aims.

Staffing implications

4.32 Human Resources will work alongside support Planning Officers to recruit the new roles as set out in 4.10 of this report. In respect of the implementation plan for the new Planning Service, it will be important that the management of change is managed against existing current policies and procedures. HR will support the drafting of the plan to ensure this is a smooth process of change implementation is aligned to our processes and that officers consult fully with staff whose roles are affected by the change.

Reducing Inequalities

4.33 The implications for reducing inequalities will be taken into account and assessed as part of an Equality Impact Assessment to accompany the implementation plan when it is brought to a future Cabinet.

Consultation

4.34 Consultation has been carried out throughout the redesign phase with officers across the authority, supported by the Walsall Proud Programme Management Office (PMO) and PWC colleagues. At this stage such consultation has not taken place with all potential affected employees in the Planning service – this will follow through the next stage of work. Consultation with customers is intended to consider new charging arrangements to support the new service as per the Cabinet report 'Income & Commercial Policy' September 2019 – this consultation will inform the final proposal.

5. Decide

- 5.1 So that the work can continue to support implementation planning, Cabinet are asked to endorse the direction of travel of the Planning Service redesign and assign some resources to support service stabilisation as set out in the recommendations.

6. Respond

- 6.1 Following support from Cabinet, an implementation plan will come to a future Cabinet (target December 2019) to commit to the service redesign and its implementation.

7. Review

- 7.1 The new service will be subject to review against its new performance management framework as expressed in figure 4. Review points will also be used in the phasing of the implementation plan to ensure regular review throughout the transformation of the service.
- 7.2 The Council intends to reengage the support of the Local Government Association funded Planning Advisory Service (PAS) who will be able to support the Council through its forthcoming changes. PAS supported the Council during 2018 in respect of its improvements to statutory determination periods. How and when this will be carried out will be set out in the December Cabinet report.

Background papers

Walsall Proud Programme Cabinet report, December 2018

Walsall Proud Programme Corporate Outcomes Cabinet report, September 2019

Walsall Proud Programme, Income & Commercial Policy Cabinet report September 2019

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Simon Neilson
Executive Director

14 October 2019

A handwritten signature in blue ink, featuring a series of connected, somewhat uniform loops.

Councillor Andrew
Portfolio holder

14 October 2019