

CABINET MEMBER UPDATE REPORT

Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Regeneration and Skills) – 20 September 2022

COUNCILLOR	PORTFOLIO	DATE
Daren Veidman	Cabinet Member Planning	20 September 2022

Introduction

1.1 The Planning Service is set up to operate the Council’s regulatory functions in relation to the development and use of land.

1.2 It comprises the following functions:

- Development Management
- Enforcement
- Building Control
- Local Plans
- Heritage and Conservation
- Trees

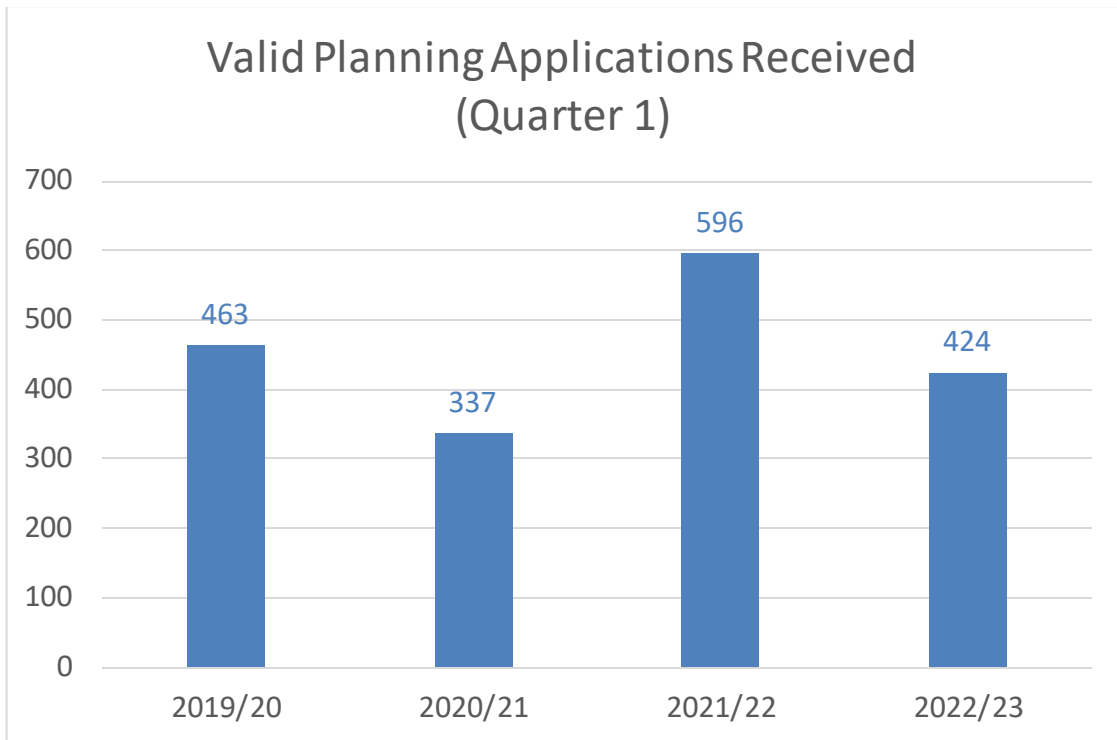
These are supported by the Technical Support team.

1.3 A key focus as we have worked from home has been looking after staff wellbeing. We have carried out two surveys and devised an action plan. These have been received positively and sickness absence is at its lowest level ever.

1.4 We recognise the importance of customer satisfaction and the need to understand how our customers feel about the service they receive. We have addressed this with a survey of agents who submit planning applications to us and the overall response is they consider us to be the most efficient planning authority in the Liverpool City Region. We held a staff away day in May 2022 and the focus was on customer care

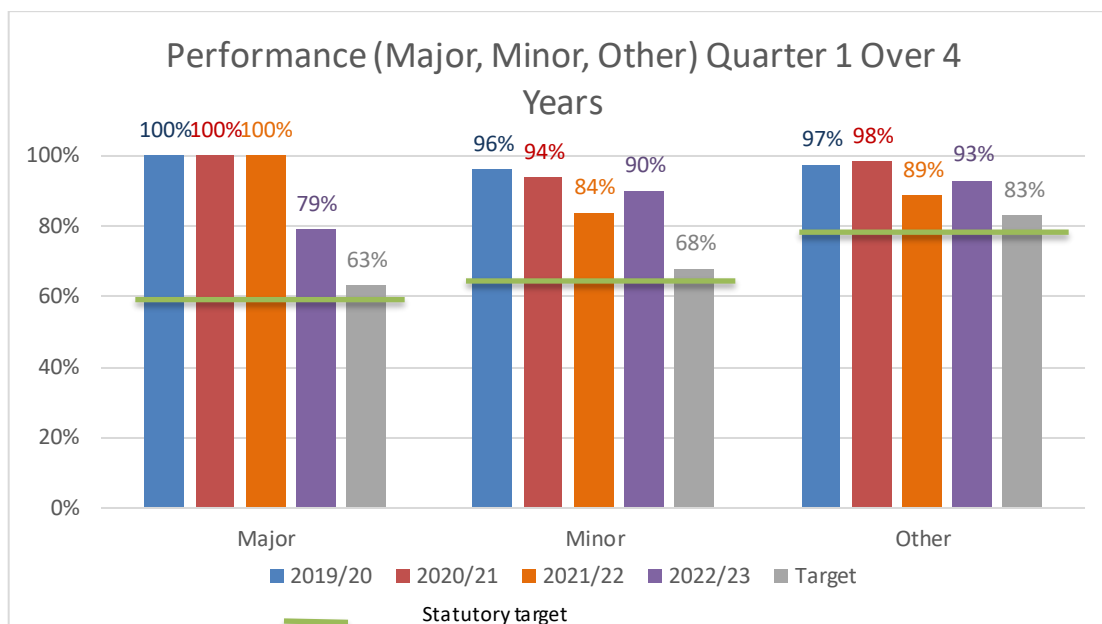
2. Development Management

2.1 The graph below shows the number of planning applications received during Quarter 1 in the years 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022. It demonstrates that though there was a significant dip in applications following the onset of COVID 19, activity picked up significantly since then and has since settled back to a similar level to pre-Covid. Looking at the only the first quarter gives a snapshot in time so it will be important to review successive quarters to identify any longer term trends.



- 2.2 The chart below shows the performance of the Service over the same time periods. The rate of determining ‘minor’ and ‘other’ applications (this comprises the vast majority of all applications) slowed down a little in 2022. This was only to be expected given the high numbers of applications received during 2021-22. The determination rate still significantly exceeds national and local targets.
- 2.3 There was dip in the number of ‘major’ applications determined in the first quarter of 2022-23. However, there are comparatively few applications in this category so even one application not meeting its target can result in dropping a few percentage points.
- 2.4 This is a major achievement but has depended on the ability to agree ‘Extensions of Time’ with the applicant. This gives us more time to determine applications and still meet Government targets.

Key performance against national targets for speed and quality of decision making:
Quarter 1 (April – June): 2019 - 2022

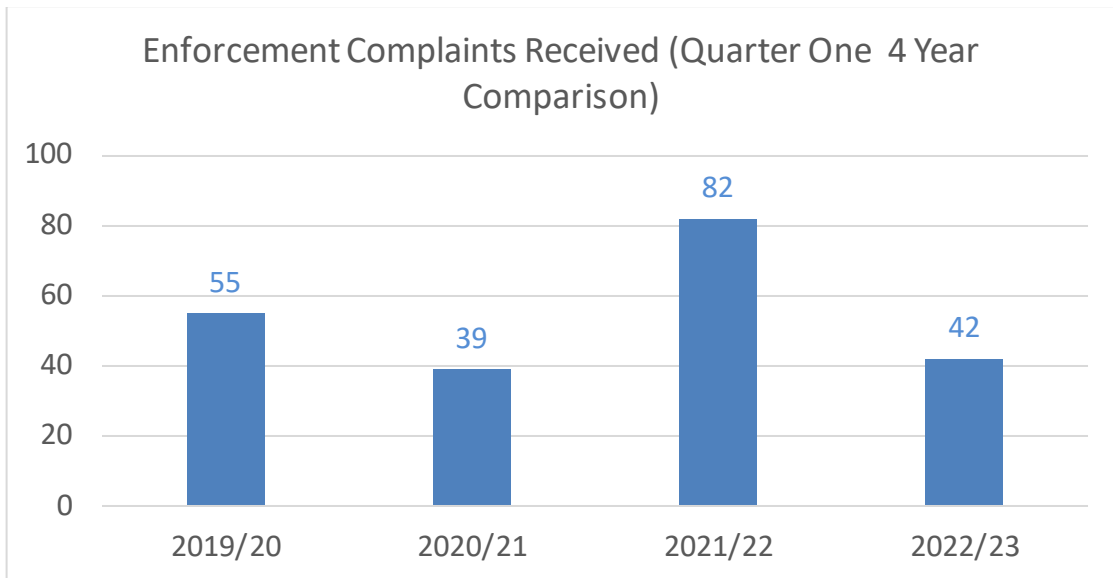


2.5 The pressure on this part of the Service continues with planning applications having been received for 31 of the 47 housing sites allocated in the Local Plan (approximately 5,400 homes as at 30 November 2021). This equates to 73% of the homes allocated in the Local Plan.

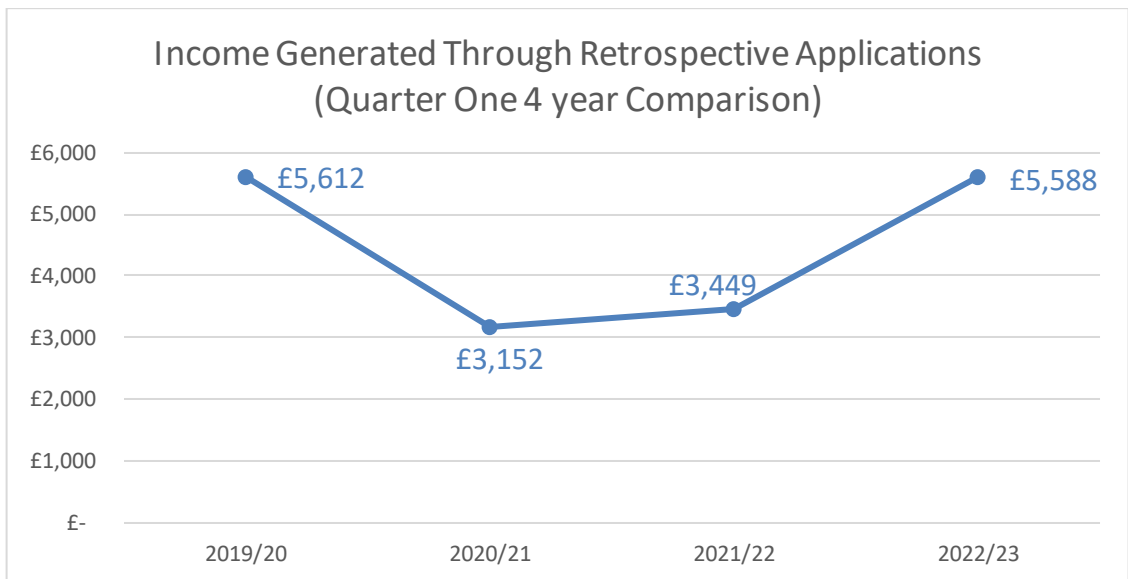
2.6 The capacity of the Service is stretched by the increased pressure relating to dealing with many complex and contentious applications. We have increased the size of our team which is helping us deal with an increased workload. One of the Team Leaders resigned in June and while we have appointed to this position there will be a several month gap before the successful candidate can start. Whilst working from home has not presented any major issues it does however have some implications for performance. It is a significant team effort across the Service to assess and determine applications expediently and in line with Government targets.

Enforcement

2.7 As we emerge from Covid the number of complaints received in the first quarter of 2022 is actually less than in the previous two years during Covid and lockdown. The rise in complaints during lockdown might have been explained by more people working from home and deciding to carry out development to their home, and more people noticing what is happening as they are also based at home. Similarly the slight reduction in complaints might be due to people returning to places of work and not spending as much time at home. The cost of living crisis could also have impacted on people's ability to carry out developments to their homes.



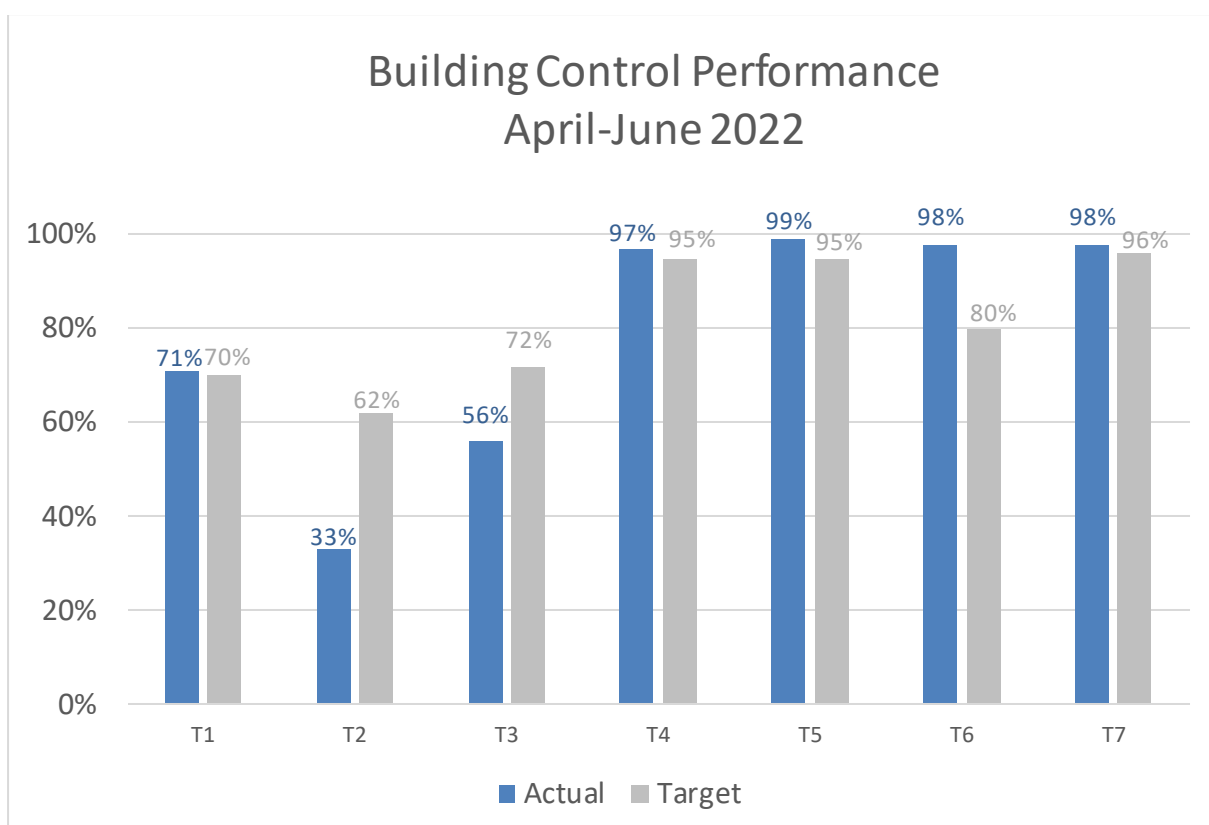
2.8 The chart below shows the income generated from following up complaints which has resulted in planning applications being submitted, with a drop during Covid and then a rise back to previous levels in this last quarter (April – June 2022).



3. Building Control

Performance targets

3.1 The number of building regulation applications received compared to earlier years is shown elsewhere in this report. This section focuses on the Building Control Team's performance in the first quarter of quarter of 22/23 and compares it against similar periods in previous years.



	Detail	Target	Actual Q1 19/20	Actual Q1 20/21	Actual Q1 21/22	Actual Q1 22/23
T1	Market share	70%	72	76	74	71
T2	Full Plans app decision / schedule within 3 weeks	62%	32	60	54	33
T3	Full Plans app decision / schedule within 5 weeks	72%	67	84	75	56
T4	Full Plans app conditionally or fully approved	95%	100	98	100	97
T5	Site insp's carried out on day they were arranged for	95%	99	99	99	99
T6	Customer satisfaction rating (from latest survey)	80%	98	98	98	98
T7	Sickness absence – attendance levels	96%	96	98	99	98

3.2 The Building Control Team continues to meet its key statutory targets in relation to plan-checking and the carrying out of site inspections. It is also meeting the majority of the locally set performance targets. Results from 2021/22 indicate that the Teams market share has reduced slightly to that of the previous financial year, although it remains higher than the national average. This is mainly due to the recent loss of two Building Control Team Leaders to private sector Building Control, who will have taken some key clients with them. The Team's performance in respect of timely decision-making on deposited applications shows that all statutory targets are being met. However, due to an increased number of Building Regulation applications being received and unfilled vacancies, the performance against some of the locally set targets (including market share) showed a slight reduction in 2021/22 compared to the previous year.

Comparing the first quarter of the current financial year, against the previous 3 years, performance remains reasonably consistent, with the exception of the speed in which plans are being checked - which has declined. Having to cope with unfilled vacancies and increased workload has meant transferring resources from plan checking to site inspection duties and this has resulted in reduced performance in this area declining. However, vacancies are now being filled and an action plan has been put into place to address this particular issue.

Income and financial performance

3.3 Building Regulation income for 2020/21 covered our costs and figures for income derived from Building Control charges for the 1st quarter of 22/23 appear to show a similar trend – with the deposit of a number of applications relating to volume housing developments.

Safety at sports grounds

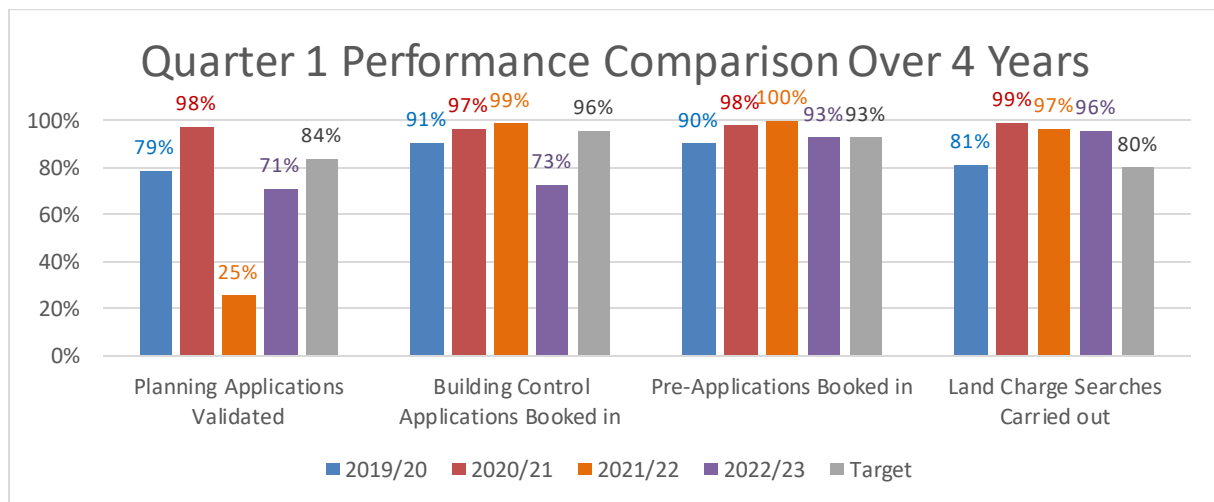
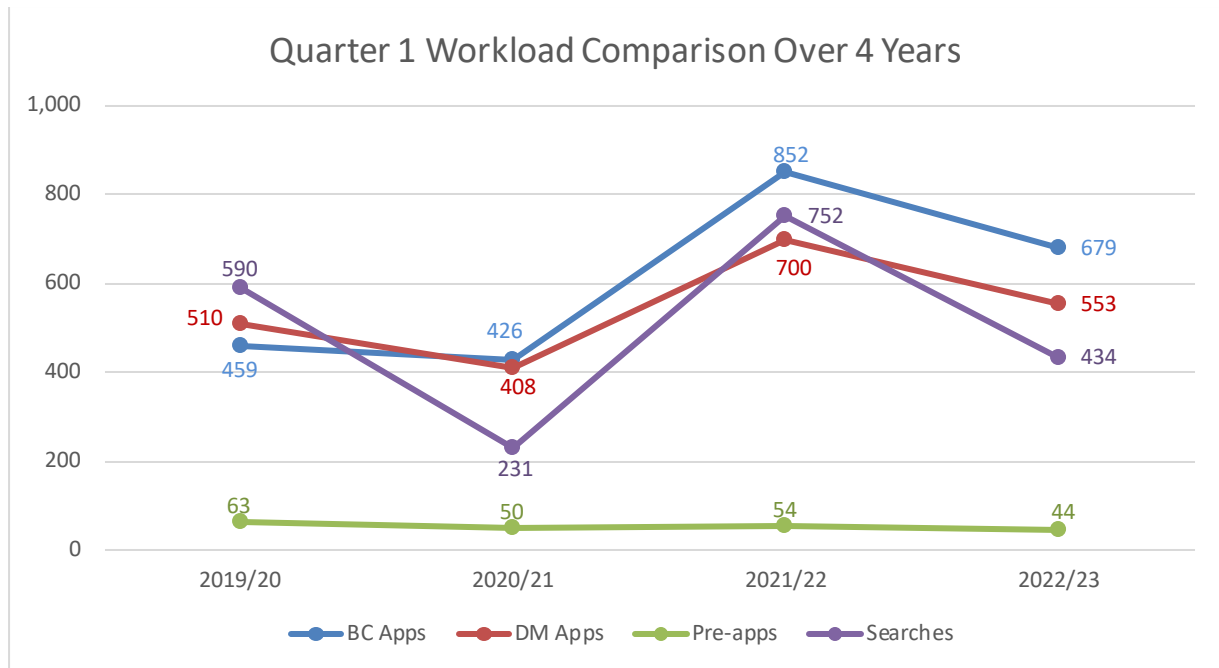
3.4 As part of conditions of the Safety Certificates held by Southport FC, Marine FC and Aintree Racecourse, the Building Control Team undertakes annual inspections in order to check the grandstands are properly maintained. The inspection of the five permanent grandstands at Aintree Racecourse was undertaken in January 2022 and inspections at Southport FC and Marine FC were undertaken in February 2022. In April 2022, the Building Control Team carried out plan checking and site inspections of the various temporary grandstands and hospitality marquees erected for the Grand National race meeting.

Staffing

3.5 Following the resignation of a Building Control Team Leader in February 2022, that vacancy has recently been filled – by an internal candidate and steps are currently being taken to backfill his previous Senior Building Control Officer post. Another vacant post – that of a Building Control Officer was filled in mid June 2022.

4. Technical Support

4.1 The chart below shows performance over quarter one over the last 4 years



Detail	Target	Actual	Remarks
Planning Apps validated within 5 days	84%	71%	Whilst below target, the overall average days taken to validate remains at 5.
BC Applications registered within 3 days	96%	73%	Whilst below target, the overall average days taken to validate remains at 2.
Pre-Apps validated within 3 days	93%	93%	On target
Searches completed within 7 days	80%	96%	Target exceeded

- 4.2 The team is multi-functional, and resources are allocated to the most urgent priorities daily. Performance on pre-application enquiries and Local Land Charge services meets current targets. The validation of planning applications and Building Regulations applications is below target this is partly due to essential maintenance and downtime of our back-office systems and the training of two new team members.
- 4.3 The team has also taken on additional workload to ease the pressure on our other teams whilst recruitment takes place.
- 4.4 An improvement in performance across all areas is anticipated once the new recruits are fully trained and the staff member that is currently on maternity leave is back in the office.

Service Development

- 4.5 Work is continuing with the transfer of the Local Land Charges Register to HM Land Registry. The project is now in the data cleansing phase and HMLR are expected to serve notice by the end of 2022 with transfer likely to take place early 2023.
- 4.6 Following a recent meeting of the Service Improvement Group, several areas were identified for improvement, these include how we engage with our customers to make the process more user friendly, accessible and efficient.

5. Local Planning

The Sefton Local Plan

- 5.1 Planning applications continue to be submitted on allocated sites. Of the 47 housing sites allocated in the Local Plan (policy MN2) planning applications have been received for 31, equating to approximately 5,400 homes (as at 30 November 2021). This equates to 73% of the homes allocated in the Local Plan.

Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs) and other policy documents

- 5.2 The Planning Policy Team are currently working on a number of Supplementary Planning Documents to support the Local Plan. These include:
- Affordable Housing
 - Conversions to Flats and HMOs
 - New Housing
 - House Extensions
 - Sustainable Travel
 - Social Value in development
- 5.3 Whilst these have been delayed a little due to staff being temporary used for other projects, it is anticipated these will shortly be made available for public consultation.

Liverpool City Region work

- 5.4 The Combined Authority undertook early engagement with the public on the Spatial Development Strategy (SDS) for the Liverpool City Region concluding January 2020 to which the Council submitted comments. The next stage of consultation on the SDS is expected in September 2022 and the Council will fully engage with this, and the supporting evidence.

Bootle Area Action Plan

- 5.5 To help support the regeneration and transformation of the wider Bootle area it has been decided to produce a Bootle Area Action Plan (AAP). This will set out a vision, objectives, projects, policies and priorities for the area. This will be led by the Planning Policy Team. In order to assist with this work, the Council has been successful in securing funding from a range of sources for various aspects of the Bootle AAP. These are:
- £138,000 from the Combined Authority to secure consultants to help with the AAP document preparation, background evidence and community engagement

- £50,000 from the MHCLG for the Council to test the Draft Model Design Toolkit in Bootle as a pilot scheme. Sefton was one of 14 Local Planning Authorities that were successful (out of over 70 applicants)
- £14,000 from the Local Government Association to procure guidance on a range of project delivery methods.

5.6 The first draft iteration of the Bootle AAP was approved by Cabinet on 7 October for consultation. Public consultation on the Bootle AAP Issues and Options paper was undertaken from November to 31 January 2022. The engagement included a 12-page newsletter delivered to all 22,000 homes and businesses in the Bootle AAP area. The Council are currently considering all the comments made.

5.7 Work is now progressing on the Preferred Options stage of the Bootle Area Action Plan. A series of discussions are taking place with both the Member Steering Group and the Officer Working Group on what the priorities for the Bootle AAP should be and the policies that will help deliver those.

Other work

5.8 The Planning Policy team continues to provide policy advice on all relevant planning applications and pre-application inquiries, including large housing developments on the Local Plan allocations.

5.9 Following recent applications and appeal hearings for traveller accommodation sites, it has been decided that the Council's evidence base for gypsy and traveller accommodation will be updated.

5.10 The Council is also undertaking a replacement Playing Pitch Strategy so that we have the evidence to deal with applications on existing playing pitches or can help secure contributions for improvements to existing pitches from large development proposals. The new strategy will also help support the Council's applications for funding for improvements to its playing pitches. This will be a complicated and multidisciplinary piece of work and will be managed and led by the Local Planning team.

6. Heritage and Conservation

Heritage at Risk

- 6.1 We are continuing to work towards the removal of the 6 Conservation Areas from the National Heritage at Risk Register. This includes a number of different work areas including raising their profile through Twitter and Facebook, regeneration funding bids, working with the local community, Conservation Area Appraisals and Management Plans, taking enforcement and other legal action in relation to a number of derelict sites and listed buildings in these areas, including the major Lord Street Verandah project.
- 6.2 Recent success includes the restoration and renovation of the Listed former Sunnymede School in Birkdale and the continued restoration of verandahs on Lord Street, Southport, along with the improvements undertaken at previous derelict and vacant sites with work beginning on the former school for the partially hearing at 40 Lancaster Road for which the Listed Building Consent is beginning to be implemented.
- 6.3 Progress has been made on a number of Heritage at Risk sites including working with colleagues and partners on a number of Council owned Listed Buildings to secure their improvement and long term use and sustainability.
- 6.4 The numbers of buildings surveyed April 2020-April 2021: 155 – 27% while the number of buildings surveyed 01 April 2021- 31 March 2022 was 362 - 64%.
- Buildings on the Council's list of Buildings at Risk: 53
 - Buildings removed from the list 2021-22: 10
 - Buildings added to the list 2021-22: 9

Regeneration

- 6.5 The capital build part of the Southport Townscape Heritage project is progressing, and discussions continue with targeted building and discussions with interested property owners. The first grant application has been awarded and works are soon to be complete mid July 22, this is for 509-515 Lord Street, a grade 2 Listed Building on the Council's Buildings at Risk Register. Other schemes are slowly progressing, and we are speaking to owners of other target property with architects having offered advice and prices on some of these possible schemes.
- 6.6 The learning and skills part of the Southport Townscape Heritage project has made significant progress in developing complementary training and education initiatives. This includes Southport's Victorians is a ninety minute interactive play aimed at school children aged 9-14yrs. Excerpts of the script have been filmed and have been uploaded to Youtube. We are looking to find ways of

introducing this into the curriculum and host live performances of the play at The Atkinson for Southport based Primary Schools in the autumn. A successful and comprehensive week of Heritage Open Days have been undertaken and a current exhibition is being held at the Atkinson called “Built on Sand – 200 Years of Southport’s Changing Street Scene” an interactive, exhibition this will run until 17 September 2022. We are also working closely with the CVS, Southport Civic Society and other local organisations.

- 6.7 Discussions have taken place on a number of Heritage at Risk sites which are considered to be key strategic sites to find new uses or upgrade them to modern facilities so that they continue to be or find their optimum viable use and save them from further deterioration.
- 6.8 Work have commenced on the public realm improvements of Scarisbrick Avenue. This public realm project is integral to the Southport Townscape Heritage project and is within the main cluster of target properties in order to complement the buildings themselves. The public realm will focus on high quality paving and new street lighting.

Other Projects

- 6.9 After a successful joint bid from Sefton, Knowsley and Wirral Councils the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government awarded a grant to develop both the supporting documentation (selection criteria) and to establish a system for members of the public to propose heritage assets for local listing. The Merseyside Environmental Advisory Service (MEAS), a joint environmental service, are leading on the project which has appointed a project officer and set up a website <http://local-heritage-list.org.uk/merseyside> which is inviting nominations of buildings to be included. Nominations to be received by 31st March 2023.

Advice to Development Management team

- 6.10 The pressure on this part of the Service has increased significantly over the past year for consultation requests on planning applications and pre-applications relating to Listed Building Consent, development within Conservation Areas and non-designated heritage assets. During this annual period the Conservation Team dealt with 637 consultation responses. The number of consultation requests in Quarter 1 (Apr – June 22) is 94.
- 6.11 In addition, this part of the Service continues to assist in various appeals, on-site monitoring and enforcement cases.

7. Conclusion

- 7.1 The past two years have been unprecedented for the Council. The Service has strived to maintain high levels of performance, but sustained increases in the numbers of applications and staffing issues have begun to impact on performance and we struggled to meet a number of key targets last year. However, we are on the way to meeting key targets again.
- 7.2 Appropriate technology has been put in place to support staff and services, and staff have performed to the best of their ability. Staff surveys show the service has been able to respond to key issues in order to maintain essential services whilst maintaining staff morale.
- 7.3 The service has risen to the challenge posed by Covid with an innovative package of measures to promote and encourage economic activity by incentivising development, and the Council has been recognised nationally for this exceptional approach. We are seeing the results of this now with numbers of applications for planning permission and building approval more or less at pre-Covid levels which is maintaining inward investment into the Borough.
- 7.4 A measure aimed at making the planning process more transparent and participants more accountable in the form of publishing comments online has taken a short while to embed. This has now been successfully embedded and enhances the service we provide to the public.
- 7.5 Major legislative change is heralded in the Levelling Up and Planning Bill and we will outline the implications of this for the Planning Service in subsequent updates.
- 7.6 The Service continues to respond to the unsettled context in which we are currently operating. We are prepared to adapt to further changes on the horizon.
- 7.7 Despite all the challenges we have faced over the past two years, we believe we provide a quality service and feedback from agents is that our service is the best in the region.