

CABINET MEMBER UPDATE REPORT

Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Regeneration and Skills)

COUNCILLOR	PORTFOLIO	DATE
Daren Veidman	Cabinet Member Planning and Building Control	February 2023

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.

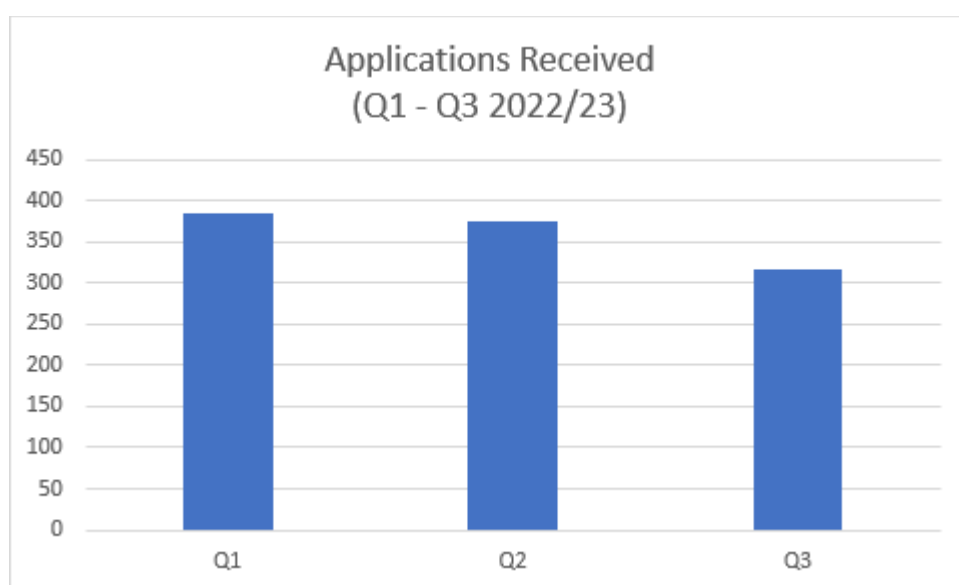
1.4 We recognise the importance of customer satisfaction and the need to understand how our customers feel about the service they receive. We have addressed this with a survey of agents who submit planning applications to us and the overall response is they consider us to be the most efficient planning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

1.5 We also know how importance it is to look after staff given most are still working from home most of the time and this is likely to continue. The Management Team have completed Mental Health First Aid training over the past quarter. We have organised various events to promote staff wellbeing including two walks during the summer and regular opportunities for staff to come together for a chat on Teams called 'Time to Talk'. We held a staff away morning in November 2022 when we reviewed the core values of Planning Services. There was a consensus that we should add a further value which reflects the contribution our staff make.

2. Development Management

- 2.1 The graph below shows the number of planning applications received during the three quarters of this year so far. Application numbers have settled back to a similar level to pre-Covid.
- 2.2 Over the course of the past three quarters there has been a slight decline in the number of applications (Figure 2.1 below) – this is a seasonal trend. No doubt assisted by this, the percentage of those approved in agreed time periods has risen over the course of the year so far (see Figure 2.2). However, performance through this year so far well exceeds national targets and also our own more demanding local targets.

Figure 2.1 Applications received: Quarters 1, 2 and 3 (April – December) 2022

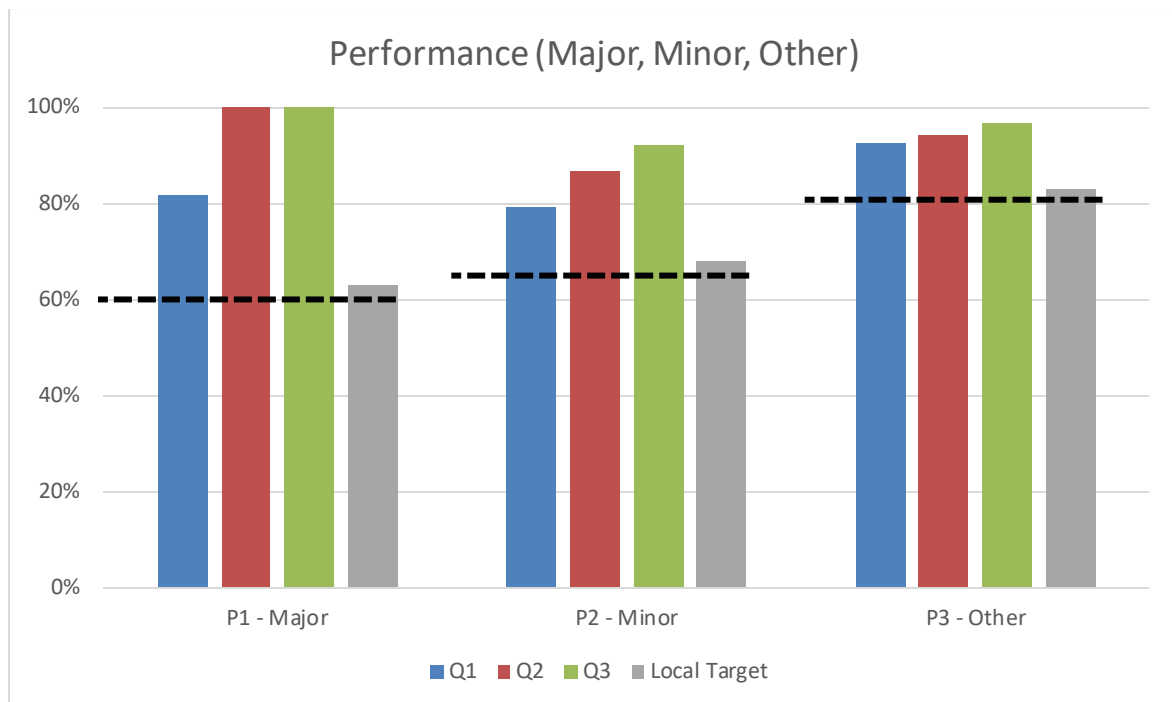


- 2.3 During Quarter 3 we introduced a new approach to agreeing ‘Extensions of Time’ within which we consider applications and keep within Government targets. This reflects good practice. This approach will enable us to respond to any delays in applications more transparently and provide a more efficient service.
- 2.4 The speed in dealing with pre-applications has remained very high and consistently surpasses our target of 80% response rate within 21 days (Figure 2.3). The Service has significantly exceeded targets in relation to the number of applications allowed at appeal (Figure 2.4). We have dipped slightly below our target of approving 95% of all applications over the last two quarters (Figure 2.5). We will review the reasons for this and will report back in the next quarter.
- 2.5 The capacity of the Service has been stretched over the past two quarters as one of our two Team Leaders resigned at the end of May and his successor started in mid-November. We expect to increasingly feel the benefit of the new Team Leader over the next quarter, and we plan to review and improve our procedures in a number of key areas. It is a significant team effort across

the Service to assess and determine applications expediently and in line with Government targets.

Figure 2.2

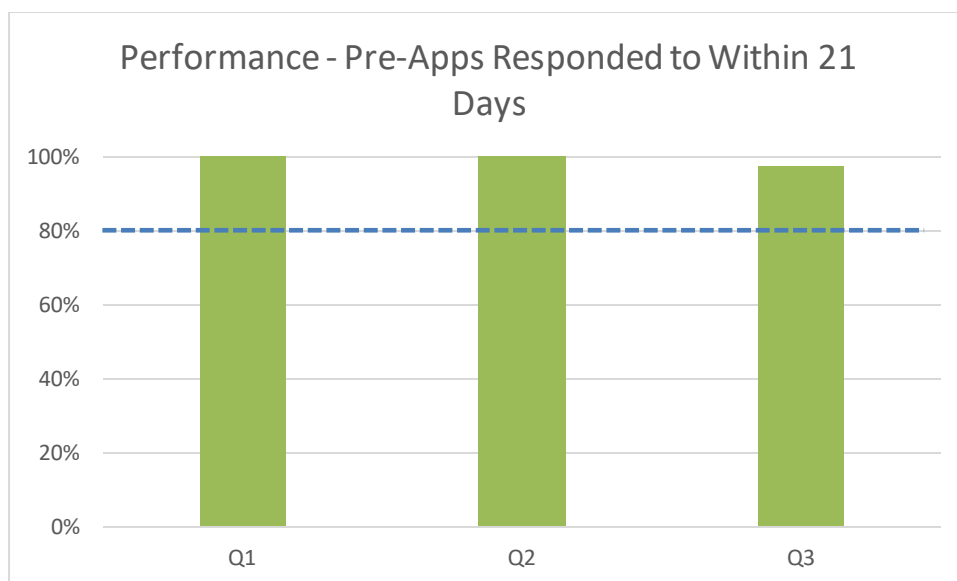
Key performance against national targets for speed and quality of decision making: Quarters 1, 2 and 3 (April – December*) 2022



--- National Target

**Up to 22nd December*

Figure 2.3 Pre-application inquiries received: Quarters 1, 2 and 3 (April – December) 2022



----- Local Target

Figure 2.4

Percentage of decisions made on appeal: Quarters 1, 2 and 3 (April – December) 2022

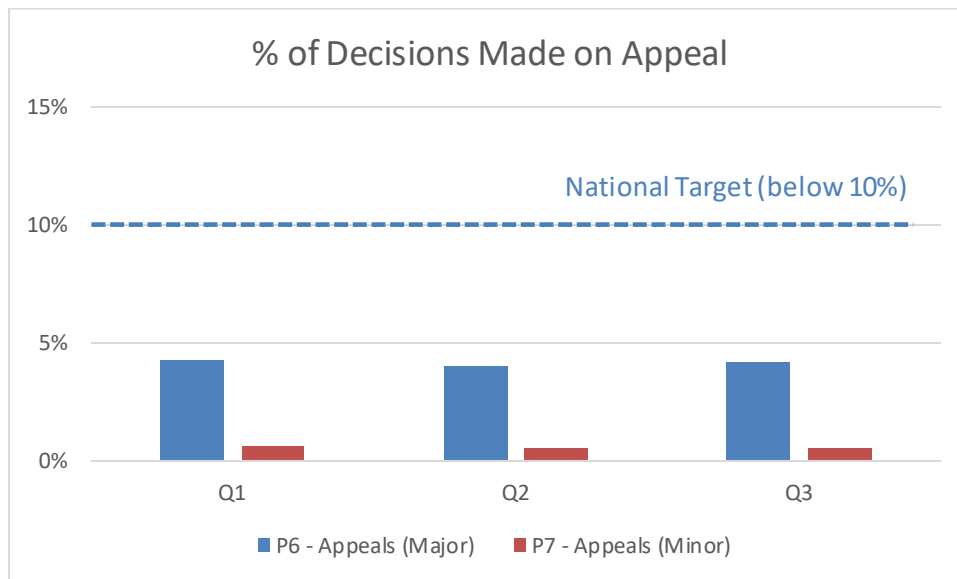


Figure 2.5

Percentage of planning applications approved: Quarters 1, 2 and 3 (April – December) 2022



Enforcement

- 2.6 As we emerge from Covid the number of complaints received in the first three quarters of 2022-23 is 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 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.

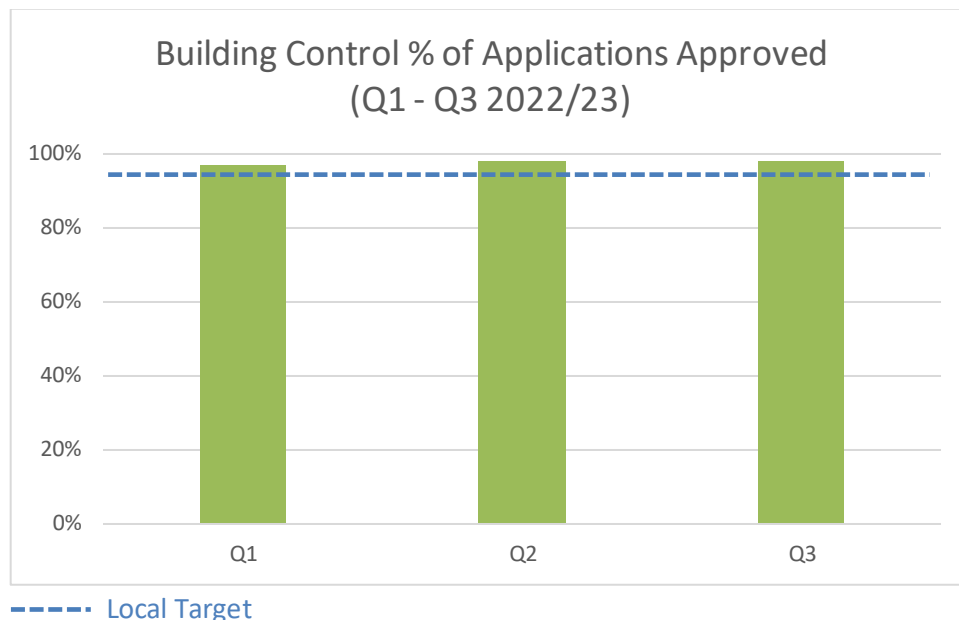
3. Building Control

Performance targets

- 3.1 This section focuses on the Building Control Team's performance in the third quarter of 2022/23.
- 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. In terms of the percentage of Building Regulation applications given full or conditional approval, figures for the first 3 quarters show this to be at 98% - compared to the locally set target of 95% (see Figure 3.1 below).
- 3.3 Results from the first three quarters of 2022/23, indicate that the Team's market share has reduced slightly from that of the previous financial year, although it remains higher than the national average for local authority building control teams. This is mainly due to the loss of some key members of staff 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. All locally set performance targets are also being met – except for the target to check plans within 3 weeks of deposit. Performance in this area is only marginally below target and an improvement plan has been put in place to address this issue.

Figure 3.1

Percentage of building regulation applications approved: Quarters 1, 2 and 3 (April – December) 2022



Income and financial performance

3.4 Building Regulation income for 2021/22 covered the Section's costs in terms of its fee-earning work element and figures for income derived from Building Control fees/charges for the first three quarters of 2022/23 appear to show a similar trend, with the deposit of several applications relating to volume housing developments and some larger commercial schemes.

Safety at sports grounds

3.5 As part of conditions of the Safety Certificates held by Southport FC, Marine FC and Aintree Racecourse, the Building Control Team undertakes annual inspections to check the grandstands are properly maintained. Plans and details relating to the temporary structures proposed for the 2023 Grand National meeting are currently being assessed.

Staffing

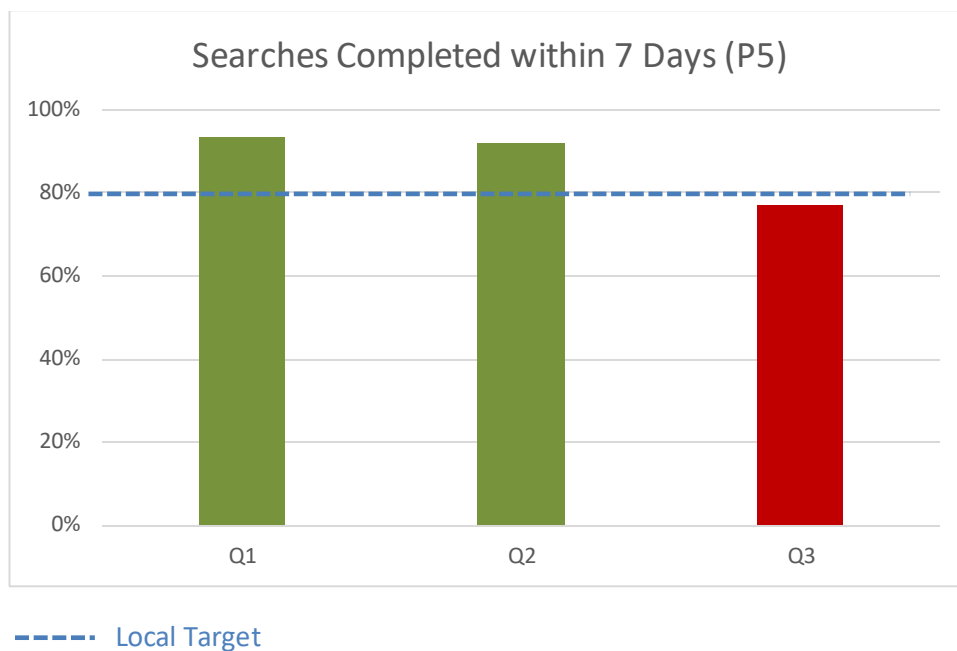
3.6 Over the last 6 months there have been a series of vacancies within the Building Control Team, the majority of which have been filled. The only current vacancy within the Team is for a Trainee Building Control Officer post.

4. Technical Support

4.1 Figure 4.1 below shows our performance over quarters one, two and three of 2022/23 in respect of the completion of local land charge searches.

Figure 4.1

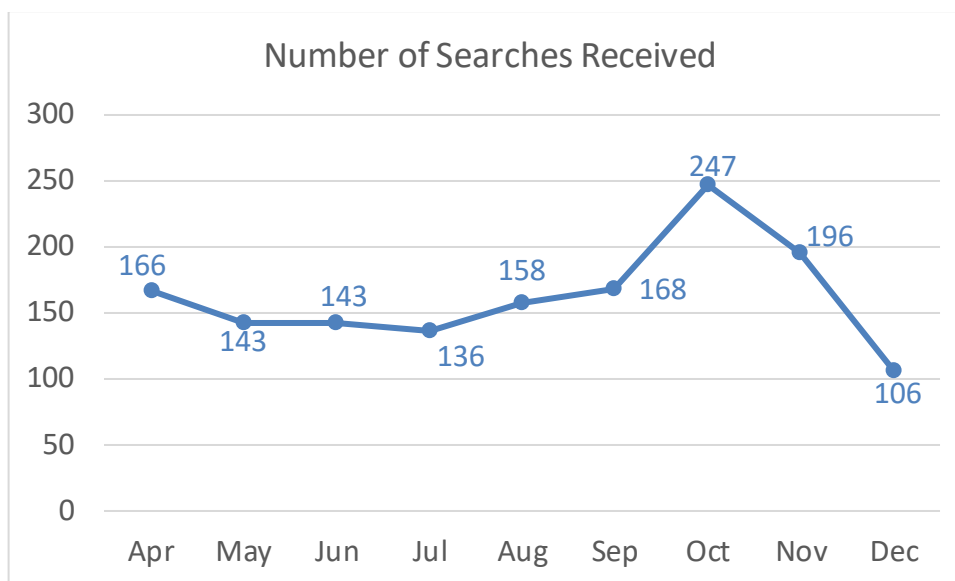
Searches completed within 7 days: Quarters 1, 2 and 3 (April – December) 2022



4.2 The performance is slightly below target for Q3. The reason for this is threefold; search requests were higher than usual (as shown in the chart below), our local land charges officer was on long term sickness absence, and other staff within the team were seconded to ensure the project of migration of local land charges data to HM Land Registry was completed on time. This led to small delays in the completion of land charge searches.

Figure 4.2

Number of searches received: Quarters 1, 2 and 3 (April – December) 2022



- 4.3 The local land charges migration project has been in progress for some time but is now nearing completion. HM Land Registry served notice on Sefton Council on 19 December stating they would be assuming responsibility for the land charges register from 16 January 2023. At this time Sefton will no longer provide searches of the register (LLC1) or personal searches of the register but will retain the larger part of the local land charge search service (the CON29). Sefton will still need to maintain the local land charges register and ensure updates are made to the HM Land Registry system.

5. Local Planning

The Sefton Local Plan

- 5.1 We have committed to undertake a high-level review to determine whether the Local Plan remains up to date or whether it needs to be updated wholly or in part. The Local Plan review will be carried out through winter of 2022-23 and will be reported in the Spring.

Major legislative change is heralded in the Levelling Up and Planning Bill. Further detail on reform to the planning system and on a new style Local Plan was announced at the end of Quarter 3 and the implications of this will be considered carefully.

- 5.2 Planning applications continue to be submitted on Local Plan allocated housing sites. As of 19 December 2022, planning approval has been granted for 74.5% of the total indicative site capacity on Local Plan housing allocations, up from 66% last year. There has now been a total of 1,145 new dwellings completed on Local Plan allocated housing sites (as at 31 March 2022), an increase of 223 during 2021/2022.

This equates to 15.76% of total Local Plan allocated capacity. This shows there is still a large supply of housing land 10 years into the 18-year period of the Local Plan (2012-30¹).

Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs) and other policy documents

- 5.3 The Planning Policy Team are currently consulting on a number of Supplementary Planning Documents and an Information Note to support the Local Plan. These include:
- Affordable Housing
 - Conversions to Flats and HMOs
 - New Housing
 - House Extensions
 - Contributions towards primary education from development
- 5.4 These were available for public comment until Friday 2nd December 2022. Work is also being progressed on a Social Value (Employment and Skills) Supplementary Planning Document and this will be available for consultation in early 2023.

Liverpool City Region work

- 5.5 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 likely to be delayed until summer of 2023 and the Council will fully engage with this, and the supporting evidence.

Bootle Area Action Plan

- 5.6 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. 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.

¹ Whilst the Local Plan was adopted in April 2017, it was based dated April 2012.

- 5.7 The first draft of the Bootle AAP was approved and consultation on the Bootle AAP Issues and Options paper was undertaken. The Council are currently considering all the comments made.
- 5.8 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. It is now expected that the Preferred Options document will be published Summer 2023.

Other work

- 5.9 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.
- 5.10 Following recent applications and appeal hearings for traveller accommodation sites, it was decided that the Council's evidence base for gypsy and traveller accommodation needed to be updated. The Council is in receipt of a draft and will complete the reporting of this hopefully in February.
- 5.11 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 is a complicated and multidisciplinary piece of work and will be managed and led by the Local Planning team. An initial draft has been received and the Local Plans Team is coordinating a response.
- 5.12 To inform both the Local Plan review and Bootle AAP (see above) the Council will undertake an Employment Land and Premises Supply assessment. This will look at all of Sefton's allocated and designated employment land, including Bootle Office Quarter.
- 5.13 The Local Plan team have recently completed its first Movers' Survey. This looks at where people moved to newly built homes in Sefton and why. It also looks at what services and facilities they have had to switch because of their move. This will be undertaken every year. The initial results can be found at <https://www.sefton.gov.uk/media/5703/movers-survey-report-2022-first-edition.pdf>

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.

- 6.2 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.

- 6.3 In order to help prevent major repairs to historic homes and to help in the cost of living crisis the Heritage team have started formulating helpful guidance for homeowners in the maintenance of their property, providing useful bespoke guidance for these important buildings will help prevent deterioration and buildings failing into costly disrepair.

Regeneration

- 6.4 The capital build part of the Southport Townscape Heritage project is progressing, and discussions continue with owners of targeted buildings. The first grant application is nearing competition - this is for 509-515 Lord Street, a grade 2 Listed Building on the Council's Buildings at Risk Register. Other schemes have now received Board approval and are slowly progressing. The team is speaking to owners of other target property with architects having offered advice and prices on some of these possible schemes.

- 6.5 The learning and skills part of the Southport Townscape Heritage project has made significant progress in developing complementary training and education initiatives. This includes performances of Southport's Victorians to various schools at the Atkinson. Excerpts of the script have been filmed and have been uploaded to Youtube. A successful and comprehensive week of Heritage Open Days have been undertaken and the exhibition held at the Atkinson called "Built on Sand – 200 Years of Southport's Changing Street Scene". This interactive, exhibition was hugely successful. We are also working closely with the CVS, Southport Civic Society and other local organisations.

- 6.6 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.

- 6.7 The heritage team was successful in December 2022 in attracting £30k funding to build on a project to help unlock the potential in vacant upper floors in historic buildings and gap sites which are having a negative impact on the Lord Street and Promenade Conservation Areas.

Advice to Development Management team

- 6.8 The number of consultation responses sent in Quarter 4 (October – December 22) is 81. This decrease from last year is due to removing the buffer zones for consultations so it means that requests for consultation are being targeted more effectively.
- 6.9 In addition, this part of the Service continues to assist in various appeals, on-site monitoring and enforcement cases.

7. Conclusion

- 7.1 Appropriate technology has been put in place to support staff who mainly work from home, 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 and we continue to hold regular staff away sessions to bring .
- 7.2 The service has risen to recent challenges 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. This positive approach continues to assist the economic recovery of the Borough.
- 7.3 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, in particular the major legislative change heralded in the Levelling Up and Planning Bill.
- 7.4 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.