

CABINET MEMBER UPDATE REPORT		
Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Regeneration and Skills – 27th June 2023)		
Councillor	Portfolio	Date
Daren Veidman	Cabinet Member Planning and Building Control	17 April 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 has reduced to 40% of per-Covid levels.

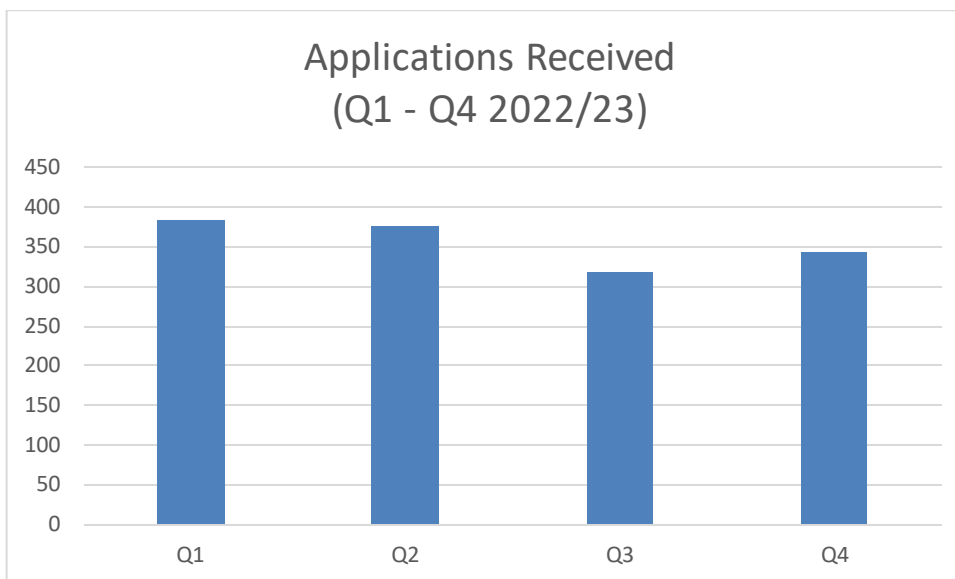
1.4 We recognise the importance of customer satisfaction and the need to understand how our customers feel about the service they receive. We have addressed this with a survey of agents who submit planning applications to us and the overall response is they consider us to be the most efficient planning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

1.5 The Management Team have completed Mental Health First Aid training during the past year. 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’.

Performance Monitoring

1.6 Work has been undertaken to prepare a directorate wide plan, which includes all the departments within the Economic Growth and Housing department. The plan demonstrates the links to Sefton’s 2030 vision and to departmental work themes and identifies performance measures to use in the future.

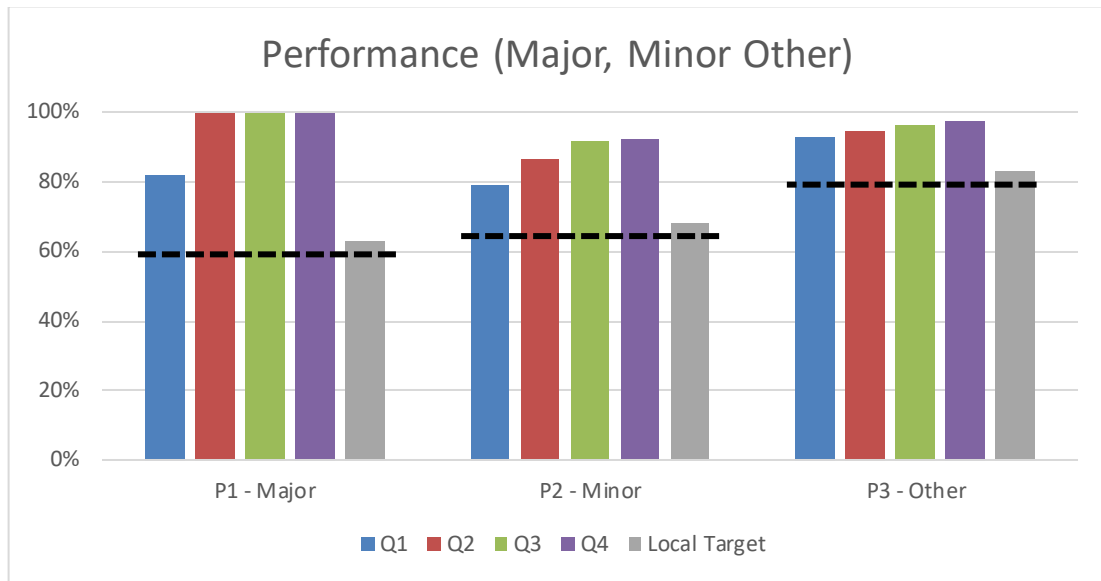
Figure 2.1 Applications received: April 2022 – March 2023



- 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 kept just above our target of approving 90% of all applications over the past year. (Figure 2.5).
- 2.5 The capacity of the Service has been stretched in the early part of this year as one of our two Team Leaders resigned at the end of May and his successor started in mid-November. We have begun to feel the benefit of the new Team Leader over this past quarter, and we are reviewing and enhancing 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.

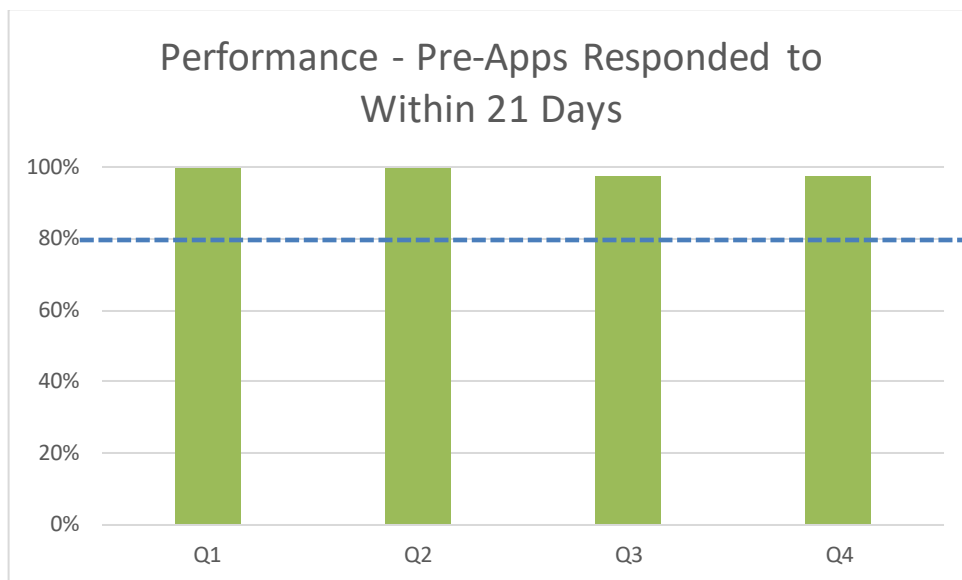
Figure 2.2

Key performance against national targets for speed and quality of decision making: April 2022 – March 2023



--- National Target

Figure 2.3 Pre-application inquiries received: April 2022 – March 2023



----- Local Target

Figure 2.4

Percentage of decisions made on appeal: April 2022 – March 2023

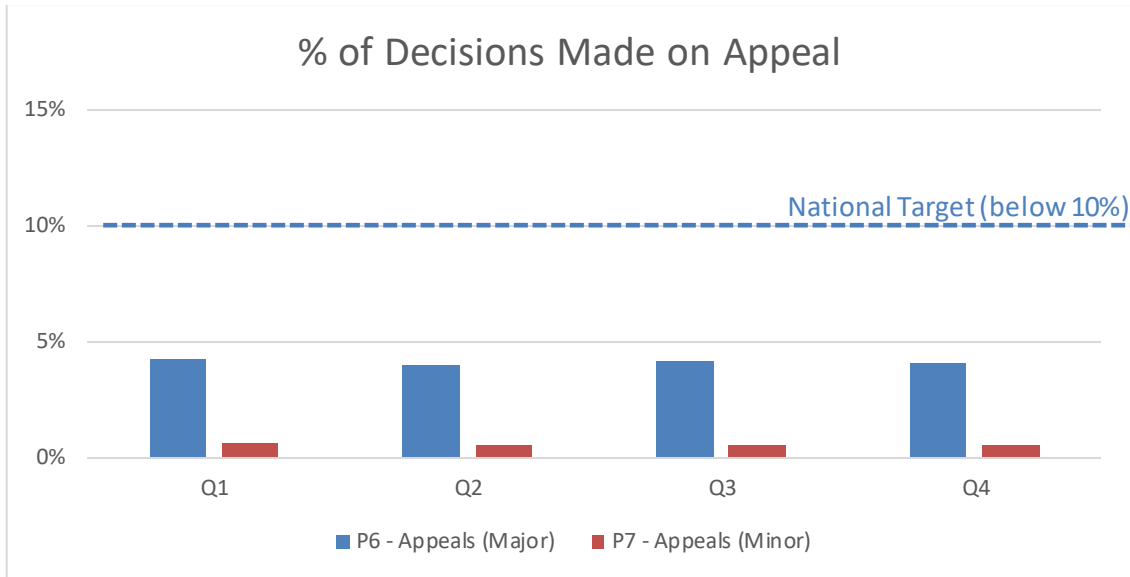
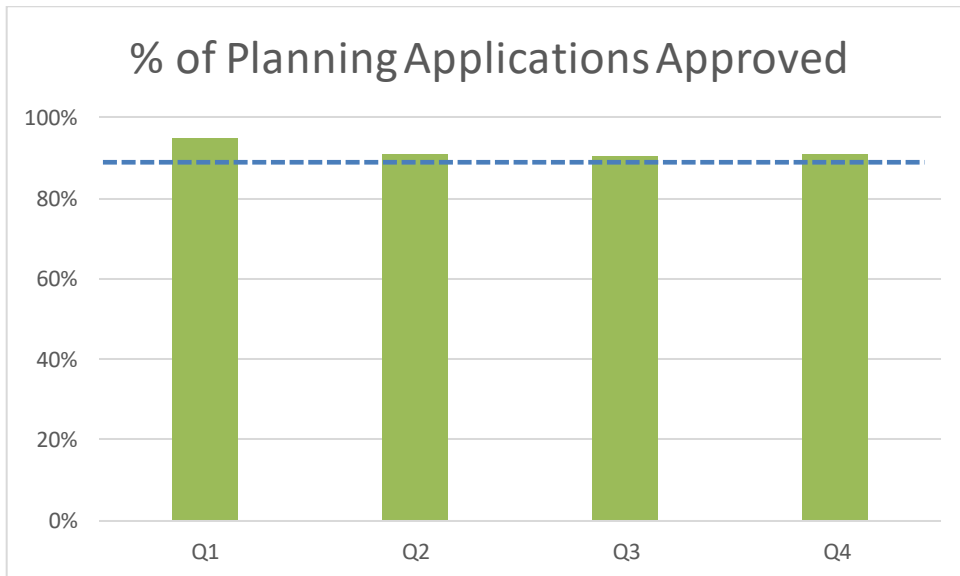


Figure 2.5

Percentage of planning applications approved: April 2022 – March 2023



----- Local Target

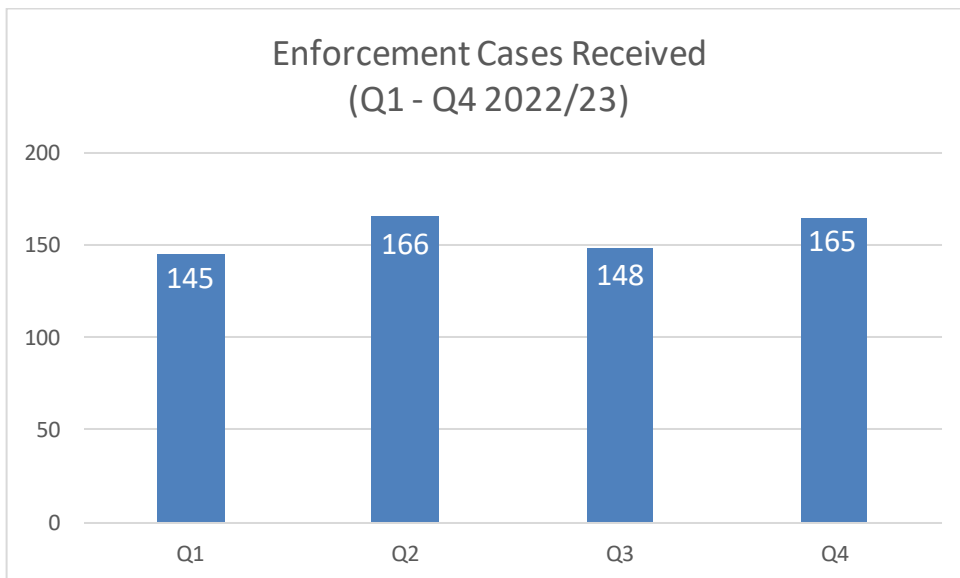
Enforcement

2.6 The number of complaints received during 2022-23 is similar to the number received in the previous year (624) – see Figure 2.6.

2.7 More cases have however resulted in formal enforcement action than the year before with 33 formal notices being served in this period (a rise of 50% from 22). Of those 33 notices:

- 17 have been complied with
- 2 have not been complied with and are proceeding to prosecution
- 2 have appealed and the appeals have been dismissed
- 8 have appealed and the appeals are ongoing
- 4 are still within the compliance period
- 0 have appealed and been successful

Figure 2.6 Enforcement cases received: April 2022 – March 2023

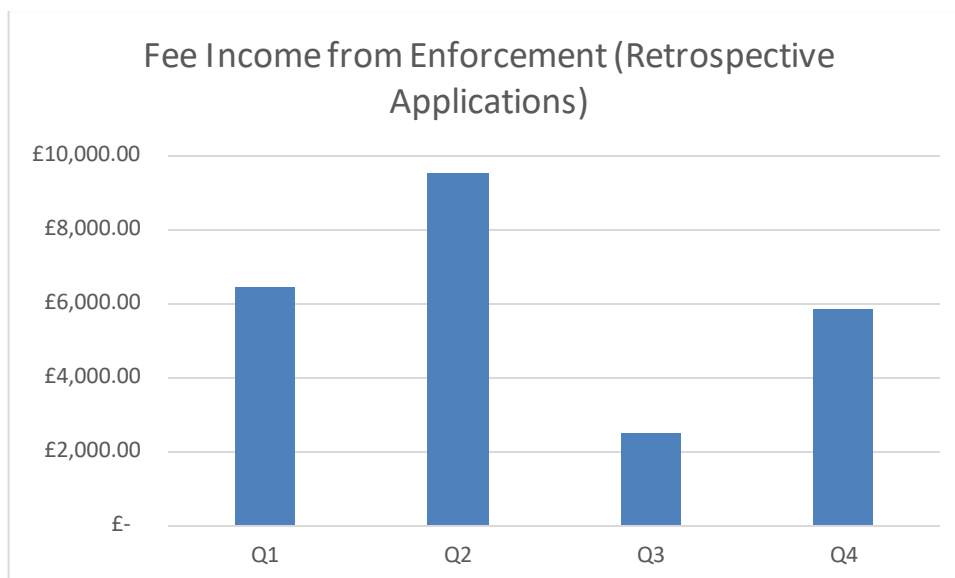


2.8 Taking a case to formal action is time consuming and when appeals are submitted this again is time consuming and takes up a lot of officer time. The figures show that the majority of complaints continue to be resolved without the need for formal action through negotiation and discussion with officers and where formal action is required the majority of cases are resolved without the need to resort to legal action (i.e. prosecution). Formal enforcement action is a last resort when all other options have failed and the enforcement team continue to be successful in this regard managing to resolve most complaints without resorting to formal action.

2.9 Figure 2.7 shows the income gained from retrospective applications resulting from following up enforcement complaints.

Figure 2.7

Fee income from enforcement (retrospective applications): April 2022 – March 2023



	No. of apps	Fees
Q1	16	£ 6,440.00
Q2	24	£ 9,506.00
Q3	7	£ 2,466.00
Q4	20	£ 5,834.00

3. Building Control

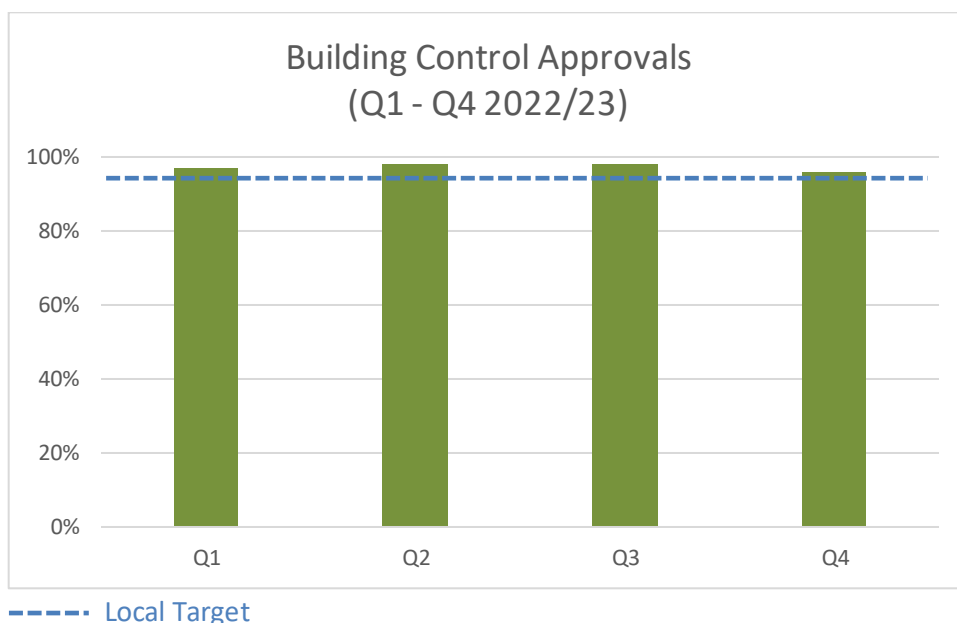
Performance targets

- 3.1 This section focuses on the Building Control Team's performance in the final 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, the figure for the final quarter of 2022/23 shows this to be at 96% - compared to the locally set target of 95% (see Figure 3.1 below).
- 3.3 Results from financial year 2022/23, indicate that the Team's market share has reduced slightly from that of the previous year, although it remains at 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 a number of 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 other locally set performance targets are also being met – except for the target to check plans within 3 weeks of deposit, although performance in this area is only marginally below target. An improvement plan has been put in place to address and overall, performance for this element is showing steady improvement.

Figure 3.1

Percentage of building regulation applications approved: April 2022 - March 2023



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 although final out-turns for 2022/23 are not available at time of writing this report, indications are that this will be the case again for 2022/23.

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. The inspection of the five permanent grandstands at Aintree Racecourse was undertaken in January 2023 and inspections at Southport FC and Marine FC were also carried out in 2022.

Staffing

3.6 Over the last 12 months there have been a series of vacancies within the Building Control Team, the majority of which have been filled.

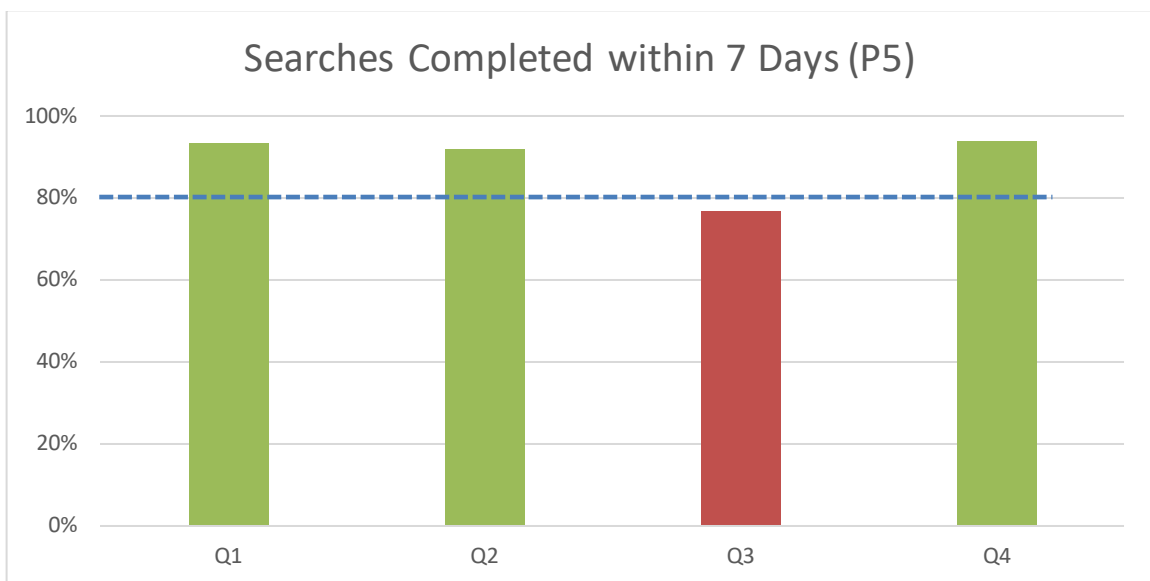
Currently there is a vacancy within the Team for a Senior Building Control Officer - following the recent resignation of a member of staff.

4. Technical Support

4.1 Figure 4.1 below shows our performance in 2022/23 over all four quarters in respect of the completion of local land charge searches. The performance has improved in quarter 4, this makes the annual performance overall 88% (8% above target).

Figure 4.1

Searches completed within 7 days: April 2022 – March 2023

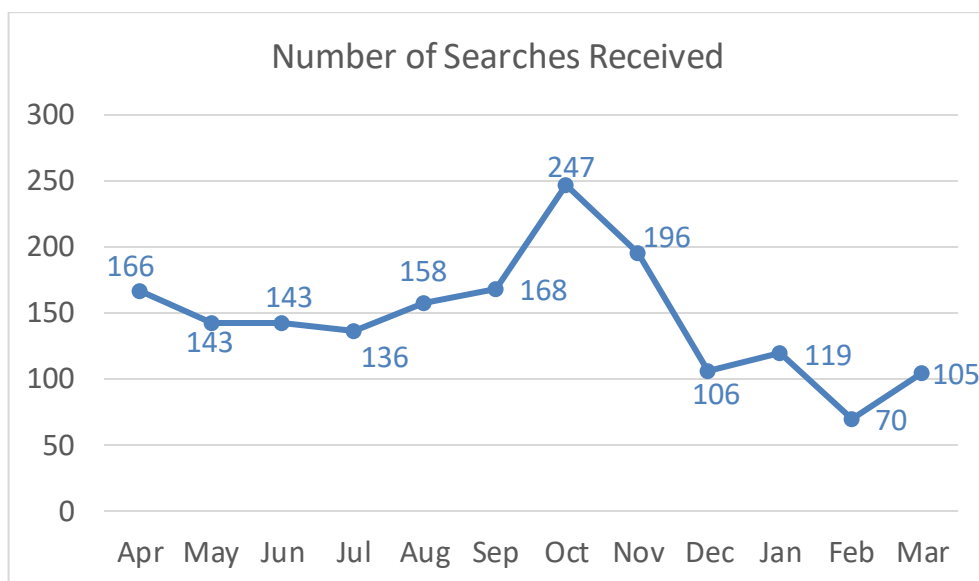


----- Local Target

4.2 In January 2023, the Land Registry assumed responsibility for the Land Charges register. The data transfer project proved complex and time-consuming, was successfully completed on time. Since then, the CON29 section of the Land Charges search (which is still being carried out by the Authority) has returned to pre-COVID levels as shown in Figure 4.2 below.

Figure 4.2

Number of searches received: April 2022 – March 2023



5. Local Planning

The Sefton Local Plan

- 5.1 The Council 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.
- 5.2 Major legislative change is included in the Levelling Up and Planning Bill which is currently making its way through parliament. Further detail on reform to the planning system and on a new style Local Plan was announced at the end of December and this will have significant implications for when and how the next Local Plan is progressed. Any decision on the review of the Local Plan will take account of the proposed changes to the shape and content of local plans.
- 5.3 Planning applications continue to be submitted on Local Plan allocated housing sites. As of 21 March 2023, planning approval has been granted for 76.6% of the total indicative site capacity on Local Plan housing allocations, up from 74.5% last December. The latest approval (1st March) on a Local Plan housing allocation was 146 homes on Waddicar Farm site in Melling. There have 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

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

- 5.4 The Planning Policy Team recently consulted on a number of Supplementary Planning Documents and an Information Note to support the Local Plan. These include:
- Affordable Housing SPD
 - Conversions to Flats and HMOs SPD
 - New Housing SPD
 - House Extensions SPD
 - Social Value (Employment and Skills) SPD
 - Contributions towards primary education from development Information Note
- 5.5 These were available for public comment in two batches: November to December 2022; and February to March 2023. They have since progressed and now inform decision making.

Liverpool City Region work

- 5.6 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, at the earliest and the Council will fully engage with this, and the supporting evidence.

Bootle Area Action Plan

- 5.7 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.
- 5.8 The first draft 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 2021 to 31 January 2022.
- 5.9 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.

The Preferred Options document will be published Summer 2023.

Other work

- 5.10 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.
- 5.11 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 commissioned a Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Needs Assessment and is now in receipt of the final study which will be published online.
- 5.12 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.
- 5.13 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.
- 5.14 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 are due to publish 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.
- 6.4 In order to help deal with the Climate Emergency and the cost of living crisis the Heritage team have formulated helpful guidance for homeowners in improving energy efficiency in their historic homes and saving money.

Regeneration

- 6.5 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 properties 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 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.
- 6.7 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 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

- 6.9 The number of consultation responses sent in the financial year of April 2022 - March 2023 is 404. 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.
- 6.10 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 and with significant increases in the numbers of applications and staffing issues it was difficult for a period to maintain a high level of performance.
- 7.2 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. We continue to hold regular staff away sessions to bring members of different teams together, as well as helping to integrate those who have joined the Service since the start of Covid and have never known what it is like to be part of a Service working together in one office.
- 7.3 Feedback from the last Sefton Agents' Forum (February 2023) showed that 80% of the agents were aware of the measures and had used some of the options available, suggesting the publicity had been effective and the measures were helpful. 71% said that the service that Planning Services provided during COVID was either "good" or "excellent", and that Sefton's Planning service was either "better" or "significantly better" than other planning services used within the region. It is therefore felt that the measures had a significant and positive impact in this Borough. We intend to carry out a full customer satisfaction survey later in 2023 which will influence how we provide our service.
- 7.4 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 and recently announced reforms to the planning system which will have implications for the review of the Local Plan.