Chelmsford City Council Overview & Scrutiny Committee

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Planning Application Consultation Portal - Inform and Debate

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Purpose
To provide an overview of the Council's planning-related digital systems used to publish and manage planning application information and consultations, the performance and reliability issues experienced by users, actions taken to mitigate these issues, and the options available for future system improvements

Recommendations
1. That the Committee note the content of the report.

Summary of Key Points
- The system used to view planning application plans and documents, provided through Workflow 360 (Civica) as part of Public Access, continues to experience significant performance and usability issues, affecting residents, consultees, Members and officers seeking to access planning application information.

- The ongoing issues generate a high volume of complaints, create additional work for Planning and Digital Services staff, reduce public confidence in the service and present a risk to the Council's ability to provide timely and reliable access to planning information.

- This report has been prepared to inform Members of the extent of the issues, the work undertaken to address them, the options available to the Council and the risks associated with maintaining the current arrangements.

- Whilst Officers continue to work to improve system performance, there is no certainty that the fundamental limitations of the current system can be resolved without replacement of the system.

- Local Government Reorganisation is a consideration for any future system procurement, however, it does not remove the need to address the immediate service, operational and customer experience risks arising from the current system.

- It is concluded that the Council should continue work to identify a replacement solution for the management and accessibility of planning documents, whilst taking account of future Local Government Reorganisation requirements and opportunities for collaboration with other authorities.

1. Introduction

1.1. This report relates specifically to the software systems used by the Planning Service to publish and manage planning application information and consultations.

1.2. It should be noted that several different systems are often referred to as "the planning consultation portal" and these are often confused with one another. These are:

- **Public Access** - the Council's online system used to view planning applications, plans, documents and consultation responses, as well as make comments on planning applications.

- **The Planning Portal** - a national service used by applicants to submit planning applications as well as obtain general planning advice.

- **Local Plan consultation software** - systems used to consult on planning policy documents and Local Plan preparation.

1.3. This report focuses on the Council's Public Access and associated planning management systems.

2. Public Access

2.1. The planning system operates on the principles of transparency, public participation and democratic accountability. The Council is required by legislation[1] to publicise planning applications and provide opportunities for interested parties to make representations before applications are determined.

2.2. The Council fulfils these requirements through its online Public Access system, which enables members of the public, statutory consultees, applicants, agents, Parish (and Town) Councils and Members to:

- View planning applications and supporting documents.
- Track the progress of applications.
- Access consultation responses and officer reports, where available.
- Submit comments or representations on applications during the consultation period.

2.3. Public representations are an important part of the decision-making process. The Council must consider material planning considerations raised through consultation responses when determining planning applications, however, planning decisions must be made in accordance with the adopted Development Plan (Local Plan) alongside national planning policy unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

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[1] *Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015 ("the DMPO")*

The number of comments received either in support of or opposition to a proposal is not, in itself, determinative.

2.4. Publishing planning applications online also supports a wider commitment to openness and accessibility by allowing planning information to be accessed at any time without the need to attend Council offices.

2.5. The Public Access system software used is provided by third parties and used, to differing extents, by many local planning authorities across the country. There are two providers of the Council's Public Access system and two separate software systems used which, together, provide the full Public Access service. Members of the public do not notice the distinction between the two software systems. These are:

- Idox – application search, information, application timeline, commenting, email notifications.
- Workflow 360 (Civica) – view and download plans and documents.

3. Workflow 360 (Civica)

3.1. Workflow 360 (Civica) is currently used for workflow and document storage and has been in use for nearly 2 decades. The version currently used is deployed on-premise with physical servers and back-ups.

3.2. Planning, Revenues & Benefits, Strategic Housing, Local Land Charges, Customer Services and Environmental Services are the only areas that use data storage and workflow within Workflow 360. Customer Services use of Civica is largely centred on sending information to other departments. It is estimated that Planning own ~40% of the data stored.

3.3. Over the last several years there has been a desire to move away from Workflow 360/Civica and use a specialist Planning solution. To date, this has not been a viable option due to the significant cost of data extraction.

4. Current Performance and Reliability

4.1. Over the past few years there have been numerous technical issues with the Public Access software. This has generated many complaints from Members, the public, Parish and Town Councils, statutory consultees, developers and officers within the Planning Service. Complaints can generally be categorised as follows:

- **'Downtime' across the software** – Occasionally Public Access is 'down' and not accessible. This is infrequent. When it occurs, it is usually back up-and-running on the same day. This issue was largely resolved by an update to Public Access in July 2026.
- **Inability to 'download all' documents** – Whilst there is a link to 'download all' it is a known issue that this functionality does not work. This has been raised with the supplier of the software (Workflow 360/Civica) but there is no fix or resolution.

- **Slowness to view or download individual documents** – This issue is the main source of complaints. This issue relates to the Workflow 360 (W360) element of Public Access. The Planning Service scan or import all documents submitted with a planning application so that they can be viewed. Due to the nature of planning application documents, these are often A1 or A0 plans or complex documents. W360 saves these files as .TIFF files which can be extremely large (~100s of MB (megabyte)). In turn, these images are stored within a SQL (Structured Query Language) database. When an image is requested, the application must retrieve it from the database, convert to a displayable format and then render it on screen. For a large image, this can be a resource-intensive process, especially if multiple people are requesting multiple documents at the same time. The application is 32-bit which limits its memory usage to 4GB, meaning that providing the server with additional storage capacity would not resolve the issue.
- **Time limit on comment submission** – This is a known limitation. As such, there is advice on the Council's website which states: *"If you have a detailed comment, you may want to write it in another program, such as Microsoft Word, then paste it into Public Access. This is because sessions on Public Access time out after 30 minutes."*
- **Time delay to display comments** – This is not an error with Public Access. As explained on the Council's website, officers make all comments we receive publicly available. There is a manual process behind this in which all comments are reviewed, checked for sensitive information, and redacted, if necessary, in line with our GDPR responsibilities. We aim to publish comments we receive online around two or three days after we receive them, but it can take longer if we receive a large number of comments on an application. This is also compounded by residents then submitting multiple comments on an application as they cannot see their comments online. Our website does already make it clear that comments take some time to display. Any delays in displaying public comments on the website does not affect the fairness of the consultation process. Residents do not need to view others comments before deciding whether to comment on an application themselves or before they reach a view about how they personally feel they would be impacted by a proposal. The Council do not need residents to 'build upon points raised by others' as the purpose of the consultation period is to understand how each person feels they may be affected (or not).
- **Error 403 'blocked'** – This is an infrequent issue whereby some users cannot access the Public Access platform. This is because the Council's firewall blocks the user as it perceives that their IP address could be a threat. Where this occurs and users make us aware of the issue, we ask for the date and time of the error, as well as their IP address which then allows Digital Services to attempt to manually unblock their address.

4.2. Plans, drawings and supporting documents often contain detailed information necessary to understand a development proposal. If documents cannot be viewed or downloaded, members of the public may find it difficult to:

- Understand what development is proposed.
- Assess the potential impact on their property or local area.
- Submit informed representations within the consultation period.

4.3. This can lead to concerns that residents have been unable to participate fully in the planning process.

4.4. When documents cannot be accessed online, residents frequently contact the Council for assistance. This results in:

- Increased telephone enquiries.
- Additional email correspondence.
- Requests for documents to be supplied by alternative means.
- Increased officer time spent providing support and responding to complaints.

4.5. This places additional pressure on Planning and Customer Services officers.

4.6. The planning system relies on openness and transparency. Difficulties accessing application documents can undermine public confidence in the planning process, particularly where residents perceive that information is unavailable or difficult to obtain.

4.7. Although planning applications remain validly advertised through statutory publicity arrangements, system issues can affect the ease with which information is accessed.

4.8. Public Access is used not only by residents but also by:

- Town and Parish Councils.
- Statutory consultees.
- Members.
- Applicants and agents.
- Prospective purchasers and solicitors (through Local Land Charges).
- Community groups.

4.9. Where plans cannot be viewed efficiently, consultees often require additional time to review proposals and seek information directly from officers.

4.10. The limitations of the current Public Access system are also a significant source of frustration for Planning Service officers and make it difficult for them to work efficiently. The internal Document Management System used by the Planning Service uses the same W360 (Civica) software as the Public Access document viewer, so officers frequently face delays when opening drawings and documents. Files may fail to display even after a delay, requiring officers to close and restart the software. This hinders effective working in a busy, already resource-constrained service. Officers also spend considerable time helping the public, Members and consultees access drawings and documents.

5. Actions to Date

5.1. To date, Officers have taken several steps with a view to resolving the issues or improve the service available. These have included:

- Public Access upgrades where they have been available from the third-party software developers.
- Rasing and escalating issues with Civica.
- Guidance for Officers on how to make plans and documents available in alternative formats.
- Double entry of planning application plans and documents so that they appear through Public Access as well as being available on SharePoint.
- Links to application documents in SharePoint published on Public Access.
- Emailed SharePoint links where requested.
- Proactive emailing of SharePoint links to statutory consultees (such as the Local Highway Authority and Lead Local Flood Authority).
- New documents and drawings to be imported as PDFs. This may make retrieval by Public Access quicker. As a recent action, we are yet to see whether this has a meaningful impact.
- Internal monitoring and escalation of recurring issues.
- Collaboration with Maldon District Council to ascertain how their systems operate.

6. Impact of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)

6.1. The Government's recent decision to pause LGR and withdraw the Essex proposal introduces uncertainty regarding the future structure of local government and the long-term ICT requirements of planning services. Any future unitary authority may seek to rationalise systems across a wider geographic area and adopt common software platforms to support service integration and efficiency.

6.2. At present, there is no confirmed outcome, implementation date or agreed approach to planning system harmonisation. As a result, it is not possible to determine whether any replacement Public Access or document management system procured by the Council would ultimately be retained, replaced or integrated into a wider solution as part of a future unitary authority.

6.3. That said, the current issues experienced with Workflow 360 (Civica) and the associated impact on residents, consultees, Members and officers are ongoing and significant. Delaying investment solely because of potential future LGR arrangements would mean that the Council would continue to operate with a system that generates complaints, requires resource-intensive workarounds and presents operational risks.

6.4. Even if LGR leads to the adoption of a different planning system in the future, it is likely that the substantial costs associated with data migration from Workflow 360 would still need to be incurred. Procuring an improved system now may therefore provide service benefits in the intervening period whilst also facilitating a future migration from a more modern and supportable platform.

6.5. Officers are maintaining dialogue with neighbouring Essex authorities and will seek opportunities to collaborate on future procurement and system design where appropriate. Any procurement exercise would take account of emerging LGR proposals to ensure that specifications, contracts and implementation arrangements retain sufficient flexibility to accommodate future organisational change. Whilst LGR

is an important consideration, it does not remove the need to address the current service risks and limitations.

7. Work Currently Underway

7.1. Officers have continued to work with Civica to investigate and resolve the recurring issues affecting the Workflow 360 Public Access system. This has included the logging and escalation of issues and ongoing monitoring of system performance.

7.2. A significant amount of officer time is currently being devoted to responding to user complaints, troubleshooting access issues and implementing workarounds to ensure residents, consultees and other stakeholders can continue to view planning application information.

7.3. Officers are undertaking a review of alternative solutions available in the market, including engagement with other local authorities to understand their experiences of different planning software providers and document management systems, as well as a scheduled meeting with Open Digital Planning (supported by MHCLG) for advice.

7.4. Initial discussions have also taken place regarding the requirements for a future replacement system, including functionality, integration with back-office planning systems, document storage arrangements, accessibility requirements and opportunities to improve the customer experience.

7.5. Officers are assessing the financial, technical and operational implications of replacing the current system, including procurement options, implementation timescales and data migration requirements.

7.6. Officers are also monitoring developments relating to Local Government Reorganisation and maintaining dialogue with neighbouring authorities to ensure that any future system decisions remain compatible with emerging opportunities for collaboration and service alignment.

7.7. Whilst this work has improved understanding of the options available and dependencies, no immediate technical solution has been identified that would address the fundamental limitations of the current system without either significant investment or replacement of the existing platform.

8. Future Options and Dependencies

Option A - Defer Procurement Until LGR Arrangements Are Confirmed

8.1. This option would put on hold the procurement of any replacement software until LGR arrangements are confirmed. Whilst this would be beneficial in terms of aligning a system with other authorities this would delay a new system being implemented for, potentially, a significant period of time. During this time it would be anticipated that the issues currently experienced would be ongoing. There would also be an ongoing reliance on current ‘workarounds’ which are not the most efficient way of working.

Option B - Procure a Replacement System at the Earliest Opportunity

8.2. This option would address the current service issues in the shortest timeframe. Whilst a new system would take some time (~18 months) to procure and implement, in the long term this would secure an improved user experience for residents, consultees, Members and Officers. This option would also allow for a new system to be procured which fits the needs of Chelmsford City Council as a single authority.

8.3. This option would require significant financial investment. Data from the Workflow 360 (Civica) would need to be migrated to a new system. This aspect of the project in itself comes with a considerable financial cost. This drawback, however, would also apply to Option 1 as it is a fair assumption, given the issues highlighted, that merging authorities would not wish to use Workflow 360 (Civica).

8.4. This option also carries a disadvantage in that any future reconfiguration through LGR could mean that a future unitary authority may wish to use an alternative system. Should Option B be the preferred option, Officer's would ensure collaboration, so far as possible, with other neighbouring authorities.

Option C - Continue with Existing Systems and Incremental Improvements

8.5. Whilst this option has a low immediate cost, it would not resolve the issues that have been highlighted. Continuing with this option would give rise to further complaints, Local Government Ombudsman intervention, and potentially challenges to decisions made through the Judicial Review process. This risk is considered to be both realistic and severe. The workarounds implemented would mitigate some of this risk, but do not eliminate it. This option would not resolve the underlying limitations of the system and would likely require further maintenance in the future.

8.6. Any future decisions will be influenced by a number of factors, including:

- Budget availability.
- Staff and project resource capacity.
- Procurement requirements and timescales.
- Software supplier roadmaps.
- Digital infrastructure requirements.
- Outcomes and timescales associated with Local Government Reorganisation.
- Competing corporate priorities and transformation programmes.

9. Conclusion

9.1. Given the issues highlighted, the risk associated with the ongoing system, the resources needed to continue to respond to complaints and implement workarounds as well as the opportunity to collaborate with neighbouring authorities regardless of LGR arrangements, it is the view of the Planning Service and Digital Services that Option B (Procure a Replacement System at the Earliest Opportunity) is the most effective, sustainable and lowest-risk option for the Council. This would require significant investment at a time when overall budgetary pressures facing the Council are significant with competing priorities. However, from a technical and operational perspective, Option B represents the best long-term solution for the Council, providing the greatest assurance of service resilience and efficiency.

List of appendices:

None.

Background papers:

None.

Corporate Implications

Corporate Implication	Response
Legal/Constitutional	No action could risk a challenge through Judicial Review or escalation to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.
Financial	Any replacement system is likely to have a significant cost associated with it.
Potential impact on climate change and the environment	None.
Contribution toward achieving a net zero carbon position by 2030	None.
Personnel	None.
Risk Management	None.
Equality and Diversity	None.
Health and Safety	None.
Digital	See report. The report proposes a new digital solution for planning application documents.
Other	None.

Equality Impact Assessment

An Equality Impact Assessment is not required as the report relates to an Inform & Debate session and does not propose a change in policy or procedure.

Consultees:

Digital Services

Planning Services

Management Team

Relevant Policies and Strategies:

Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015

Town and Country Planning Act 1990

Statement of Community Involvement