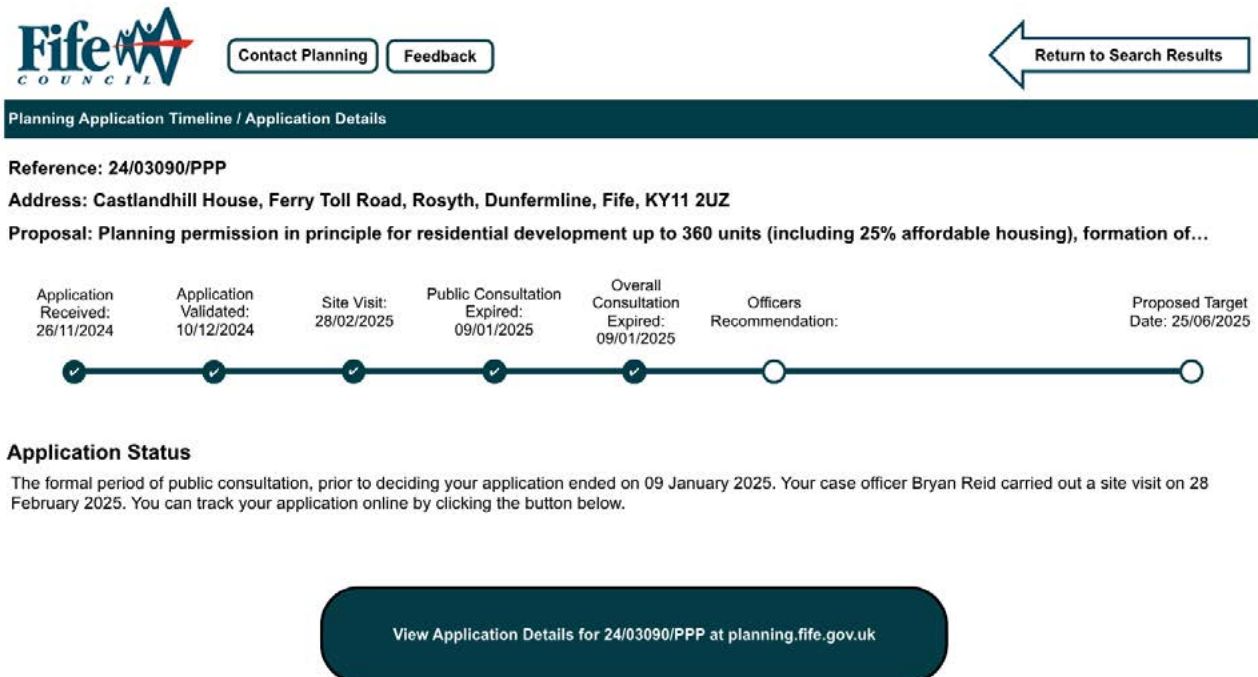


# Planning Application Timeline Tool



## Context

As part of Fife's continuous improvement work, the planning authority found that communication should be key within the planning system. This does not always seem to be the case throughout the service and by analysing customer feedback, planning have identified there are some areas where communication could be improved. During the COVID pandemic and the inability to have a telephone service, this also impacted communication with customers. The service collated all customer enquiries to find that the majority of these related to getting an update on their planning application. Combined with this, the service found that most customers found initial communication was good during the validation process of an application, but contact was lost until an application proceeded towards a decision.

Using this data and with the help of digital technology, the Improvement Team in 2021 had an idea of using Power BI to create a tool which could be used by customers to show exactly where an application is within the planning system. In addition, the service could show what has been completed and what is still to be completed. This would help with

communication but would enable customers to find out more information on their planning application without the need to contact the planning authority directly.

Fife Council's online planning system has limitations. Although this will show some progress of cases and has recently implemented a simple timeline before the service could implement anything similar, it does not provide a complete picture. To assist customers and to give them an updated position on their application which can be used in conjunction with the online planning system, the Improvement Team started to map out the stages of an application. From an application that is received, whether it is invalid, any site visits, consultation dates, how the decision will be made (committee/delegated) and the report being started, to a recommendation and the final decision being made.

## What Happened

At the time this project was scoped out the service employed two Planning Improvement Technicians within the planning service. One of them has experience in computer programming and the other has extensive experience working within planning dealing with complex applications for validation. Both members of staff have experience with dealing with customers daily. This together with customer feedback provided a good base to scope out what was required. During this project, the Improvement Team was expanded with another member of staff who had some planning experience but also, some proven ability in using the systems within the planning authority. The service has structured the team to include a Planning Improvement Officer who oversees all improvement projects and allocates work to two Planning Improvement Technicians. Using Power BI dataflows, the team were able to create a data warehouse to collate some of the service's data from a case management system – Uniform. This allows the use of this data to create several visualisations and can be coded to provide different data fields and outputs.

Initially, the team had to create a baseline of the main stages of a planning application. As highlighted above, there are many stages that planning applications go through but using some of the fields in our case work system, it is possible to analyse where an application is within the planning process and what else is required to be completed before a decision can be made. By comparing these fields, each stage was scoped within the process as well as a text description which would also be displayed to the customer.

Using each of these stages, custom text was created to give customers details on their application when they enter either an application reference number or an application address using a custom-built user interface. As part of this, a graphical timeline which shows which stages have been completed and what stages have still to be completed as shown below.

## Areas of Collaboration

The idea of this project came directly from within the Improvement Team. One of the staff had recently completed training in Power BI while analysing the many comments



received from our customers who completed the customer survey and emails that were received through a central mailbox during the COVID pandemic. The idea was to provide customers more communication and as much information about their planning application as possible while adhering to data protection principles. Using Power BI previously for a new weekly update of development applications, invaluable feedback was received from a representative of Disabilities Fife regarding accessibility. A user interface was designed with this knowledge and information in mind. The tool is also due to be presented at the next Agents Forum to gather more feedback and how it can be improved. A link has also been included to acknowledgement letters for planning applications which are sent when every application is validated.

## Overall Result

The Timeline Tool was published in March, and it is hoped that this will help to provide the service's customers with more information about their planning application while reducing the need to contact the service and case officers directly. The tool also includes a link so customers can contact planning services directly using an online form which is also used for customer enquiries. This allows the service to collate all enquiries together but also to monitor its responses. In the next year, feedback will also be gathered on this while monitoring enquiries to quantify the effectiveness of this piece of work.

Using agile principles and as part of the service's commitment to continuous improvements, the Improvement Team have already gathered some ideas to expand the Timeline Tool further and upgrade this function by including target dates, the monitoring of extensions of time, amendments received, draft and final sign off dates, and to add a feedback form so customers can also suggest improvements.

## Lessons Learned

The planning service in Fife invested in the workforce and identified an Improvement Team to be vital so that it is possible to deliver this type of project work. Although staff have knowledge of planning, the service has found it to be invaluable to have people that can expand the use of digital tools and systems to help within the planning process. While Planning Services still relies on the council's IT Service for some aspects of this, the service has found that planning staff who can combine their planning knowledge with various digital skills, are crucial to deliver improvements.

Although, this was identified early as an improvement, it took a bit of time to design and implement the project. It also involved working closely with colleagues within the IT Service to produce a working prototype that could be published online. At the time Planning Service's workload was high, and this project was delayed for various reasons. On reflection, this could have been completed sooner. Delaying the project meant the team had to keep going back to it and the complexity meant that some of the steps had to be duplicated.



Within this time, the software company that provides the online planning system, also delivered a timeline within their public access system. Although it is helpful, it does not show as many stages as the Planning Service's Timeline Tool can now display for our customers but there was a risk that this work might have become superfluous.

