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Joyce White
Chief Executive
West Dunbartonshire Council



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Dear Ms White

COUNCIL PERFORMANCE: THE PLANNING PERFORMANCE FRAMEWORK

I am writing to thank you for your authority's first annual report under the new Planning Performance Framework. I have enclosed a feedback report for your authority, and I would ask you to consider this with your planning officials as part of the approach to pursuing continuous performance improvement together.

You will know that I am committed to ensuring that the planning system in Scotland does all it can to facilitate sustainable economic growth for Scotland. I strongly believe that this should not be dependent solely on legislative and procedural change. Changes in culture and service delivery, by all sectors involved in planning, will improve the reputation and effectiveness of our planning system and are consistent with our shared commitments to Delivering Planning Reform.

The Planning Performance Framework, which was developed by Heads of Planning Scotland, presents a more holistic framework for assessing planning authority performance and improvement. While I am encouraged by this first round of performance reports, I would ask that you ensure that the focus on performance and service culture is firmly embedded throughout your authority, by all who play a part in delivering the planning service, so that planning can achieve its' potential in supporting the Government's Economic Strategy.

Performance is not just the responsibility of planning authority planners. The development sector, agents, agencies, communities and other Council services all need to work together to improve delivery. There are some key areas where I want to see a particular focus on improvements across Scotland.

- We have a plan-led system and I am determined that development plans should be relevant and up to date, reviewed and replaced on a rolling 5-year cycle.
- I want to see evidence that clear arrangements are in place for pre-application discussion and that strong project management arrangements support determinations on significant developments. My officials are separately leading work on promotion of processing agreements in this regard.
- I want to ensure that requests for information are clear and proportionate. We need to reduce some of the emphasis on process where value is not being added, and to maintain a focus on positive outcomes and quality of place.

- There is a need to increase pace in planning decision-making. While there have been some recent improvements by some authorities, this has been variable across the country and it is still taking too long to determine some planning applications.
- There are some long-running 'legacy' cases which, when decided after several years, are distorting the performance statistics and damaging planning's reputation. These old cases need to be withdrawn or concluded as soon as possible.
- I want to improve performance on managing the negotiation, conclusion, and delivery of section 75/legal agreements.

All of this in turn should lead to reduced and more predictable decision-making timescales and help to get important development up and running as early as possible.

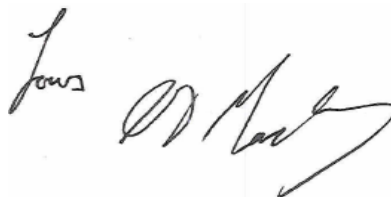
Turning to your authority's performance report, I was very encouraged to hear about the customer-focused approach that you have been taking, with particular emphasis on improving developer confidence in your service and supporting investment and regeneration. Certainty is something that matters to those looking to invest, and your engagement with developers and maintenance of an up-to-date policy framework, along with efficient and consistent decision-making will play very well with investors. I hope you will have success in encouraging developers to enter into processing agreements with you as a means to further secure confidence in the operation of planning in West Dunbartonshire.

In addition to the progress being made through the framework, you will likely be aware that we have recently convened a High-Level Group on Planning Performance, which I co-chair with Councillor Stephen Hagan, COSLA Spokesperson for Development, Economy and Sustainability. The group is reviewing performance across Scotland and is bringing a shared focus to key areas for improvement and I have enclosed a copy of a Performance Markers Paper which the group have agreed.

It is identifying the markers of good performance that will link to any future reform of planning fees, as well as looking at the process that will be used for setting different fee levels for individual authorities based on their performance under powers proposed through the Regulatory Reform (Scotland) Bill.

I am hosting a series of events across Scotland for local authority and agency officers to discuss my views and expectations of performance within the planning service. I would be pleased if you would encourage staff from across your authority who have a role to play in planning to attend their nearest event.

In the meantime I look forward to hearing about your authority's progress with delivering your service improvements and to your next annual performance report.



DEREK MACKAY

cc. Pamela Clifford