

Report on: - Herefordshire Council Planning Services.

Created from: - 2 Day review of processes and systems.

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1 Purpose of Document

The purpose of this document is to provide details of the current processes and systems that are in use by Herefordshire Council planning services as requested by the Planning services scrutiny Committee.

The document intends to give a balanced view on the current status of systems and processes within the planning services e.g. are they working well, do they need attention or could they benefit from more detailed investigation to potentially improve the way they currently operate.

The document also attempts to illustrate estimated timescales for any effort required for each observation. However these should be taken as a guide only until further detailed analysis work can be carried should it be requested.

The document is not a development plan however if one is created the contents of this document could greatly inform the setting of key objectives.

2 Key Points Summary

- From the review of processes and systems in use by Herefordshire Council's planning services department it was clear that they are fit for purpose. The definition of fit for purpose in this context is that the required business operation(s) can be completed from start to finished using the processes and systems in place.
- Although the processes and systems are fit for purpose it was identified during the review that there could be improvements made to deliver greater business efficiency in workflow and throughput of planning applications and reduce staff effort for various stages in the application processing and determination management.
- The review identified that Planning Services are still quite dependant on manual paper methods – there are electronic methods that can be utilised to make improvements in this area. The implementation and use of 1 APP (software Connector for Civica to the planning portal), redesign of the workflow and information capturing channels would make things more effective. This would align closer to the governments digital by default program. *(Planning services have already started to investigate the implementation of this connector).*
- The review identified that Planning Services are currently in the process of ensuring all registration staff are on the same level of competency which, when completed, could potentially enable processes to be put in place to reduce certain aspect of duplication in effort.

- The review observed all aspects of the planning application process, validation and determination stages and although detailed actions were not possible to define, there was enough to suggest that further investigation was required that would be of benefit to Planning Services.
- From the observations it would be a recommendation that an improvement plan is formulated to focus on the stages in which benefit to the business can realised.
- From the review of stages certain high-priority areas of improvement were identified:
 - 5.1) Performance issues with scanning solution – this had already been identified and work on this started 18/11/2014 – results of which are looking positive however further time to monitor success is required.
 - 11.1) Viewing scanned documents through Civica – this had already been identified but the review identified further information to diagnose – this is currently being investigated – further update/fix expected shortly.
 - 12.1) Dealing with representations – this is something that needs further investigation and could be considered as a priority for an improvement plan – this is may be the biggest area for improvement.

3 Background

The creation of this Document has been at the request of the Herefordshire Council Planning Services Scrutiny Committee on 10th November 2014. The Committee's requirement was to obtain information on the current Herefordshire Planning Service's systems and processes and identify if they were fit for purpose or where improvements might be possible.

Planning Services is a statutory local authority function and requires an effective solution consisting of processes, people, software and hardware to achieve its government set targets for processing Planning applications and associated management. Over the last few years planning have struggled to process, validate and determine planning applications within required timescales, potentially due to staff numbers and some of the old processes. With the current staff numbers and some modified processes it would appear that the processing of applications is now within 4 days.

A two day review was started on the 11th and 12th of November 2014 in Blue School House. The review was carried out by the following Hoople staff:

<p>Duncan Trumper MSc (GIS & Mgmt) MCMI. Business Application Team Leader – Hoople Ltd.</p>	<p>Over 17 years ICT experience ranging from problem identification, business analysis, system design, through to implementation and usage. 14 years local authority experience spanning the majority of core services areas. Extensive knowledge of planning services in Herefordshire and the software solutions being utilised.</p>
<p>Tracey Yarnold Senior Application Specialist – Hoople Ltd.</p>	<p>5 years ICT experience providing operational, technical support and development of the Civica APP system and related systems for Herefordshire Council users. Total of 13 years local authority experience, a qualified Trading Standards Officer since 2003 with specialist knowledge of Public Protection functions.</p>

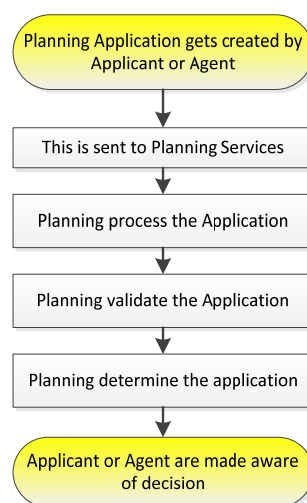
Helen Mills (Technical Support Team Leader - Building Control and Planning Services) greatly assisted the review by organising staff availability to demonstrate the processes in place and systems used. Without the support from all the Planning Services staff the review would have taken longer and not been as comprehensive.

4 Review objectives

- 1) Confirm Herefordshire Council planning services current planning process.
- 2) Identify all the IT systems being used in the planning process.
- 3) Identify if the current processes and systems used are fit for purpose.
- 4) Identify if there are areas that could be improved and classify these into small/medium/large according to business outcomes e.g. measurable improvements in throughputs, reduction in staff effort etc. Estimate effort for each identified if possible.
- 5) Identify areas that need further investigation for potential improvement.

5 Scope

The scope was to carry out a high level review of planning services systems and processes used in the planning application function, as identified in the following:



The review will not aim to offer solutions for all areas that could be improved but will illustrate areas for further consideration and investigation where identified.

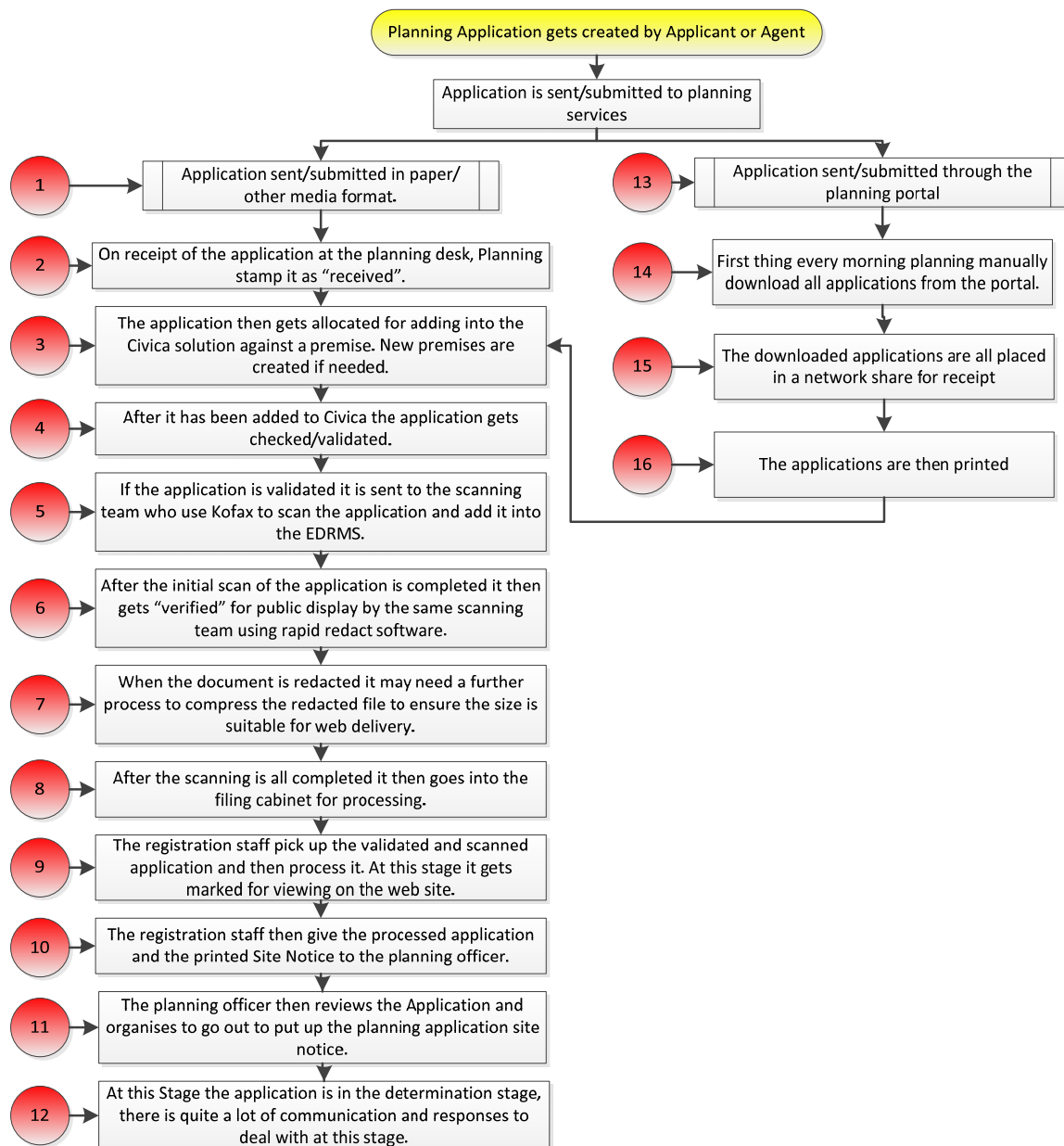
The scope included all of the following ICT related components;

System	Detail
Civica APP	The software solution that is used by planning services to manage its planning application process. It is used extensively through-out Herefordshire Council by many different business areas (waste management, Environmental Health and trading standards, conservation, transportation, housing, parks and countryside).
Civica APP plugins	These are additional elements of functionality that are outside of the standard Civica software application. They are generally purchased separately and have usually been created to address changes in government policy or direction e.g. FSSnet for environmental health / 1App for planning Applications.
EDRMS	The EDRMS or Electronic Document Record Management System is essential for storing electronic instead of paper records. It requires metadata (information about the record(s)) to be attached to records to maximise the chances of finding the right records is possible. "Wisdom" is the solution used.
Kofax	The software for the scanning solution used for the planning applications. It is able to process paper scans and electronic documents when received from the planning portal. Kofax is integrated with the ERDMS and important for getting information marked and loaded into the EDRMS.
Rapid Redact	The software used to open the full initial scanned document from EDRMS and erase specific information. It then saves a copy of this to a file share before it is again referenced in Civica and saved back to the EDRMS as a "redacted" copy for public display. This is done to ensure the councils compliance with data protection is maintained in conjunction to personal information.
Adobe Pro	The software used to open the PDF documents and compress them after using the Rapid Redact to ensure delivery over the web is possible. There is a web limit of 40mb and the rapid redact can sometimes exceed this.
Performance of solution	The review will look at the performance of the current systems used in the planning process. It will identify areas where things could aide user experience within the planning department.
FOXit	The software used to view PDF documents on the planning officer laptops. This could be useful in achieving the digital by default

System	Detail
	ideas.




6 Review Observations


The following diagram illustrates each of the stages (numbered in red circles) which were reviewed in this numeric order.





The following table specifies the stage observed (as identified in the diagram above) with the associated observations made within each. Each observation was given a status indicating if there was a potential improvement based on measurable improvements in business outcomes. The status was classified as follows; Green = Areas working well or require further investigation, Amber = small/medium potential improvements and Red = Large potential business benefit. The Action column indicates possible actions required to progress things and estimated timescales where possible.




Estimated initial timings have been included where possible, in many instances this is for initial business analysis which in turn will establish precise requirement, for which timescales can be defined.

Stage	Stage detail/observations	Status	Action
	Application sent/submitted in paper/other media format		
Observations			
1.1	The current process is just receipt so not a great issue with how this is being done. There is always going to be a requirement to accommodate paper submissions. However the more paper based applications that are received the more admin requirement there is in capturing – as much as possible the applications should be channelled through the planning portal. As part of utilising electronic methods this area should see improvements.	medium	Consider utilising electronic methods and promoting their usage. Timescale not possible as consideration needs to be for end to end solution.
	On receipt of the application at the planning desk, planning stamp it as “received”.		
Observations			
2.1	Nothing to note in this area – it is just the receipt of files – very straight forward and works well. There is always going to be a need to mark files received either paper or electronic.		No action other than to consider how this can be automated for electronic
	The Application then gets allocated for adding into the Civica solution against a premise. New premises are created if needed.		
Observations			
3.1	The process of adding new applications where addresses weren't present – appeared to require quite a lot of effort and lengthen the process. The Civica application is a premise based system meaning everything needs to be assign to a premise with a Unique Property Reference Number (UPRN)	Small/ medium	Investigation needed to analyse all aspects of the process. Initially



Stage	Stage detail/observations	Status	Action
	for linking information up.		(1 day) to undertake business analysis.
3.2	The process of adding new addresses didn't have a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) – it was apparent from the demonstration that this could be useful due to steps involved. It would help staff with the current process and for any new method a value would be seen in staff training and business continuity.	Small	Consider creating SOP for existing. Ensure an SOP is created for any new method.
3.3	There was some scanning done at this stage which was already available in electronic format and overlapped with the later process of scanning – this was related to the site plans and sending them to the corporate address team for creation of new addresses and UPRNS.	Small	Some staff training could be required in this area – also consideration of electronic methods and processes
3.4	A spreadsheet is in existence which is being updated with the new properties – may need further analysis of process to see if this step is necessary. It is of value but it could be possible to remove this step with more efficient process design.		Included with 3.1 Further investigation needed to analyse all aspects of the process. Initially (1 day) to undertake business analysis.
	After it has been added to Civica the application gets checked/validated.		
Observations			
4.1	This stage indicated a check of what was put in from previous section – some duplication of effort.		Does it need this check?
4.2	Exponare GIS was used quite extensively for looking at site information and linked information. The solution requires constraint information to be available and Ordnance Survey mapping. The ordnance survey mapping is updated regularly in line with updates and constraint information updated periodically when changes are made.		Application performs well. Consider the constraint data used and verify versions.
4.3	From demonstration it indicated that some methods of linking to Exponare involved some double entry of search elements. Exponare wasn't used through the terminal server session therefore did not automatically find the application	Small	Some training and SOP in the area could save some button clicks making


Stage	Stage detail/observations	Status	Action
	being validated.		things slightly quicker.
4.4	<p>There seemed to be much manual overhead in this stage – printing off sheets for folders – sticking the sheets on folders – marking on these sheets with various details that were already present in the Civica application, identifying constraints and marking these on sheet..</p> <p>There could be an improvement in this area – more automation could be utilised – better templates created to pull information through.</p>	Medium	Consider current process and improve this to get quick wins – decide to fully adopt electronic methods of working and get bigger. Would need detailed discussion with planning services regarding improvement plan.
4.5	The system has an automated process to pull through consultees based on the location of the application – it is possible to include these on the applications however it would need to be reviewed to see if it would offer time savings. The value of this function is that it would bring through all possible constraints for consideration, when configured, so that none were accidentally overlooked – they could then be deleted as appropriate to application.	Small/ Medium	Further investigation necessary with vendor and planning services. Business analysis (1 day)
	If the application is validated it is sent to the scanning team who use Kofax to scan the application and add it into the EDRMS.		
Observations			
5.1	There have been a number of performance issues in this area. It would appear that the original solution design and configuration was not robust enough to cope with the increase in scanning across the authority – this is currently being reviewed and re designed to add additional resource to the scanning processes and server. Although there have been manual restarts of the application this is not acceptable for an enterprise solution.	Large	Complete the improvement works on the 18/11/2014 – review to see that problem is addressed. <i>As at the 20th Nov – performance and reliability has significantly improved.</i>
5.2	Due to the hot desk process, it sometimes means you have to set up the scanner the first time you log on – not too much of an overhead	Very small	Approach Desktops for information.



Stage	Stage detail/observations	Status	Action
5.3	On adding some of the metadata for the scans it might be possible to automate some of the information in the fields as default – this is because they are generally the same each time.	Very small	Review what is technically possible to save a few clicks. Initial estimate. 1/2 day to liaise with vendor review possibilities.
5.4	The scanning solutions appeared to be quick – although it was mentioned that they were slowed down to accommodate the use of separator sheets. The separator sheets are no longer used as there was no recognised benefit. As the separator sheets are no longer used maybe the scanners can be increased in speed again through the silex boxes?	Very small	Discussion with desk.tops would be needed to see if this can be improved.
5.5	With the exception of the performance elements experienced that require restarts (5.1) – when the system is up and running it seems quite effective and easy to use.		No action
	After the initial scan of the application is completed it then gets “verified” for public display by the same scanning team using rapid redact software		
Observations			
6.1	Full documents that have been scanned are then found again from Civica and the EDRMS and then redacted – this would appear to be a duplication of effort – could it be better to do the redaction at the same time as the full scan and automate some for the Civica entry into the action diary.	Medium	Review this solution and its steps and then engage Vendors to see if redesign is possible. 1/2 day initial business analysis and liaison with vendor.
6.2	The speed of redacting the document very much depends on the length of the document – in effect this can't be automated from what has been seen – it is essential to go through the documents to remove signatures and any other personal information elements to comply with data protection and information security.		No further action.
6.3	When the original document has been redacted it sometimes appears to increase the size of the document which then needs to be compressed through another piece of software to ensure it can be delivered over the web – is there a later version of the Rapid Redact is there some solution to this with this PDF writer?	Small/ Medium	Review upgrade, escalate problem to vendor (1 day to review and escalate)
6.4	Sometimes the rapid redact doesn't operate very quickly	Small/	Review the



Stage	Stage detail/observations	Status	Action
	when it is redacting the document. Demonstration seen and acceptable however this may only occur when large scans are being processed.	Medium	system resources and the architecture with vendor. (1 day initial business analysis)
6.5	The process of getting the redacted version back into Civica is manual and would appear to have some unnecessary steps – this includes publishing it and adding the action diary entry.	Medium	Need to review the solution with vendor to see if automation could be implemented. (1 day initial business analysis)
	When the document is redacted it may need a further process to compress the redacted file to ensure the size is suitable for web delivery.		
Observations			
7.1	For large pdf documents that have exceeded the 40mb size, there is a requirement to put them through Adobe to re compress them – this is to ensure they can be viewed over the web. This should not be necessary as the rapid redact creates a PDF therefore why should it need another PDF writer to compress it? Although there is no problem with this individual system, it should not be necessary to require it.	Small	Covered in 6.3
	After the scanning is all completed it then goes into the filing cabinet for processing.		
Observations			
8.1	This would appear to be another pause in the process. The application then awaits being picked up for processing – having spoken to planning registration the process was designed to enable the most effective use of staff resources and competency could be made. There does seem to be a number of pauses and duplicate checks which would not be necessary if one person was doing the application from start to finish. It was high-lighted that although various people will be part of the processing there are still errors that occur in entry – this wasn't quantified but may need to be looked into should the process change.	Small/ Medium	Planning to confirm that they have considered the processes and that 1 person handling end to end validation and registration is not more efficient.
	The registration staff pick up the validated and scanned application and then process it. At this stage it gets marked for viewing on the web site.		
Observations			

Stage	Stage detail/observations	Status	Action
9.1	Application is searched for in Civica for the 4 th time in order to complete the application.	Small/ Medium	Included in 8.1 Planning to consider if this process is the most efficient.
9.2	Application is plotted in the MapXtreme system within Civica – reports are that it is difficult to use to plot big applications – there are some applications plotted outside of Civica and then imported back in. Although the system enables the required process – the tool is not as good as tools they have used in the past. There are options that can be considered but will need some evaluation of technical implementation and potentially costs. This could include Civica GIS, MapInfo Pro, Open source.	Small/ Medium	Review GIS technical configuration details (1 day), Approach vendor(s) for demo/and organise (1/2 day) Consider implementation path – timescales dependant on above.
9.3	Selection of consultees with the Civica system seems to be quite time consuming – could there be a more efficient method used? Could there be a selection list used to speed up and make things easier.	Very small	Consult Civica to see if the correct process is being followed or if the system can be alerted. (1/2 day to draft details and deal with Civica)
9.4	As Part of the consultation process it is necessary to advertise certain applications in the press. There is a manual task involved in cutting down the application description to ensure costs for advertising through the press is kept down. The cut down version was then entered on to press release document – Allegedly some council's don't do this. Could this be looked into by planning and potentially alternative methods/ processes used? If we are stuck with this can we automate some of the steps, could we put basic info in the press and then a link to our online news page (is this deemed press?) Nothing here may be possible due to legal requirement but worth looking at.	Small/ Medium	Planning to firstly consider Is it absolutely necessary to use the paper press? Are there smarter ways of compliance without cost. Could the work flow be changed to capture exactly what was required up front?
9.5	For some of the internal consultees e.g environmental health, conservation etc emails are being sent out which then has an email response and this then has to be captured and added to the action diary – the system could be used by the internal	Medium	Review system setup, identify training and awareness

Stage	Stage detail/observations	Status	Action
	consultees for capturing comments – this would potential speed up internal feedback and reduce some admin burden.		requirements. (Estimate 3 days configuration and training)
	The registration staff then give the processed application and printed Site Notice to the planning officer.		
Observations			
10.1	There is nothing wrong with this step as it does what it needs to, however the whole process is paper based and manual – there could be more effective electronic methods used. This could be considered as part of a whole electronic methods piece of work.		Consideration of using electronic methods in conjunction with 4.4.
	The planning officer then reviews the application and organises to go out to put up the planning application Site Notice.		
Observations			
11.1	The planning officer is able to search for the application in Civica without problem – if the planning officer wants to view the scanned documents they should be able to navigate to the documents from within Civica , however they are unable to due to problems with performance in the technical solution. This reduces the application review efficiency. Although there is a work around in place it is not as efficient as it should be.	Large	Need to get the technical solution evaluated to see where the problem is and fixed – Currently this is being investigated.
11.2	The planning officers have been using FOXit for reading PDF's and using the measuring tools – they have been struggling with this application. There is an update that has recently been released which may provide some improvements. If this solution is going to be utilised in the electronic methods of working it needs to be suitable. This is free to use but this may be why there are problems	Medium	Evaluate upgrade, if not suitable look at what else is on the market to satisfy requirements. (1 day to evaluate upgrade and identify alternatives). Ideally needs to be considered in conjunction with 4.4
11.3	The Planning officers take site pictures, come back in the office and down load these, then email them to admin staff to add into Civica against the application and the EDRMS	Medium	Evaluation of the processes and test feasibility of

Stage	Stage detail/observations	Status	Action
	solution. – could we not have a loader where they can load them directly and automation occurs? This would reduce admin and duplication of effort please increase throughput.		designing a loader. That works in conjunction with Civica and the EDRMS. (1 day business analysis) (Technical solution design TBC based on above)
	At this stage the application is in the determination Stage, there is quite a lot of communication and responses to deal with at this stage.		
Observations			
12.1	Dealing with representations appears to take quite a bit of effort to deal with – 1 staff member spends the majority of their working week dealing with emails and other comments obtained from web feedback – this would appear to be the biggest area in which improvements could be made. This could utilise system design with the web call guides which could capture information and insert these straight into Civica. It could look at dealing with all consultees if the system was design correctly. 9.5 above touched on the internal consultees feed back.	Large	Although the process works this is a status red as it could possibly result in major savings in effort. Further detailed work is required in this area to move things forward. Again could be part of 4.4 comments for electronic methods.
12.2	If the feedback could be channelled to go directly into the Civica solution it may enable some efficiency around the redaction process – if the work flows could be design it could save some time as it will only capture the information that is essential.	Medium	Further investigation on the technicalities is required to see where and how improvement could be made. (2days initial business analysis)
12.3	Feedback from parishes seems to be inconsistent in both format and response methods – again work flows could be considered and a single method for all could be considered. The contents of 12.1 apply to this for consideration	Medium	Further investigation on the technicalities is required to see

Stage	Stage detail/observations	Status	Action
			<p>where and how improvement could be made.</p> <p>(2days initial business analysis)</p>
12.4	<p>For some emails received there is effort required to copy and paste this in a word document to then be saved to the EDRMS – question why the planning services department have been instructed to work this way from records management. Are there tools available that would enable them to work more efficiently with emails and their storage and redaction.</p>	Small/ Medium	<p>Further analysis required (1day business analysis) to see if improvements to processes and systems can be made. Need to approach record management for initial feedback</p>
	<p>Application is sent/submitted through the planning portal.</p>		
<p>Observations</p>			
13.1	<p>Applications are sent through the planning portal which is the national preferred route and they are already in electronic format. Although electronic documents are in place from the planning portal, utilisation of these appears to be very weak at present. This is the direction in which things are moving and can be used to gain efficiency in the business by reduced admin, quicker processing and reduction in some current tasks. Further effort in this area is required to implement electronic methods and promote the usage.</p>	Medium/ Large	<p>Consider current process and improve this to get quick wins – decide to fully adopt electronic methods of working and get bigger. Would need more detailed discussion with planning services regarding improvement plan.</p>
	<p>First thing every morning planning manually download all the applications from the portal.</p>		
<p>Observations</p>			
14.1	<p>Manually down loading these applications takes time and this task should be replaced by the installation and configuration of the 1 APP connector – this automates the download and insert into Civica Application which in turn offers the business greater efficiency. The application would need to have a workflow to process the incoming applications but this is</p>	Medium	<p>Purchase Civica consultancy for installation and configure the 1 App connector,</p>

Stage	Stage detail/observations	Status	Action
	likely to be far easier and quicker than paper copies		
14.2	It is unclear on how the 1 APP will deal with the electronic documents – it could be feasible to develop an automated process to load the applications through the action diary and the EDRMS.		Review the 1 APP process and investigate with EDRMS vendor and Civica to see if there are automation methods possible.
	The downloaded applications are all placed in a network share for receipt,		
Observations			
15.1	This area only seems to be used as a holding place before the application is then printed and follows the normal paper application route – this adds to the current processes by dealing with applications in this way – there needs to be a review of what this can do as an initial load into the Civica and EDRMS could be possible.		Although the methods of working will change when the 1 APP connector is put in place, there should be greater usage of this area. Further investigation needs to take place.
	The applications are then printed		
Observations			
16.1	This defeats the whole objective of digital by default – the electronic ways of work need to be focussed upon in this area. Planning are already looking at tablets, 1APP connector and this will all help to get rid of this process – resulting in greater efficiency.	Medium	Consider current process and improve this to get quick wins – decide to fully adopt electronic methods of working and get bigger. Would need more detailed discussion with planning services regarding improvement

Stage	Stage detail/observations	Status	Action
			plan.
16.2	There is quite a bit of printing which takes place in planning – again with the implementation of electronic methods this should cease.	Medium	Consider current process and improve this to get quick wins – decide to fully adopt electronic methods of working and get bigger. Would need more detailed discussion with planning services regarding improvement plan.