



**SOUTH
KESTEVEN
DISTRICT
COUNCIL**

**Finance, Economic Development and
Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny
Committee**

7 September 2021

Report of: Councillor Linda Wootten,

Cabinet Member for Corporate
Governance



Update on Local Authority Searches

This report provides the Committee an update regarding land charges and the process mapping exercise that is being undertaken.

Report Author

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Corporate Priority:	Decision type:	Wards:
Administrative	Administrative	All Wards

Reviewed by:	Alan Robinson, Deputy Chief Executive	26 August 2021
Approved by:	Karen Bradford, Chief Executive	27 August 2021
Signed off by:	Councillor Linda Wootten, Cabinet Member for Corporate Governance	27 August 2021

Recommendation (s) to the decision maker (s)

- Notes the update regarding Local Authority searches and that there is no longer a backlog and at the time of writing this report the average turnaround for searches was 4 days.
- For the Committee to review and monitor the KPI's around Local Authority searches as part of its work programme as delegated by Governance and Audit Committee.

1 The Background to the Report

- 1.1 Governance and Audit Committee at its previous meetings have received information regarding the performance relating to Local Authority searches. The Committee considered a report on the performance and delegated the Finance, Economic Development and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee review future information as part of the KPI's.
- 1.2 This report sets out the current performance and plans for improvement.
- 1.3 As reported to previous Committees the average turnaround times had been longer; the average was 22 days for a full search at the end of April but in May this had risen again to 27 days and at its highest reached 32 days due to staff holidays and sickness.
- 1.4 On 1 May 2021, the Land Charges function transferred from Planning to Legal and Democratic Services. Since that time it has emerged that:
 - a. the service had been under-resourced.
 - b. The significant influx of demand was not matched by an increase in resource. This has resulted in the backlog.
 - c. Due to the backlog, much time has been spent answering emails and phone calls from solicitors whose clients are under time pressures to exchange contracts, and this has taken resources away from processing searches.
 - d. The planning system (Uniform) and the land charges system (Total Land Charges 'TLC') do not fully integrate. Updates to Uniform cause delays within TLC and this has a knock-on effect to the search turnaround times.
 - e. The Council does not have an up-to-date GIS mapping process, as a result of which the Land Charges Team have to manually duplicate data to ensure accuracy. This and many other such anomalies add delay into the process.
 - f. There is no resilience for staff taking holiday; the effect is for performance to dip.
 - g. There is no current Service Delivery Plan for Land Charges and therefore no strategic approach to the service.
 - h. Benchmarking suggests that the salaries are not competitive and this needs to be addressed.
 - i. The stamp duty holiday was extended to the end of June 2021.
- 1.5 Some immediate measures have been put in place to address the issues:
 - a. Additional resources have been secured to clear the backlog;
 - b. Additional overtime hours have been approved to clear the backlog;
 - c. Support from a neighbouring Authority, which has successfully reviewed and improved its own Land Charges service has been brought in and is currently reviewing systems and processes. The scope for the exercise was;
 - d. Phase One focussing on service performance. Key to this is the engagement and communication with the Land Charges team. SKDC have the opportunity to explore Phase Two;
 - e. The second phase will provide a holistic review of the service delivery and make recommendations for sustainable improvements and performance management.

- 1.6 By implementing the immediate measures there is now no backlog with processing and officers are now turning around requests in 4 days (the Service target is 10 days).
- 1.7 Internal audit has completed an assurance review, as requested by members, this review and the outcomes from the process mapping exercise will inform the future Service Plans and also the level of permanent resources that are needed in the team.

2 Consultation and Feedback Received, Including Overview and Scrutiny

- 2.1 Finance, Economic Development and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee to review and consider the KPIs as part of its performance monitoring. Governance and Audit Committee have received updates at their meetings on 9th June 2021 and 21st July 2021.

3 Financial Implications

- 3.1 A temporary budget increase has been provided to the service in order to deal with the performance pressures, however any ongoing increase in resource will need to be considered as part of the budget setting process for 2022/23 onwards.

Financial Implications reviewed by: Richard Wyles, Section 151 Officer

4 Legal and Governance Implications

- 4.1 The short term improvements will ensure that searches are done in a timely way, to assist house sales to complete by contractually agreed timeframes.

Legal Implications reviewed by: Graham Watts, Head of Democratic Services and Deputy Monitoring Officer

5 Equality and Safeguarding Implications

- 5.1 Not applicable

6 Risk and Mitigation

- 6.1 The risks are to legal deadlines and reputation. The service improvements have mitigated these risks but the service and process mapping will identify areas for the team to work in a more cohesive way so that the backlog issue does not arise again.

7 Community Safety Implications

- 7.1 Not applicable

8 How will the recommendations support South Kesteven District Council's declaration of a climate emergency?

- 8.1 Automation and good e-systems will reduce the usage of paper.

9 Background Papers

- 9.1 Governance and Audit Committee meeting held on 9th June 2021.
- 9.2 Governance and Audit Committee meeting held on the 21st July 2021

10 Appendices

- 10.1 None

Report Timeline:	Previously Considered by: Governance and Audit Committee	9 June 2021
	Final Decision date	Ongoing