

Executive Summary for Councillors

Review of Maldon District Council's Development Management Service

POS Enterprises Ltd | Final Report | June 2026

Overall conclusion

The independent review concludes that the Development Management Service has a strong foundation on which to build. Staff were found to be committed and motivated, the Council's financial position is sound, and workloads are generally manageable when compared with the size of the authority.

The principal challenge is not a fundamental staffing or workload crisis, but the inefficient operation of systems, processes and performance management. The report identifies the under-use of existing planning IT and back-office systems as the most significant barrier to improved performance.

Key issues identified

Performance and service delivery

- The Council meets national planning performance thresholds, but performs below the average of comparable Essex authorities in several areas.
- There is a growing backlog of planning applications and significant reliance on Extensions of Time, which can mask underlying delays.
- Appeal outcomes and costs awards indicate a need to improve the quality and robustness of decision-making, particularly for major applications.
- Performance monitoring is not sufficiently systematic and is not making full use of available real-time reporting tools.

Technology and systems

- Existing planning software is not being used to its full capability.
- Manual workarounds, particularly spreadsheets, have created duplication, inefficiency and a lack of consistent management information.
- The review identifies this as the most significant and immediate opportunity for improvement.

Governance and member support

- The report identifies concerns about the number of applications reported to committee, lengthy officer presentations, update-report practice, and the effectiveness of member training.
- The forthcoming National Scheme of Delegation is expected to change how planning applications reach committee and will require clear member training and communication.
- Councillors should receive clearer and more regular information about planning performance, application progress, appeals and wider service matters.

Staffing and management

- The service has experienced recruitment difficulties and has relied on agency and contractor staff.
- Regular one-to-ones, team meetings, service meetings and structured performance management are not embedded consistently.

- There is a need to improve communication between teams and provide clearer support for staff training and development.

Development Management processes

- The pre-application advice service and Duty Planning Officer service have been suspended for over two years and should be reintroduced in a managed way.
- The Local Validation List is out of date and should be updated urgently.
- There are delays in statutory consultee responses, especially from some external services, and monitoring arrangements for Section 106 obligations and infrastructure delivery need strengthening.
- A comprehensive procedures manual is required so that key processes are consistently understood and applied.

Strengths highlighted by the review

- Dedicated and committed planning staff.
- A well-managed enforcement service.
- Supportive team culture and peer-to-peer support.
- Manageable caseloads.
- Strong corporate support for improvement.
- Financial capacity to invest in service transformation.
- Positive staff attitude towards change and Local Government Reorganisation.

Recommended priorities

Immediate priorities

- Comprehensive review and improvement of planning IT systems.
- Removal of inefficient spreadsheet-based processes.
- Creation of clear procedure manuals.
- Updating the Local Validation List.
- Strengthening management oversight and performance monitoring.
- Introducing regular one-to-ones, team meetings and structured service meetings.

Service improvement priorities

- Enhanced member training, particularly ahead of the National Scheme of Delegation.
- Better communication with councillors.
- Improved planning committee procedures and update-report practice.
- Reintroduction of pre-application advice and a managed Duty Planning Officer service.
- Improved customer and stakeholder engagement, including a Developers' / Agents' Forum.
- Better workforce planning, career development and use of career-grade posts.

Strategic priorities for Local Government Reorganisation

- Reviewing pay and recruitment competitiveness against nearby authorities.
- Working with Brentwood and Chelmsford on statutory consultee performance issues.
- Strengthening infrastructure planning and Section 106 delivery arrangements.
- Considering introduction of the Community Infrastructure Levy as part of future arrangements.

Source: POS Enterprises Ltd, Final Report: Maldon District Council Review of the Development Management Service, June 2026.