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## Report of Chief Planning Officer

Scrutiny Board: City Development

Date: 18<sup>th</sup> September 2007

Subject: UPDATE ON THE STRATEGIC REVIEW OF PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

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### Electoral Wards Affected:

Ward Members consulted  
(Referred to in report)

### Specific Implications For:

Equality and Diversity

Community Cohesion

Narrowing the Gap

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## 1.0 Purpose of the Report

1.1 The report is presented to Scrutiny Board in order that Members can consider and comment on the progress on implementing the solutions within the five improvement themes of the strategic review for Planning and Development Services.

## 2.0 Background

2.1 A Strategic Review of Planning and Development Services was undertaken last year, which led to a report to Executive Board on 14<sup>th</sup> June 2006. Executive Board agreed the proposed service improvements set out in the report. Five improvement themes were identified as follows:-

1. *Capacity building and working with the private sector*
2. *Realising a definitive officer view*
3. *Development and support for Plans Panels*
4. *Information and communication technology*
5. *Improved customer services*

2.2 The Scrutiny Inquiry report from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in March 2007 requested further reporting on the progress in meeting the work streams identified in each of the themes. A summary of progress surrounding each improvement theme is set out below.

### **3.0 Summary of progress**

#### ***Capacity building and working with the private sector***

- 3.1 Recruitment has taken place to appoint to full structure and proposals are currently under consideration to add a further 2 Principal Planning Officers (grade PO4) to the structure. It is intended if agreed to advertise for these posts in September.
- 3.2 Discussions have progressed through the Property Forum to develop with the private sector a joint approach to recruitment and retention in Leeds. A separate workshop involving planners and other built environment professionals from both the public and private sector has taken place to develop ideas and workstreams.
- 3.3 On two occasions the existing Strategic Alliance between the council and Jacobs has been utilized to progress discrete areas of work.
- 3.4 The level of technical/admin support has been improved in the Compliance Team. It is anticipated that a range of benefits will be realized including improving and streamlining communications and savings on Legal Services charges. Short listing for a Senior Compliance Officer has also taken place recently.

#### ***Realising a definitive officer view***

- 3.5 The new Planning Technical Board continues to meet as required and is considered to be a successful forum in which to resolve differing views and provide a clear and effective framework for producing timely decisions.
- 3.6 Weekly design surgeries are proposed to be expanded to include other disciplines such as conservation officers and tree officers to improve speed and quality of consultation responses.
- 3.7 In addition a Design Advisory Panel has been set up to help promote higher and more consistent design standards. This meets on a monthly basis and involves the Civic Architect in considering design issues on significant major developments.
- 3.8 Two new posts proposed and funding secured for a Design Officer (grade PO3) in the Sustainable Development Unit and a Design Engineer (grade PO4) in highways to deal with increased consultation demands.
- 3.9 A protocol for charging for pre application advice for major application as defined by the DCLG is being drafted. The purpose of which is to recover the costs associated with providing that advice which in turn will help us to sustain and improve the service provided.
- 3.10 A charter for Strategic and Key Regeneration Projects is being drafted and circulated for internal consultation. This Charter recognises that one of the keys to successful delivery of Strategic Developments and Key regeneration projects is to improve communication between the Council, developers and other agencies involved in the development process to minimise delays reduce the possibility of receiving conflicting advice and to maximise certainty in the development process. To achieve this it is intended to utilise the principle of 'Planning Performance Agreements' as advocated by the Department of Communities and Local government. This would in general relate to 'Large Majors' as defined by the DCLG in the consultation paper entitled 'Planning Performance Agreements: a new way to manage large scale major planning applications.
- 3.11 Two design training workshops have taken place one of which involved members. A further workshop is programmed for September. Other member training subjects programmed for September through to December include a Design Best Practice Conference which is a joint member/officer event, member training on planning enforcement, planning policy update and the annual Governance and Conduct Update.

- 3.12 Householder Design Guide going to consultation in September.
- 3.13 Street Design Guide produced by Highways going to public consultation in September.

### ***Development of and support for plans panels***

- 3.14 In taking forward the *Development and support for Plans Panel* theme, a review of the Plans Panels commenced in May 2007. This has been very comprehensive and has used a range of methodologies taking into account best practice from other Planning authorities, consultations and meetings with Officers, Members and customers, workshops with Members, customer satisfaction surveys and use of “mystery visitors” at Panel. Additionally, external consultants, Addison Associates, were appointed to assist in the review. At the time of writing this report the draft findings of the external consultants have yet to be fully considered. However a significant amount of other work has been initiated.
- 3.15 Corporate Governance and Audit Committee agreed on the 16<sup>th</sup> of May that the membership of the Plans Panels should comprise of no less than 7 and no more than 11 members of the council and secondly, that completion of the compulsory prescribed training is a prerequisite to any Member sitting as a Plans Panel Member.
- 3.16 Member training is now underway with a number of Members already accessing the training programme. There has been considerable commitment from Member to undertake the training and this factor will be key in demonstrating that Leeds City Council does make well informed, effective development decisions. As well as this a training programme for Ward Members who do not sit on Plans Panel, but who may wish to refer matters to Panel has now been developed and will commence with the first briefing scheduled for 12<sup>th</sup> December 2007.
- 3.17 The Scrutiny Inquiry report made a recommendation on the development of protocols for Member involvement at the pre-application stage. Some progress has been made here. The revised Code of Practice reflects the changes of the Planning reform agenda and now encourages Member involvement at the pre-application stage, in appropriate cases, subject to the necessary probity and pre-determination safeguards, as set out in the Code. Further detailed protocols are being currently progressed on earlier Member involvement. In the interim a leaflet “Positive engagement, a guide for planning councilors” and a diary insert describing the dos and don’ts of Members engagement in planning has been sent to Members.
- 3.18 On a half yearly basis, it is proposed members will receive a performance management report, with a Core Cities comparison wherever possible, covering the following areas: Enforcement data, Appeals, Improvement activities, Section 106 and Achievements. This range of performance information will provide a more complete picture of the performance of the service than just the Best Value indicators and the priorities for improvement.
- 3.19 A number of Senior Officers have now attended a presentation skills course and the format of presentations will have a more standardised structure. Guidelines are in production and presentations will include a brief introduction to site and development, key issues and an update of what’s new rather than repeated information.
- 3.20 A new Panel report format is currently in development which will be more concise without affecting the quality and comprehensiveness of the information provided. It is also intended to include a summary of negotiations with applicants. Position reports on the Major applications subject to the pre-application “Charter” will also be presented to Members for information to achieve an early ‘steer’ on key issues.
- 3.21 The practice of deciding which sites need a visit at the Chair’s briefing will be adopted by all Panels. This will mean there will be fewer “surprise” requests.
- 3.22 An audit of alternate venues to hold the Plans Panel meetings has been initiated due to audio and visual problems. However, rooms other than Committee rooms 6 and 7 have been used in the past, all with varying degrees of success. There does not appear to be an “ideal” venue.

Consequently, an investigation is underway to see if there are solutions to improving the audio and visual technology used in the existing rooms.

3.23 In June and July a Plans Panel customer satisfaction survey took place. The survey which ran for two cycles of each Panel attempted to find out a little about the types of customers who attend the Panels and what they thought about the process. The survey highlighted some defined areas for improvement and a number of common themes emerged:

- Lack of customer knowledge of how the process worked
- Who everyone was at the Panel meeting
- Perception of a lack of knowledge of the Members
- Audio and visual difficulties with the venue
- Advance notice of the running order

In addressing these issues a number of improvements have been made and will be implemented shortly:

- Leaflet for the public describing the Plans Panel process and showing who the Members are.
- A Powerpoint slide showing the seating plan at Panel runs as the public enter the room.
- Investigation of audio and visual solutions for the venue.
- Member training.

However the main cause for complaint was:

- Lengthy meetings without knowing what time the items would be heard

It is anticipated that a host of measures will be needed to manage the length of time the public need to wait to hear their application. These continue to be investigated.

### ***Information and Communication Technology***

3.24 Aiming to have update of Public Access to latest version available for use in September.

3.25 E Government Board established to lead and oversee the implementation of the E Government agenda including the implementation of the new Parsol standards.

3.26 Document imaging pilot still ongoing because of staffing and technical issues. It is now anticipated that this pilot will run to the end of the year.

3.27 Upgrading to latest version of CAPS Uniform (7.4) in September to meet new standards for National Land and Property Gazetteer.

3.28 Introduced electronic responses for members of public whom comment on applications electronically.

3.29 Benefits continue to be realised from spatial data computer system these include:-

- Mapping requirements now comply with new Ordnance Survey requirements
- Additional info added to Panel report templates.
- Increase in electronic comments for public
- Implementation of Uniform Local Development Framework module.

### ***Improved Customer Services***

3.30 Customer Service Forums for agents submitting Householder applications and Major applications now established and meeting on a quarterly basis. Feedback from forums has been positive.

- 3.31 A number of new leaflets providing 'up front' guidance for customers on the services we offer are scheduled to be published in the autumn.
- 3.32 The web site has been reviewed and updated in a more user friendly format.
- 3.33 The complaints section continues to respond efficiently and effectively to customer and Ombudsman complaints within target. Feedback sessions are held weekly and quarterly summary reports are produced to take forward service improvements arising from what has been learnt.
- 3.34 Customer Services Action Plan has been developed in Planning Services which highlights priority areas for improvement. Work on implementing the actions identified is on going.
- 3.35 The number of calls received by the Development Enquiry Centre continues to increase. Despite this 85% of calls continue to be answered at first point of contact.

#### 4.0 Performance

4.1 The Government set national performance targets for decision making on planning applications are as follows:-

- 60% of major applications within 13 weeks
- 65% of minor applications within 8 weeks
- 80% of other planning applications in 8 weeks

Leeds cumulative performance against critical targets is as follows (figures for same period the previous year shown in brackets):-

April 06 – March 07

- **67.5%** (61.2%) major applications
- **80.61%** (68.3%) minor applications
- **86.91%** (82.6%) other applications

July 06 – June 07 PDG timeframe

- **79.17%** (65%) major applications
- **76.97%** (69.1%) minor applications
- **82.26%** (83.2%) other applications

4.2 In Compliance the following performance has been achieved:-

April 06 – March 07

- Number of cases received **1612**
- Number of cases resolved **1509**
- Initial site visits

Cat 1	Site visit same day /within 1 working day	Target 100%	Achieved <b>100%</b>
Cat 2	Site visit within 2 working days	Target 95%	Achieved <b>83%</b>
Cat 3	Site visit within 10 working days	Target 90%	Achieved <b>93%</b>

4.3 Performance targets continue to be achieved, and have indeed been improved upon from the comparative period last year particularly related to planning applications. However, in achieving this there is still concern that there has been a fall in customer satisfaction. It is intended to continue to look at this conflict as a priority to achieve a satisfactory balance.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

5.1 The review continues to deliver significant and positive improvements across the range of planning services. The above improvement themes are consistently being moved forward and monitored closely on a monthly basis. However priorities for the next six months are:-

- Complete Panel review and begin implementation
- Strategic and Key Regeneration Applications – finalise and consult
- Review appeals record
- Complete process of staff recruitment
- Develop customer panels

## **6.0 Recommendations**

6.1 Scrutiny Board is invited to note and comment on the attached report.