

Report of Chief Planning Officer

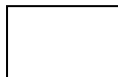
Scrutiny Board: City Development

Date: 18th November 2008

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

Electoral Wards Affected:

ALL



Ward Members consulted
(Referred to in report)

Specific Implications For:

Equality and Diversity

☐

Community Cohesion

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Narrowing the Gap

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1.0 Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 This update 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 identified in the strategic review for Planning and Development Services.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 A Strategic Review of Planning and Development Services was undertaken in 2005, which led to a report to Executive Board on 14th 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 A report of progress was presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in March 2007. At the meeting the committee requested that further reporting on the progress in meeting the work streams identified in each of the themes should be provided yearly. A summary of progress surrounding each improvement theme is therefore, set out below for the period 2007/08.

3.0 Summary of progress since September 2007

Capacity building and working with the private sector

- 3.1 Recruitment has taken place to appoint up to full structure plus a further 2 Principal Planning Officers (grade PO4). However the Head of Planning Services post is now vacant. The post has been advertised, however appointment to this post is now unlikely until early 2009. The Planning Manager post is currently being covered by a short term acting up arrangement involving two of the Senior Area Planning Managers. Overall a 5% vacancy rate is being maintained. Further recruitment to vacant posts is being closely monitored in relation to workloads, capacity and budgetary factors. The recent decline in fee income as a result of the economic downturn also raises concern because of its potential effect on future staffing levels and therefore performance.
- 3.2 The level of technical/admin support has been improved in the Compliance Team. In addition Work is currently under way to make further improvements. A full report to City Development Scrutiny Board will be presented in the near future to detail the proposed improvements.
- 3.3 The E- planning team are currently progressing a scanning project and aim to implement online all Planning applications during 2009.

Realising a definitive officer view

- 3.4 The new Planning Technical Board continues to meet as required and continues to be a successful forum in which to resolve differing views and provide a clear and effective framework for producing timely decisions.
- 3.5 Weekly design surgeries have been expanded and these are now well established and working well and will be continued to be monitored.
- 3.6 The Design Advisory Panel continues to meet regularly 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.
- 3.7 A Protocol for Strategic and Key Regeneration Projects was introduced on the 1st of April 2008. This Protocol 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'. It is anticipated that in the first year approximately 5 large majors will be considered under this Protocol. Currently discussions are under way on a large Major application which may be the first application to be considered under the Protocol
- 3.8 The Charter for charging for pre application advice for major applications as defined by the DCLG has been finalized and implemented on the 1st of June 2008. The purpose of the Charter is to recover the costs associated with providing that advice which in turn will help us to sustain and improve the service provided. The initial fee for providing the service has been set at £2000 plus VAT. Fees for follow up meetings have been set at £500 plus VAT. Since the 1st of July 17 chargeable enquiries have been received (period 1st July – 29th August 2008). Fees of £11000 have been received for 10 of those enquiries. A further £12500 is outstanding on the remaining 7 enquiries. The majority of the fees received so far are for follow up meetings for enquiries that had commenced before the introduction of the Charter. The introduction of the fees has received limited negative feedback from applicants and agents. The introduction of this has however coincided with the economic downturn which is likely to affect the take up rate of this service.

- 3.9 Charging for the discharge of planning conditions following the approval of applications was introduced by Central Government in April 2008. The charges are £85 for a single request to discharge a condition or conditions on most applications and £25 for conditions relating to householder approvals. The introduction of the charge has allowed the service to recover the costs involved in providing this service. Since the implementation of this charge on average £5000 of previously un recovered costs have been recovered per month.
- 3.10 A draft Householder Design Guide is being reviewed in light of the new permitted development rights being introduced by the Government for householders on the 1st of October 2008. The intention is to consult the plans panels on the revised document before going out to consultation later in the year.
- 3.11 Consultation on the Highways Street Design Guide has been completed and the document was presented to the Highways Board on the 11th of August 2008 and to Executive Board on the 2nd of September for approval. The item has however, been deferred to the November Executive Board pending the submission and consideration of a deputation to the council representing blind and partially blind groups.

Development of and support for plans panels

- 3.12 A Review of the Plans Panel is underway and significant process has been made. The composition of the Plans Panel have been looked at in some detail to produce a structure that is both effective in how it operates and politically balanced. For this current financial year there are 10 Members of the Council each on both East and West Panels and 8 on Central Panel. Members are required to have been trained before they can sit on Panel and also have to attend compulsory courses through the year. A full training programme has been arranged for Members in the current year. This is currently underway with a number of Members already accessing the training programme. There has been considerable commitment from Members to undertake the training and this factor will be key in demonstrating that Leeds City Council does make well informed, effective development decisions. The uptake of the training is being closely monitored. There are currently 3 events in the programme outstanding until the end of December, and the response rate has been good. As well as this a training programme for Ward Members who do not sit on Plans Panel has been initiated. A Parish Member training programme is also currently being put together.
- 3.13 A number of meetings have been held of the joint Member/Officer working Group to look at the way that Plans Panel operates and as a result a detailed implementation plan is being developed and a number of protocols finalised. These include a draft Site Visits Protocol, draft Public Speaking Protocol, draft protocol for Pre Application presentations at Plans Panel Meetings and draft Protocol for pre-application discussions with local communities and ward members (including Parish and Town Councils) A Joint Plans Panel was held in March 2008 to report on progress made through the Group. A further Joint Plans Panel is being arranged for November 2008 to report back on the final outcome of the Group and to agree the implementation plan.
- 3.14 In the interim, a number of measures have been tried out to improve how Panels operate and will be taken forward as part of the implementation plan across all Panels. Generally the size of the agendas has been reduced across the Panels and the time of the meetings has decreased substantially as a result. This is certainly the case with both Central and West Panels and whilst the number of items being considered at East Panel is higher than the other two Panels it has been reduced in number overall. West Panel have trialed the timing of items and also splitting the meeting into two sessions on long agendas with a break in between and letting customers know where they are on the agenda to minimise as far as possible the wait time for the item to be heard. Site visits are now programmed in with the consideration of applications to minimise delay as far as is possible.
- 3.15 Pre application presentations and position statements are now more common on both Central and West Panels as time has been released for them to be considered.

- 3.16 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.
- 3.17 A number of Senior Officers have now attended a presentation skills course and the format of presentations will have a more standardised structure. Guidelines have been produced and presentations include a brief introduction to site and development, key issues and an update of what's new rather than repeated information. It is intended that skills will continue to be developed on a rolling programme.
- 3.18 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" are also being increasingly used to achieve a steer on major and complex development proposals.
- 3.19 Due to audio and visual problems an audit of alternate venues to hold the Plans Panel meetings has been completed. 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 has been carried out into alternative solutions to improving the audio and visual technology used in the existing rooms. The conclusion is that 3 enhancements are required. These are to the microphone system, a second large display screen nearer to the public gallery so that plans are more easily read by members of the public and the introduction of individual display screens for members and officers. These are all being pursued with Corporate Services and the Chief Executives Department.
- 3.20 In June and July 2007 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 further 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, officer details and exemplar sites of good design quality which have been approved by Panel on a geographical basis, as the public enter the room for each Panel meeting.
 - Implementation of audio and visual solutions for the venue.
 - Introduction of a single agenda rather than an agenda and a Plans Panel list to avoid confusion and improve clarity of those matters to be considered at Panel.
- 3.21 The customer satisfaction survey originally run in June /July 2007 is being re run this autumn at Plans Panel with 2 runs for each Panel to identify customer satisfaction and improvements at Plans Panel.

Information and Communication Technology

- 3.22 Public Access was successfully upgraded to the latest version in Sept 07. We will be working with the software company to develop and test a new version which will offer additional functionality like free text searching and the ability to proactively track applications. This is anticipated to be available from April 09.
- 3.23 The e-Planning Board continues to lead and oversee the implementation of the e-Government agenda including the implementation of Parsol standards.
- 3.24 The Document imaging pilot has been completed. An implementation plan has been agreed to introduce electronic scanning of new planning applications on a team by team basis. The aim is to have all new planning applications available online from early 2009. Application forms, plans, reports and decision notices for applications received after this date will be available using Public Access.
- 3.25 Electronic consultation on planning applications will be rolled out from November 2008 as the applications are scanned.
- 3.26 A major upgrade to the operating system is planned for October 08 and a further upgrade to CAPS Uniform version 7.5 is planned for December.
- 3.27 Benefits continue to be realised from spatial data computer system these include:-
- Spatial information about the UDP Review
 - Discharge of conditions on planning permissions
 - Pre-Application and Planning Performance Agreement information
 - Improved information and reporting on enforcement cases
 - Implementation of Uniform Local Development Framework module continues to be developed.
- 3.28 The service has participated in the Local Government Transformational Planning Project run by the DCLG. The project was carried out in conjunction with Hambleton District Council, East Riding County Council and Lewisham Borough Council. The purpose of this is to Process Map and analyse the entire planning application process to fully understand it and identify where improvements can be made to the process and remove those elements of the process that do not add value. This work will result in better customer service and reduce delay in the process.
- 3.29 An implementation plan has been produced to deliver the identified improvements over the next two years. CLG will be producing a synthesis document, at the end of the year, of the project and lessons learnt so that other authorities can use our experiences of best practice as 'pathfinders' to improve their own services.

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 continues to be positive.
- Work has been progressing in readiness for the achievement of the Customer Services Excellence Award (formerly Charter Mark) in the Development Enquiry Centre.
 - A new visual screen has been installed in the reception area of the Leonardo Building. Information on the screen informs members of the public about the functions and services of City Development based in Leonardo Building

- There is now a new reception desk in Leonardo Building which separates the reception role from the enquiry centre, this was undertaken as a direct result of receiving comments back from customers.
- A customer questionnaire was undertaken asking our customers about the services, 93% of customers stated that we provided a good to excellent service.
- Other areas of customer feedback have been implemented, such as a comments book and mystery visitors scheme.
- Service standards have been developed for the Development Enquiry Centre, these were agreed with customers who frequently use our service
- Planning Services and Building Consultancy have also developed individual customer services action plans which identify areas such as training, development of service standards, updating the web, implementing service improvements which have been identified as a result of complaint investigation and feedback from customer questionnaires.

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 07 – March 08

- **63.49%** (61.01%) major applications
- **78.15%** (69.94%) minor applications
- **86.47%** (83.63%) other applications

July 07 – June 08 PDG timeframe

- **65.98%** (62.36%) major applications
- **77.98%** (77.65%) minor applications
- **86.30%** (87.21%) other applications

4.2 In Compliance the following performance has been achieved:-

April 07 – March 08

- Number of cases received **1501**
(This figure is down 6.7% compared to the same period 06/07)
- Number of cases resolved **1646**
(This figure is up 12% compared to the same period)

- Initial site visits

Cat 1 Site visit same day /within 1 working day Target 100% Achieved **90%**

(There were only 10 cases in this category)

Cat 2 Site visit within 2 working days Target 95% Achieved **91%**

Cat 3 Site visit within 10 working days Target 90% Achieved **87%**

4.3 In most areas performance targets continue to be achieved. In compliance the slight downturn can be attributed to long term sickness and job vacancies. Recruitment for 1 full time

Compliance Officer, 1 part time Compliance Officer and 1 full time Senior Compliance Officer is currently underway to address this.

5.0 Conclusion

- 5.1 The review continues to make significant progress and improvements. But there are still areas that require action. These include implementation of
- Complete Panel review and its implementation
 - Householders guide
 - Enforcement review
 - Continue to look at staff resources in light of considerable budget pressures caused by downturn in the economy
 - Complete and publish the Charter for Parish and Town Councils.
- 5.2 The currently fragile confidence in the economy has significantly affected the pace of development and the consequent effect upon planning fees remains a significant cause for concern. This in addition to existing budgetary pressures could affect staff resources and performance in the coming year.

6.0 Recommendations

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

Background Papers

There are no background papers