



Report of: Head of Planning Services

Area Committee: Outer North East

Date: 6th December 2010

Subject: Community Planner

<p>Electoral Wards Affected:</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Ward Members consulted (referred to in report)</p>	<p>Specific Implications For:</p> <p>Equality and Diversity <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Community Cohesion <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Narrowing the Gap <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></p>	
<p>Council Function <input type="checkbox"/></p>	<p>Delegated Executive Function available for call in <input type="checkbox"/></p>	<p>Delegated Executive Function not available for Call In Details set out in the report <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></p>

1.0 Purpose of this Report

- 1.1 The Community Planner role has been operational for over a year and this report provides Area Committee with a review of the role and function of the Community Planner in the Outer North East Area Committee area during this time. The report describes the organisational and management arrangements in place, the work that has been undertaken so far, plans for the rest of the financial year and the role in practice with lessons learnt.

2.0 Background Information

- 2.1 The need for a Community Planner was identified in 2008. The Area Committee identified a number of key functions for the post holder; looking at planning applications, pre-application, enforcement issues, conservation area work, appeals and training. The aim was to raise awareness, knowledge and understanding of the issues relating to planning to achieve a high quality built environment with appropriate development.
- 2.2 Funding was secured for the post at the meeting of the Outer North East Area Committee on 15 September 2008. The funding is made up of equal contributions from Wetherby and Harewood wards. The current post holder was appointed in September 2009.

- 2.3 The Community Planner project relates to action H13 of the 2008/09 Area Delivery Plan, which aims to support Town and Parish Councils to enhance the well-being of and service provision to the communities they serve and comes under the Stronger Communities Theme. It also is part of the ADP priority Environment- *Protect and improve the quality and sustainability of the built and natural environment.*
- 2.4 Organisationally, the Community Planner role sits within Leeds City Council Planning Services. Until January 2010, the role was managed by the Head of Planning Services, but since this time has been line managed by the Development Project Manager. The Community Planner for the Inner North West Area Committee area completes this small team.
- 2.5 Professional support and advice on planning matters comes from the Area Planning Manager and the Head of Planning Service.
- 2.6 Supervision is through regular work programme meetings and one to ones. A work plan for 2010-11 has been produced which deals with larger ongoing projects and this supplements the regular day to day activity. Updates go to Ward Members reporting on progress and to keep Ward Members informed of key issues on the ground. The Council's performance management and appraisal system is also used.

3.0 Main Issues

3.1 Work Undertaken

- 3.1.1 This list is not exhaustive, but is an indication of the type of work that has been undertaken:
- Public Inquiries - liaison, co-ordination, providing advice and support, organising meetings with Members, local residents and Parish Councils. Attendance at appeals to support the local community;
 - Attendance at Town and Parish Council Forum meetings, with input on planning issues;
 - Attendance at individual Parish Council meetings, with input on planning issues;
 - Delivery of training on: conservation, Parish Council's role in planning, determining planning applications, public speaking, the planning process, enforcement, appeals and making effective representations;
 - Involvement in the Town and Parish Council Charter;
 - Fortnightly Ward Member meetings - briefing Members on the sensitive and contentious applications in their ward, providing planning advice, liaising with Planning Officers and follow up of issues;
 - Enforcement issues;
 - Attendance at public meetings about proposed developments;
 - Drafting representations for Ward Members;
 - Attendance at Plans Panel meetings.

3.2 Evaluation

- 3.2.1 At the outset of the project a number of assumptions were made about how the Community Planner role would operate. The job description provides a framework for the activities, but it has largely been a role that has evolved and responded to the individual demands of communities, Parish Councils and Ward Members.
- 3.2.2 The Community Planner role is a very different job than that of a Planning Officer. In addition to having planning experience and knowledge, the role must be able to make links and learn what the important issues for communities are. This has taken some time and has been quite intensive as local communities have differing priorities and needs. Consequently, this has had an effect on the progress of other initiatives which were originally scheduled for completion during the first six months of the role. A lesson learnt is not to underestimate the amount of time and effort required to build up links, contacts and trust with communities and individuals. Anecdotal evidence from the experience of the Outer North West Community Planner role, which has been operational for several years, shows that it takes about nine months to a year before the post is fully bedded in.
- 3.2.3 With hindsight it would have been more effective for the post to be officially “launched” at a Town and Parish Council Forum so all stakeholders received the same messages about the role and there was an initial opportunity for networking.
- 3.2.4 However, significant progress has been made in a number of areas, particularly in supporting Public Inquiries.
- 3.2.5 Between March and May 2010 the Community Planner was involved with two high profile Public Inquiries - Church Fields and Grimes Dyke. Parish Councils in particular have been appreciative of the role played by the Community Planner:

“We have found Sarah to be very helpful and supportive since she was appointed as community planner for this area. We have, and still are, facing a major public inquiry into development of a site in Boston Spa - 13 days gone, 4 more to come - and Sarah has helped facilitate dialogue with the relevant planning officers and has been very supportive of our own efforts in preparing and presenting evidence to the Inquiry. In our opinion she has fulfilled a very vital role as interface between the Parish Council and the community at large with the inevitably impersonal planning department”. Boston Spa Parish Council

“From the personal perspective and particularly relating to the “Grimes Dyke” appeal but also other public inquiries Sarah has been a key link with members, council officers and barristers. It is my belief that by her efforts third parties have had the opportunity to have greater involvement and support from the early stages up to and including giving evidence before the planning inspectors”. Barwick-in-Elmet & Scholes Parish Council.

- 3.2.6 However, this level of involvement comes at a high cost in terms of resource input. Not all Parish Councils have been visited, although this is now a priority

and will be achieved before the end of the financial year. Another lesson learnt is that whilst forward plans and initiatives can be developed, some of the work of the Community Planner is reactive and can absorb a great deal of time. This is particularly important to note with the re-opening of the Church Fields Public Inquiry in the coming weeks.

- 3.2.7 Anecdotal evidence suggests that the principle of the Community Planner is supported. However, one area where there is room for improvement is in the clarity of function of the role and basic premise of the role. There appears to be a discrepancy of expectations and understanding of the extent of influence the role has, which has led to some tensions. The purpose of the role, (taken from the job description) is:
- “To provide planning advice and guidance to the NE Area Committee, Ward Members and to Town and Parish Councils, individuals and groups in the NE Area Committee area, to provide relevant training on planning policies and procedures and to pursue planning initiatives for improvement”.
- 3.2.8 Some parties have seen the role as more of a champion role, fighting the cause for the locality, whereas others acknowledge the parameters within which the Community Planner works. The Community Planner operates within a legal framework where decisions on applications should be made in accordance with the Development Plan unless material planning considerations indicate otherwise. Planning decisions have to be made in accordance with policy, not on the grounds of popularity or unpopularity, or if there are objections or support for a proposal.
- 3.2.9 The job description is an accurate reflection of the role, however more clarity is needed. There is a role for training here for the Parish Councils in order to convey how the planning process works, how applications are determined and where everyone’s role fits in. This should help local communities to become better informed and more effective.
- 3.2.10 The defined purpose of the role as per the project delivery statement was to:
1. Advise and represent the Area Committee on planning matters
 2. Assist local communities and local councils to resist inappropriate planning applications
 3. Draft objection letters and win appeals
- 3.2.11 These were the assumed requirements of the role. However, in practice points two and three are not straight forward. Applications that some communities deem “inappropriate” may have no valid planning reason for refusal. Therefore there is sometimes a perception that the Community Planner is not supporting the view of the local community, Members or Parish Councils. However, the advice and support that is given is the independent professional advice, in line with adopted Council policy.
- 3.2.12 Similarly, the Community Planner has already played a significant role in the Grimes Dyke and Church Field Public Inquiries- co-ordination, communication and education. However winning of such appeals is only possible according to the planning legislation. The community Planner’s role is to assist the local community to state its case effectively.

- 3.2.13 The reality of the job is that the focus of the role and most of the time has been spent with Ward Members and some Parish Councils. The day to day business of providing planning advice and follow up on individual applications has been more time consuming than was anticipated. Consequently little time has been spent with the wider community on “planning education” initiatives.
- 3.2.14 Some Parish Councils are more interested in planning issues than others and so there has been more activity and contact with those Councils and a determination by them that the Community Planner should provide a great deal of time on applications in their Parish. However, other Parish Councils have made contact when their need arises and their requests have been dealt with swiftly wherever possible.
- 3.2.15 A year into the role, processes have been embedded with the Ward Members- fortnightly briefings on applications, processes for making Panel requests, making representation and so on. The briefings in particular are resource intensive- preparation, actual meeting and follow up and much time is being spent on day to day activity. This has not left much capacity for following through on larger projects or other areas of work. It is now timely for such processes to be embedded within mainstream Development Control. This will allow relationships to develop and improved communication between elected Members and the case officers who are dealing with individual applications, with input from the Community Planner where appropriate. Should the funding be continued, it is important to acknowledge that the Community Planner resource should be targeted where it will make the most difference and add value.

3.3 Looking Ahead

- 3.3.1 A Forward Plan was circulated to Ward Members in August 2010 which detailed the projects to be undertaken during 2010-11, beyond the day to day work carried out and is attached as appendix 1.
- 3.3.2 A key project is the planning conference being arranged for 1st March 2011 for Parish Councils and Ward Members. Subject to funding, there will be keynote addresses from external speakers and practical workshops on subjects including design and how applications are determined, which should provide a greater understanding of the issues.
- 3.3.3 Development Management is in the process of great change with the revocation and subsequent reinstatement of the Regional Spatial Strategy, changes described in the *Open Source Planning* Green Paper and anticipated changes in the Decentralisation and Localism Bill resulting in an increased shift to local decision making. Some Parish Councils have indicated that the Community Planner’s role will be key as a “contact who understands what’s going on and what’s changing”.
- 3.3.4 The detail of the planning reform is not yet known, but any movement towards localism and increased local involvement will mean an enhanced role for the Community Planner in supporting communities to help them shape the places where they live.

3.4 Assessment

- 3.4.1 No formal assessment has yet been carried out by Area Committee with the clients of the Community Planner. However, feedback has been gathered in-house and some comments have been included in preceding parts of this report. Feedback has been unanimous in its support for the role. This appears to be particularly the case with the support and advice provided with the Public Inquiries. Parishes have indicated an improvement in community involvement in planning and a better appreciation of the planning system and the way it operates.
- 3.4.2 Several Parish Council's have indicated that they feel the role should be repeated across the district.
- 3.4.3 However, there are comments about the uncertain nature of the role and its function which need addressing in order to make the role completely effective.

4.0 Implications for Council Policy and Governance

- 4.1 There are no implications for Council policy and Governance.

5.0 Legal and Resource Implications

- 5.1 There are no legal and resource implications beyond the use of Area Committee finances.

6.0 Conclusions

- 6.1 Feedback has shown that there is general support for the role of Community Planner. Parish Councils have felt that the role provides a good knowledgeable interface between the Councils and the Ward Councillors and between the Parish Council and the community at large with the planning department. However, the role of being this link is not always an easy one and some Parish Councils have acknowledged this. Opinions differ on proposals and some may not get their desired outcome which may cause discontent where the Community Planner takes a professional view contrary to local opinion.
- 6.2 There is a need for clarity of the role and a re-articulation of the remit and purpose of the role, especially in light of the proposed changes to the planning system. Training for communities may also be helpful in this regard, describing how the planning system works within the policy context.
- 6.3 Lack of time has been an issue for the role, there is a lot of interest in planning issues across the area from Members and some Parish Councils. Balancing workload, attendance at evening meetings and progressing with larger projects is sometimes problematic, especially when Public Inquiries take over the time available.

7.0 Recommendations

Area Committee is recommended to:

- i. note the contents of this report;
- ii. agree that the Community Planner liaises with ward members to provide clarity in the role and remit of the Community Planner post;
- iii. accept a report in the new year which seeks continued funding for the Community Planner post for financial year 2011-12.

Documents used:

Wellbeing application for Community Planner