

REPORT OF CHIEF PLANNING OFFICER
MEETING: SCRUTINY BOARD (DEVELOPMENT)
DATE : 20TH FEBRUARY 2007

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

Electoral Wards Affected	Specific Implications For :
	Ethnic Minorities <input type="checkbox"/>
	Women <input type="checkbox"/>
	Disabled People <input type="checkbox"/>

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 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 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, with further plans to increase the number of Principal Planners and other planners within the service to help deal with the large amount of major and complex applications. Other capacity gaps are now being covered by outsourcing and the use of freelance planners.

- 3.2 Discussions have been held with the private sector to work towards a joint approach for planner recruitment, training and retention in Leeds, this work continues to progress.
- 3.3 The range, quality and accessibility of self service channels and defining service levels is being improved and thus releasing officer time to deliver other priority services. Stakeholder presentations are now underway.
- 3.4 The structure will be realigned reflecting the technical nature of the tasks introduced by the new computer system.
- 3.5 Strengthening the role of the compliance service with the aim to deliver a more proactive service and by providing training for Members on enforcement action.

Realising a definitive officer view

- 3.6 A fortnightly departmental forum has been established which has provided a clearer and more effective framework for decision making, especially with regard to complex planning issues.
- 3.7 Guides for Urban Design (together with a forthcoming Scrutiny report on garden development), Householder Design and Highways Design are being produced. With regard to the Highways Guide, sustainability and equality appraisals have commenced, formal consultation will commence towards the end of April 2007. These guides will provide greater clarity for all stakeholders and improve consistency in decision making. These should be adopted and in use early to mid 2007.

Development and support for Plans Panels

- 3.8 One of our main priorities within the review is to improve and develop the process of Plans Panel meetings for all of our stakeholders these improved processes will help in improving our customer satisfaction. A protocol for developer presentations to Plans Panels is being finalised. A review has taken place of public speaking and site visits resulting in revisions to the Panels' protocols ensuring improved efficiency and equity.
- 3.9 A compulsory training programme for all councillors who serve on the panels has being put into place, with introductory and update sessions already taken place and the programme is being expanded for 07/08.
- 3.10 A number of other work streams are ongoing for implementation. For example:-
 - Regular meetings between the Chief Planning officer, senior planning officers and the Chairs of the Plans Panels to provide a forum for continuous improvement in the operation of Panels and to improve consistency in the way in which applications are determined have been arranged with a view to:-
 - Ensuring a consistent approach to pre-application presentations at Panels
 - Achieving strategic objectives by ensuring that the City's key objectives set out in the 'Vision for Leeds' and the UDP are reflected in the decision making process.
 - Better decision making fully reflecting the Government's and City Council's priorities and which is reinforced by regular Member training on key topics such as probity, updates on new planning policy (eg PPS3 garden development).

Information and communication technology

- 3.11 Public access channels facilitated by the new computer system have been implemented to enable applicants to track progress on their application and improve information for all interested parties. Training has taken place with Members, Parish Councils and Property Forums.
- 3.12 Implementation of web based services is ongoing, for example access to development plans. The provision for links to services through the national planning portal is in place, including electronic submissions of planning applications.
- 3.13 The service is working towards document imaging through a pilot which is taking place and due to end March 2007. On completion of the pilot feedback will be analysed and work will continue to move towards the electronic provision of information on current planning applications.

Improved customer services

- 3.14 In order to receive feedback from our customers we are in the process of re-establishing two customer forums, one for major developers and representatives from community organisations and the other for householder agents, the forums will be held on a six monthly basis. This will enable closer working with our stakeholders, opportunities to provide detailed information on new initiatives and give feedback on how the service has been improved as a result of consultations with stakeholders.
- 3.15 The service has made additional investment in customer services staff to deal with customer and ombudsman complaints. Feedback sessions are held weekly and quarterly summary reports produced to take forward service improvements arising from what we have learnt through dealing with the complaints. Establishing a dedicated complaints service has certainly been a successful way of dealing with our complaints and helped with learning and making improvements to our service more effective.

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 at 31 December 2006 is as follows:-

April 06 – March 07 timeframe

- 61.2% major applications
- 68.3% minor applications
- 82.6% other applications

July 06 – June 07 PDG timeframe

- 65% major applications
- 69.1% minor applications
- 83.2% other applications

4.2 Performance targets continue to be achieved, however, in striving to maintain this there has been a fall in customer satisfaction. This is a concern. It is intended to look at this conflict as a priority to achieve a satisfactory balance.

5.0 Conclusion

5.1 The review has already delivered 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, four main priorities for the next six months are:-

- The role of the Plans Panel meetings
- Customer Satisfaction Strategy
- Resources and capacity
- Guidance on 'Garden' Developments

5.2 In addition to the themes addressed in item 3.0, and above, numerous other work streams are identified within Appendix A which fall under the main five work themes of the review.

Recommendations

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