

ITEM

ITEM

Executive, 3 January 2008

UPDATE ON THE DEVELOPMENT CONTROL PROCESS REVIEW

Report of Head of Planning and Building Control

Statutory Powers: Town & Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended) and Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004

Financial Implications: The improved processes being brought into place in the Development Control service will lead to more efficient processes and savings in staff time. Once these are in place, a further decision will need to be made as to how much of this saving in staff time should be realised as cash savings and how much reinvested in the service to allow improvements in the service offered to customers.

Purpose

1. To provide an update to Members regarding the process that has been undertaken within Development Control in order to identify where savings and improvements in the service could be achieved.
2. To provide an update as to the investment in ICT necessary to enable these savings and improvements to be realised.
3. To update Members on areas where improvements have already taken place and the implementation of the remaining identified improvements.
4. To provide an update to Members regarding the move towards electronic working and the effect this will have on Development Control Committee.

Relationship to Corporate Priorities

The Development Control service is crucial to the delivery of affordable housing (CP1), the provision of quality jobs (CP2) and the maintenance of a distinctive and clean environment (CP3 and CP4), through the successful negotiation of planning applications. Much of the ICT investment identified in this report will improve access to the service (CP5).

Recommendation

1. **That the Executive NOTES the action plan for implementing the process review.**
2. **That the Executive RESOLVES that the production of the Members' Bundle be discontinued with effect from the February 2008 meeting of Development Control Committee onwards.**

Background

1. On 4 June 2007, Executive received a report on the Development Control Process Review. When considering that report, Members expressed a wish to receive updates on the implementation of the improvements identified through the Process Review. An

update report was presented to the 4 October 2007 Executive, and this report is intended to provide a further such update.

Progress So Far

2. Following the process review and the departure of one of the then 3 Area Planning Officers (APOs), a decision was made to restructure the section, changing from 3 to 2 area teams. The office accommodation was rearranged to enable this to happen and a Planning Assistant appointed in place of the third APO. Following decisions made at the 4 October 2007 Executive, 2 planning officer posts are being filled, subject to the availability of suitable applicants, paid for by Planning Delivery Grant.
3. In addition to the restructuring, progress has also been made in implementing the following improvements to the service identified by the review. These are:-
 - Introducing the expert planning system (using PDG money) (saving of £2,300 per year of Planning Officer time)
 - Reallocation of work (saving of £3,900 per year of Planning Officer/ Planning Support Officer (PSO) time)
 - Electronic notification of all consultees other than Town & Parish Councils (saving of approximately £60 in paper and ink and £2,000 per year of admin/PSO time)
 - On-line guidance on pre-application enquiries (saving of £200 per year of Planning Officer time)
 - Removal of paper copies of consultee responses (saving of approximately £40 in paper and ink and £400 per year of staff time)
 - Scanning letters of representation (saving of approximately £1,100 in admin officer time)
 - Scanning historic applications underway (saving of approximately £4,600 of admin, PSO and planning officer time when complete)
 - Getting all Article 3 directions on the computer system – a major piece of work nearly complete (saving of approximately £2,800 of admin, PSO and planning officer time when complete)
4. Since this subject was last discussed by the Executive in October, considerable work has been taking place to drive forward improvements, albeit that some of this is in areas that have yet to be finalised. The back scanning of old files not already covered by the scanning of newly received applications, using the allocated £52,000 of PDG money, has been underway for the last two months. Ongoing work to identify all applications the subject of Article 3 directions and log them onto the computer system is nearing its conclusion. This will allow more comprehensive use of the Expert Planning System, as its current weakness is not knowing which properties have had their permitted development rights removed.
5. A trial of lap-tops to enable remote working has also been undertaken, and has proved very successful. This has shown officers the benefits of using the lap-tops to enter data either on site or at home, during or shortly after a site visit, thereby avoiding the double-handling of hand-written notes that later need typing up. The savings identified in officer time with a target date of 31 March 2008 should therefore be realised. In addition, the officers who have trialled the lap-tops have become enthusiastic about the benefits not only of these, but of electronic working more generally. This should aid the introduction of the item entitled "Officers inputting conditions" in Appendix 1 by the target date of 28 February 2008.

6. The reintroduction of permitted development (PD) rights on estates where these have been removed has proved problematic. We have received Counsel's opinion that it would be unlawful for the Council to unilaterally apply to remove the imposed conditions that removed these rights. He suggests that individual owners could apply to remove the conditions, but only as they relate to their own house. If this is the case, the end result would be an even more complex picture where some parts of estates had PD rights removed and others had them reinstated. This would not generate the anticipated savings and would instead increase workloads. Your officers have gone back to Counsel to ask whether it would be possible for individual householders to apply to remove the condition for the whole estate covered by the original permission. His view is that this too would be unlawful. This saving has therefore been deleted and this is shown in Appendix 1.
7. The vast majority of the more efficient processes identified in the Process Review involve moving from a paper-based system to an electronic one. Officers within Development Control are now embracing this new way of working and, with the scanning in to the computer system of both current files and history files, our customers can now access information on planning applications, including submitted plans and comments received, online.
8. A key aspect of this move towards electronic working is to ensure that the Development Control section avoids running two systems, so that when the electronic system is up and running, officers are moving to discontinue the paper-based ones. Running both systems at once would mean that, far from there being a saving in staff time, there would be an increase as officers would have to continue existing practices whilst adding the new electronic ones.
9. At present all letters and consultation responses on any application on a Development Control Committee agenda are mailed to each Member of Committee in the Members' Bundle. This uses a lot of paper and print and considerably increases the postage costs compared to sending the report alone, as well as taking up a lot of officer time. The Process Review did not take into account the savings that would be made by decreasing the amount of printing and postage by not sending out the Members' Bundle. Once these are taken into account, it is estimated that the savings rise to approximately £2,800 per year.
10. The copying of all this paperwork in order to produce a Members' Bundle is unusual and your officers are not aware of any other authority that does this. The vast majority of authorities rely on a summary in each report of the points made by consultees and other representations. Some reports to Development Control Committee already contain such a summary, although others rely on Members reading the Members' Bundle.

The Changes Proposed to the Members Bundle to Development Control Committee

11. Committee reports would still be sent out to Members as paper copies. All Committee reports would in future include a summary of all the main points made by both consultees and members of the public in response to the application. Members would no longer receive the bundle of additional papers currently contained within the Members' Bundle.
12. If, in any particular report, any Member felt that the summary of points raised was not sufficiently comprehensive, and wanted to view the original document, this would be available online. Instructions will be prepared as to how to access the relevant part of the Council's web-site, for any Member not already familiar with this. Finally, the original

document would still be held within the Council offices. Any Member unable to access the Council's web-site from home could therefore view the document on computer in the Council's offices, or if preferred, the original paper copy on the file.

13. The increased savings that have been identified as flowing from this move have however been included in Appendix 1.

Strategic Risk Assessment

Opportunity	Issues/Obstacles	Benefits
Improving efficiency provides a potential opportunity to deliver savings or increase capacity within the service.	Reduced Planning Delivery Grant from decreased performance and insufficient ICT investment.	Ensure all the proposed ICT investment and other improvements go ahead.
Improving efficiency provides a potential opportunity to deliver savings or increase capacity within the service.	In the medium term, there will be additional workload from strategic projects such as Sherford and Langage	Ensure that the service is sufficiently fit-for-purpose and efficient to deal with anticipated increases in workload
Opportunity to ensure that all Members are aware of the electronic means by which documents can be viewed and that viewing the original document in the Council offices is available as a fallback	Accusations that the Development Control Committee has not had access to all relevant information are answered by the fact that all documents are available online and any concerned member of the public may put their views personally to Committee during public speaking	Reduction in time wasted by officers having to produce a paper-based Members' Bundle as well as scanning documents on to the web-site

14. Appendix 1 shows those elements of the process review that have already been achieved and sets target dates for the remainder. This programme will continue to be actively driven forward in the coming months, although Members should note the contract for the Support Manager for the Head of Planning and Building Control ended on 31st December 2007, and therefore the changes will need to be driven from within existing resources within the service.

Conclusions

15. The Development Control service has been through a thorough review in the last year and a series of improvements to processes have been identified that will result in more efficient ways of working, primarily by making more use of electronic ways of operating. One of these is discontinuing the sending of the Members' Bundle.

16. The time that would be saved within Development Control by discontinuing the production of the Members' Bundle was calculated as part of the Process Review and amounted to some £900 per year. When the costs of printing and posting the bundle are added, the cost of providing the Members' Bundle rises to some £2,800 per year.

17. No other authorities that your officers are aware of produce a Members' Bundle, with most relying instead on a summary of views expressed in each Committee report. It is proposed to move to this way of working, but with the documents that would previously have been sent as part of the Members' Bundle available online as well.
18. The improvements that have yet to take place are being driven through in line with the timetable set out in Appendix 1. Once these are all in place, it will be possible to reassess the levels of improved efficiencies generated as a result.

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Executive
January 3 2008

Head of Service

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APPENDIX 1

Process Improvements – Progress and Savings

Process Improvement	Immediately realisable savings	Savings in officer time expressed in cash terms	Total gross cumulative savings	Target date for improvement to be achieved
Expert planning system		£2,300	£2,300	Achieved
Reallocation of work		£3,900	£6,200	Achieved
Electronic notification of some consultees	£1,300	£700	£8,200	Achieved
On-line guidance on pre-application discussions		£200	£8,400	Achieved
Electronic notification of all consultees except PCs and TCs	£60	£2,000	£10,460	Achieved
Removal of paper copies on consultee responses	£40	£400	£10,900	Achieved
Scanning letters of representation		£1,100	£12,000	Achieved
Reintroduction of PD rights			£12,000	Counsel's advice that not lawful
5 years worth of historic files scanned in		£4,600	£16,600	31/01/08
Postcard acknowledgements instead of letters	£250	£1,750	£18,600	31/01/08
Discontinue Members' bundle	£2,050	£750	£21,400	31/01/08
All Article 3 directions on computer system		£2,800	£24,200	31/01/08
Officers inputting conditions		£5,600	£29,800	28/02/08
Overhaul standard conditions		£3,800	£33,600	28/02/08
Improved pre-application system		£900	£34,500	31/03/08
Improvements to complaints process		£4,000	£38,500	31/03/08
Remote working phase 1		£3,900	£42,400	31/03/08
Remote working phase 2		£4,000	£46,400	2009 (dependent on improved 3G mobile phone coverage and capacity in District)
Automatic input of consultee responses onto computer system		£800	£47,200	2009 (dependent on new computer system)

* To achieve this total of gross savings £11, 500 of recurring ICT costs will need to be incurred. These recurring costs are in relation to the expert planning system and remote working.