

Subject: Development Control

Status: For Publication

Report to: The Cabinet

Date: 15 November 2006

Report of: Deputy Chief Executive

Portfolio Holder: Cabinet Member For Spatial Development

Key Decision: NO

Forward Plan General Exception Special Urgency "X" In
Relevant Box

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1 This report updates member on progress made in relation to Development Control performance management and to make recommendations for the future approach of the Development Control Service.

2. CORPORATE PRIORITIES

2.1 The matters discussed in this report are linked to the following priorities:-

- Embedding our customer promise (Customers).
Improving the process and procedure in relation to this area of work will increase customer satisfaction.
- Improving performance across the 8 x 8 by 2008 indicators (Improvement).
- By strengthening the organisation in this area we will be able to more consistently meet the performance standards that members and users expect.

3. RISK ASSESSMENT IMPLICATIONS

3.1 All the issues raised and the recommendations in this report involve risk considerations as set out below:-

- There is a risk that by failing to introduce the improvement plan as referred to in this report, sustained improvement will not be achieved. This could have a negative impact on the customer's experience.

- Recruitment and retention of staff within the team continues to be a challenge and is being addressed by the interim Head of Planning.

4. BACKGROUND

4.1 A report was presented to Member in August 2005 which alerted Members to concerns surrounding the performance and operation of the Development Control Service. Within the report a number of options for the future delivery of the function were identified and it was resolved that :-

- Approval be given for the processing of major applications backlog by an external provider
- Approval be given for an interim manager
- Options to be considered in relation to externalizing the DC function.

4.2 The following has occurred since this resolution:-

- Action plan implemented for dealing with backlog of major applications.
- All outstanding 106 cases presented to members during July 2006 and external scrutiny in relation to process, procedure and lessons to be learned is currently ongoing. This will be the subject of a further report to members.
- Management Review of Development Control (DC) by Urban Vision. The review and recommendations have been shared with staff and now form the basis of the (DC) improvement plan.
- Interim Head of Planning in place.

5. APPROACH

5.1 A number of options have been considered in terms of the future of the Development Control function. A balance needs to be found between the inclination to provide planning services in-house, which provides maximum local control and other external options, ie: externalizing or partnering with another local authority.

5.2 It is evident however from the management review of the Development Control function that much work is required in order for the service to be fit for purpose and functioning effectively. It would not be advisable to consider externalizing a service which requires improvement on this scale and the focus during the past months has therefore been to create an improvement plan which will transform the service and ensure that the staffing structure is adequate to meet the needs of the service.

5.2 The recommended approach is that :-

- The Development Control Service remains an in-house function. A robust performance monitoring system has been implemented to ensure service improvements are achieved. It is also recommended that a further detailed assessment is undertaken in 12 months.
- Given the difficulty of recruiting specialist planning support a select list of specialist consultants is to be developed to support functions such as specialist conservation advice.
- It is proposed to continue with the existing interim Head of Planning arrangement and extend this until September 2007. The rationale behind this approach is that it will ensure continuity and allow us to drive through improvements with a clearly motivated and competent head of planning and bring about stability within the staff group. We have failed to fill this post on two separate occasions and the impact of it failing a third time would be high. The approach outlined above will enable us to ensure we have a service which is fit for purpose, a staffing structure to take us forward and importantly a service we can all be proud of.
- Develop and implement staffing proposals which will improve the service we provide in relation to enforcement and tree conservation. This will be the subject of consultation with staff and the trade union and clearly indicates a commitment from the borough in terms of delivering excellent service.

6. CURRENT PERFORMANCE

6.1 **Complaints/Ombudsman queries** – stringent procedures are now in place to deal with the management of complaints and ombudsman queries. We have begun evaluating the nature of the complaints in order to introduce directly related service improvements. In effect, in cases where the complaints are justified the team will respond to the criticism, review ways of working and implement changes. As a consequence of reviewing complaints and ombudsman queries received over the past 12 months, the following have recently been introduced:

- Improvements to call answering – monitoring now in place.
- Responding to emails - Emails are logged as incoming mail and in boxes printed off daily.
- A separate member queries system has been introduced and member queries will be logged and performance will be assessed against the customer care standards.
- Procedures are being introduced – a validation checklist is being drafted based on the “Good Practice Guide“. This will be introduced in November 2006, and will ensure that applicants are clearer about the Service’s requirements to make a valid application and ensure developers are aware of the documents to submit with their Applications.

- Improved Consultation Procedures - As a consequence of learning from the complaints received we have improved our consultation procedure to ensure we are consistent in notifying all affected neighbours.
- Enforcement - An enforcement Policy is being drafted.

6.3 Performance April 06 – October 2006-10-25

BVPI Planning	Description	2005/6 outturn	Performance April - October	2006/7 target	Top quartile English District Councils
BV 109a	Major planning applications	35.00	62.5*	60.00**	71.25
BV 109b	Minor planning applications	74.00	74.65	65.00**	75.28
BV 109c	"Other" Planning applications	92.00	91.15	80.00**	88.01

*The outturn for BV109a may be subject to variation pending the determination of the historic major applications.

**These are the published targets for these BVPIs – however the targets are being internally reset to reflect continuous improvement.

7. CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

7.1 In order develop the continuous improvement further within the Development Control Service it is proposed that :-

- Training Sessions will continue to be provided for members in terms of policy development and improvement
- A Developer's Forum is being organised at the end of November in order to engage with Developers, improve communication and importantly commence discussion and development surrounding a Developer's Charter.
- A User's Forum is being organised at the end of November in order to engage with general users of the service.
- Forward Planning team be relocated so that they are co-located with Development Control.
- Regular and robust performance monitoring continues and is the subject of regular review by the portfolio holder, with reports made available to all members via the intranet and reports to Overview and Scrutiny Performance Task Group.

8. COMMENTS OF THE HEAD OF FINANCIAL SERVICES

- 8.1 There are no immediate financial implications arising from this report. There may well be growth implications which will have to be addressed during the budget process.

9. COMMENTS OF THE HEAD OF LEGAL AND DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

- 9.1 It is essential the working relationship between the development control team and legal services is defined and articulated clearly. This is now being addressed and will assist in ensuring clarity and consistency.

10. COMMENTS OF THE HEAD OF HUMAN RESOURCES

- 10.1 In order to embed many of the improvements training and coaching issues may emerge all of which will be addressed with the Interim Head of Service.

11 COMMENTS OF TRADE UNION

- 11.1 Staff within the Development Control section are focused on working with management to provide an excellent service that members and customers expect. Development Control staff have been consulted on the proposals within this report and their comments have been incorporated into the improvement plan.

12. CONCLUSION

- 12.1 The implementation and performance management of the improvement plan will ensure an improvement in service delivery.

13. RECOMMENDATION(S)

- 13.1 Approve that the Development Control Service be retained as an in-house function with a further detailed assessment in twelve months.
- 13.2 Approve the continuing interim Head of Service arrangement until September 2007.
- 13.3 Approve the development of a select list of specialist planning support.

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Background Papers	
Document	Place of Inspection
Development Control Committee Report dated August 2005	Legal and Democratic Services
Development Control Improvement Plan dated July 2006	Town Centre Offices