

PLANNING PRODUCTIVITY REVIEW

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF PLANNING AND REGENERATION.

Cabinet Member Cllr Richard Chesterton
Responsible Officer Mrs Jenny Clifford, Head of Planning and Regeneration

Reason for Report: To update Scrutiny Committee on the recent assessment of productivity in the Planning Service.

RECOMMENDATIONS: That the report be noted.

Relationship to Corporate Plan: The primary purpose of the planning system is to regulate the use and development of land in the public interest and be a positive force in protecting what is good in our environment and preventing what is unacceptable. The Planning Service is a statutory service, the effective operation of which is central to the delivery of Corporate Plan priorities of community, housing, economy and environment. The Local Development Plan sets out the strategy and approach to the development in the district together with community and environmental safeguarding / enhancement until 2026.

Financial Implications: The budget for the Planning Service for 16/17 has been set at £493,000 with expected income from applications and other sources of £834,000. Activities by the Planning Service to enable housing delivery also directly results in the award of New Homes Bonus (funding) from the government.

Legal Implications: National Planning Policy Framework 'The purpose of planning is to help achieve sustainable development. Sustainable development is about positive growth- making economic, environmental and social progress for this and future generations.' The same document advocates a positive approach, with planning taking an enabling role.

The Service operates within a highly regulated environment which has been and continues to be subject to significant Government changes. The Planning Service including the enforcement of planning control must operate within the legal and performance parameters established through legislation and Government performance indicators, but should also command public confidence in the system. The operation of the Planning System will by its nature often involve making difficult decisions that will not be universally supported within the community.

Risk Assessment: The operation of the Planning Service is by its nature open to what can be high levels of public scrutiny with potential for challenge. It must operate within legislative constraints. The Government is currently seeking to accelerate the delivery of housing and continues to make changes to the planning system to achieve both this and wider aspirations of increasing the speed of decision making. The Government has also recently published its intention to open up the assessment of planning applications to alternative providers on a pilot basis. This may indicate a wider intention to introduce competition into elements of the planning system.

The Local Planning Authorities are expected to operate in a reasonable way, in accordance with statutory requirements and Government guidance. There is an expectation that the Council will be able to justify its decision making.

Risk in relation to planning arises from lack of an adopted and up to date development plan, lack of a five year land supply, departure from legislation and guidance, inability to justify and evidence decisions. Adequate resource is required to achieve this.

1.0 BACKGROUND.

- 1.1 In April 2016 an application was made to the Local Government Association under their productivity expert programme for external advice to undertake a review of aspects of the Planning Service and in particular to focus on how best to realise efficiency and productivity gains. A grant was subsequently awarded and a peer-type review commissioned by an external consultant holding a Head of Planning position with another authority.
- 1.2 There is a strong desire to improve the productivity of the service to deliver the efficiency gains that will allow the effective allocation of staff and financial resource to focus on major (and complex) growth and place-shaping activity. The realisation of growth aspirations within the existing Local Plan, emerging plans including the Local Plan Review and Greater Exeter Strategic Plan and delivery of the Culm Garden village all require the Planning Service to take a leading role, capacity for which must be available. The service also seeks to find ways to continually improve, learn from best practice and to respond to changing demands upon it as a result of Government changes to the planning system, legal requirements, the District Council's Corporate Plan objectives and priorities.
- 1.3 Key deliverables sought through the review were:
 - A review of the planning and enforcement service.
 - Expert advice on additional steps and measures that could contribute to an improvement plan for the service.
 - Advice on how best to embed improvement measures within a structural, operational or cultural redesign as part of a transformational approach.
 - Recommendations on future advisory/leadership capacity-building for the Head of Service.
- 1.4 Anticipated outcomes were:
 - A >10% efficiency gain across the planning service.
 - A more productive, confident, and effective planning and enforcement service.
 - Increased income through maximising income generation potential in areas of discretionary activity including pre-application and planning performance agreement processes.
 - A service more able to partner effectively to share expertise and learning, or to benefit from synergies across councils.
 - Improved recruitment and retention within the service.

- An empowered management function that seeks to inspire for strategic outcomes.

1.5 An assessment of the planning and enforcement service has now been undertaken, advising on best practice and the potential for productivity gains and any other improvements that could be made to realise efficiency gains.

2.0 OUTCOMES AND CONCLUSIONS REACHED.

2.1 The report delivering the outcomes from the review is attached for Member information at **Appendix 1**. The conclusions reached are as follows:

The planning service has been the subject of not insignificant change in recent years including as a consequence of restructures and staff changes. Not surprisingly, this has to a degree impacted on the performance of the team. Members have a keen interest in the outputs of the service and a review of the service and the operation of the planning committee has recently been completed. The performance of the planning application team is generally good, notwithstanding the gaps that currently exist in the staffing structure and the team are committed to the delivery of a quality service. A further restructure of the service is planned and whilst the analysis of the nature and character of the workload is complicated by the fact that existing staff are covering for the vacant posts, it is evident that any restructure needs to be better related to the caseload.

Performance management is in place and will be further enhanced by a new reporting and monitoring tool that is going to be added to the existing back office system. IT is generally used well but there is scope for making improvement particularly in terms of reducing manual data inputting and making key processes less 'clunky'.

Moves are being made make the service to be 'paper light' in terms of its operation. This gives an ideal opportunity to reflect on how key stages of the application process are undertaken so that they more efficient and effective.

There has been a great deal of interest in the delivery of the enforcement function for the Council particularly in terms of the responsiveness of the service. Key information is already held and with appropriate expression against performance indicators this should be sufficient to demonstrate the level of enforcement activity without the need to resort to case lists.

Planning committee operates in a professional way but generally quite lengthy. Parts of the agenda could be delivered in a different way which would not only save time for the meeting but also it would significantly reduce the amount of officer time spent on preparing the committee agenda.

2.2 The report also makes a series of recommendations across a range of topics areas:

- i) Customer relations
- ii) Performance management
- iii) Setting of priorities and allocating resource
- iv) ICT systems
- v) Work practices and procedures
- vi) Enforcement
- vii) Operation of the Planning Committee

3.0 NEXT STEPS.

- 3.1 The Head of Service in conjunction with the Chief Executive (acting in his Director of Growth role) have reviewed the structure of the existing service, together with its relationship with economy and regeneration functions. Together with the recent Housing White Paper, which set out a direction of travel for councils to take more control and ownership of the 'delivery' aspects of planning and growth, there is clearly a need to consider how the council's capacity, intervention and resource can be better aligned to the demands of today and the needs of the future. Consultation with staff over proposed changes to the existing service structure is proposed to start shortly.
- 3.2 The outcomes from the productivity report are being shared with Members and staff. Recommendations arising deal mainly with detailed operational matters and are being reviewed by service managers. A service improvement plan is being prepared in order to project manage and implement change.
- 3.3 One of the main areas of focus for the Scrutiny Committee over the last year has been the enforcement part of the Planning Service. Significant efforts have been made within the service to address Members concerns over communication and service responsiveness. Significant improvements have been made, with a number of positive comments at both Cabinet and Planning Committee, recognising the effort that has been put in to change the culture to one that better reflects member/customer needs. Regretfully, at the time of writing this report notice has been received from two members of staff, which will mean further change in the short term. T Efforts will be made to advertise these vacancies and reappoint as soon as possible the enforcement service back up to its full complement of staff.

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Circulation of the Report: Councillor Richard Chesterton

List of Background Papers:

Scrutiny Committee 22nd February 2016, 23rd May 2016, 10th October 2016

Planning Committee 9th March 2016, (further report expected 29th March 2017)