Overview & Scrutiny Committee

September 2016

Development Services - Policy and Development Portfolio Holder Update

Service Plan Performance

The service area is continuing to perform at a high level with regard to planning application performance with the number of planning applications determined within the statutory time scale again remaining at over 90%. There also continues to be significant schemes submitted resulting in sustained high levels of fee income, which is a pattern that has continued over the last three years.

There has been an increase in the number of successful appeals against officer and committee decisions which officers sought to vigorously defend. Officers prepare regular reports to planning committee to give an opportunity to review the decisions and learn lessons from these.

The number of enforcement cases on hand throughout the year has remained at a level of up to 160 open investigations. This has continued to increase from previous years.

The revised procedure to monitor section 106 agreements and contributions is working well with those procedures being kept under review and fine-tuned particularly in respect of the level of collaborative working that is required with the County Council and other partners. A further internal audit of this area of work was undertaken in March this year which concluded that there was a substantial level of assurance reflecting the progress that has been made to date.

The new householder 'drop in' service which provides free pre-application advice on domestic extensions, etc. has been well received and continues to be fully booked on a weekly basis.

In line with most other Council's, a charging regime for the provision of non-householder pre-application advice was introduced in February this year and is being kept under review and closely monitored. To date, the income received is resulting in a cost neutral position. The scheme was considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at their meeting on 28 June 2016 and the intention is to continue to trial it for the next year.

Late last year, a Land Charges Kiosk service was introduced in the Riverside House reception area which enables personal search providers to access the relevant information themselves without any input from officers.

As expected, the demand and take up of this service has been very high which has also resulted in a reduction in the workload and a post on the establishment offered up as a saving.

The Government continues to press ahead with proposals to move land charges to become the responsibility of the Land Registry in the next few years.

Within Development Management, Officers are continuing to review processes and procedures to ensure that all areas of work are undertaken as effectively and efficiently as possible whilst also ensuring a continuing high level of customer service. As part of that, Officers are starting to plan and prepare for the changes that will be introduced within the planning system by the Housing and Planning Act including the proposal to introduce competition in respect of the consideration of planning applications.

Building Control is now part of a joint service with Rugby and Daventry Councils. This year we have also done a re-structure as a result of the joint service. The workload remains at a fairly constant level which, with strong competition from Approved Inspectors. Building Control continues to receive positive feedback from clients responding to the customer satisfaction questionnaire, with a very high level of satisfaction. Income levels are slowly improving.

In June 2016, Council submitted modifications to the Local Plan to address issues raised by the Inspector in his letter of 1st June 2015. This followed extensive work to reach agreement with the other Councils in Coventry and Warwickshire to redistribute unmet housing need arising in Coventry. The Inspector initially agreed to a period of suspension, but has now agreed to reconvene the examination at the end of September. The Inspector has now formally ended the period of suspension for the Local Plan Examination and has confirmed the timetable for the hearing sessions. These are due to commence on 27th September and to end on 15th December. It is hoped that we will have an adopted plan by Summer 2017.

Development Services has a permanent part time officer working on HS2, to ensure that the authority is fully engaged with the process and is in a position to deal effectively and appropriately with the related planning applications when they start to arrive by being a designated authority, the first in the country. We are also assisting areas that are significantly affected by HS2 by liaising with the public and parish councils and ensuring that they understand the process.

Risks

Risks to the service area are as follows:

Local Plan being delayed or not being adopted with impacts on our ability to defend appeals or resist applications outside the green belt and inability to progress needed development in the green belt

Failure to allocate G&T sites continue to be a risk to the progress of the Local Plan, although this risk will be reduced if the Council can provide a clear commitment to identify sites and bring forward an allocations plan quickly after the adoption of the Local Plan. In the meantime, there are also risks of G&T sites being set up in inappropriate locations

Lack of marketing Building Control service resulting in further loss of business to Approved Inspector's - it should be noted that mitigation has been put in place with the appointment of a marketing consultant, who will be helping to brand the service and provide advice on how we market our business better.

Volume of work – increase in number of planning and building regulation applications

Difficulty in recruiting professional experienced staff generally

Work Volumes: The volume of work generally remains at a high level and whilst all staff continue to work as effectively as possible and are fully supported by managers in doing so, there is a risk of increased levels of health and well-being impacts that managers are monitoring closely.

Workforce Planning

There have been significant difficulties in recruiting experienced professional staff. We are therefore considering ways of developing staff so that we 'grow our own' expertise in these areas. One example of this has been with a member of staff in Development Management, who was appointed in a trainee role, and has developed into a Senior Planning Officer and is currently at the late stages of her qualifications supported by the Authority. We have recently recruited an Assistant Conservation Officer at an appropriate level to assist with the range of heritage-related work within the team but also grow and develop into the role. We are also in the process of recruiting an Assistant Building Consultant for the Building Control team. Finally, we have started trialling the introduction of a "planning technician" role to assist with some of the routine planning work and have done so by offering a 9 month work placement role to a degree level student.

Succession Planning: Historically, Development Services have had some difficult experiences with the lack of succession planning severely impacting on the service, and therefore we are trying to ensure that we have plans in place by training and developing staff to assist in their career development. It is hoped that we will have staff able to step into more senior roles when they become available.

Skills, Training and Competency Needs: Officers are developing a service area training plan following on from staff appraisals, which will provide generic training as well as specialist planning and building control training.

Finance

Development Services achieved the 2.5% saving on discretionary budgets in 2015/16, and for 2016/17.

The additional work to progress the local plan has required the Planning Reserves being topped up. There has been a need to carry out some short pieces of work to strengthen our evidence for the local plan examination.

Budget: Officers have been involved in additional finance training throughout the year.

Procurement: As part of the training stated above, officers are working closely with the Procurement team to ensure that procedures are improved.

Contract management: Through a significant amount of work and scrutiny of the Contracts Register for the service area by Finance and Audit, the data held is now much clearer and has helped us as a service area understand what needs to be included in the Contracts Register. An up-to-date contracts register is being maintained

Audits: We have had a number of recent audits which have all had satisfactory or substantial ratings.

Risk Register: This is regularly reviewed for the service area. This is also a standing item on our team meetings and meetings with our Portfolio Holder.

Work Streams and Projects

Building Control:

During the year, we have progressed the new structure for Building Control following the merger of the three Councils services. We are also transferring Rugby and Daventry ICT systems onto IDOX which is a major migration process and very time consuming and costly for the joint Building Control service. Daventry's migration is near completion.

The Building Control service is established and recognised by Architects and Builders who continue to use the service as we are able to remain competitive, cost neutral and reactive. We have a strong relationship with Warwick University and the Developers where we have secured the contract to provide the BC Service for the Sherbourne Residental Blocks, the conference centre which is under construction, Sports Hall Hub and 6no extensions to the Art Block. We are inspecting at JLR Fen End, a new test facility, and projects at Warwick Hospital. Rugby School has over £30 million to spend over the next few years. Bloor Homes are now an established partner and we have recently secured two large housing developments in Rugby/Warwick area. AC Lloyds are about to submit a B/Regulation application for Station Approach which is for 210 units. Building

Control has recently appointed a Marketing Consultant, and this should identify areas for further development.

We also need to consider ways of retaining our current Building Control staff, who are often being approached by the private sector, due to the lack of qualified people in the industry. This review was agreed by Employment committee in December and work is commencing shortly.

Development Management:

Across Development Services there is a need to continually improve the electronic delivery of the services we offer, in particular for development management and building control as they are very customer facing services.

Alternative Service Providers within Development Management: The Housing and Planning Bill which is currently going through Parliament proposes the introduction of alternative providers for key elements of the development management service which will add a significant level of complexity into the process. This will means choice to customers, so we will be in direct competiton. Therefore, we need to shape the service in the next three years so that it is more efficient and effective by streamlining what we do so that we are competitive for the future changes. If not, then we will lose business and involvement in the planning process for those applications dealt with by the private sector.

Policy:

A number of neighbourhood plans are expected to reach adoption during the year including Barford and Leek Wootton

We have progressed towards the examination of the local plan. Linked to this we will be submitting the Community Infrastructure Levy and will be commencing the examination process for this. Work to allocate sites for Gypsy and Traveller sites is also progressing in the Local Development Scheme. Also, work is underway with our partners on a visioning exercise which will inform an Area Action Plan for Leamington Town Centre.

Work will continue through the year on progressing the delivery of major housing sites including the provision of infrastructure to go alongside the new housing

Any Changes Required to Service Area Plan

There are no changes required. It should be noted that the service area has been through significant redesigns in 2015/16, and the Service Area Plan for 2016/17 reflects this.