

Report of the Director of Planning and Community Development

DEVELOPMENT CONTROL: REVIEW OF PROCEDURES1. Purpose of report

To advise the cabinet of progress in effecting the review of the development control service in the Directorate of Planning and Community Development and to seek the approval of consultants to assist with the review. This is in accordance with the corporate objective of providing high quality services and the aim to strive to continuously improve the quality and level of services.

2. Background

Ian McLaren QC identified a number of shortcomings in the Council's development control procedures in his review of the handling of the applications at Temple Lake, Nuthall. The cabinet resolved, at its meeting in July 2006, to carry out a "root and branch" review, including processes, management and supervisory arrangements, induction, training, recruitment and retention of staff. The appendix sets out the main issues to be covered by the review and progress to date.

3. Financial Implications

The work of the consultants is likely to commence this year but extend into 2007/08. Exact costs are not known at this stage but it is anticipated that the cost can be contained within overall directorate budgets. Arrangements have been made for appropriate consultants to give presentations to a group of officers and members following which an appropriate choice would be made.

Recommendation

The cabinet is asked to RESOLVE that external consultants be appointed to carry out the development control review with costs being contained within overall directorate budgets.

Background papers

Nil

APPENDIX**1. Content of Review**

The main components of the review are likely to be:

- 1.1 Processes and procedures: it is necessary to review current practices and compare these with best practice elsewhere. This needs to cover procedures for dealing with (a) formal applications for planning permission, listed building consent, etc, (b) informal enquiries and guidance, (c) enforcement and (d) appeals.
- 1.2 Information, including publicity, consultation and communication: the outcome should include a compendium of practices, procedures and policies, which can be made available to the public, including over the internet.
- 1.3 Management: a review of management and supervision arrangements, including roles and responsibilities, case handover arrangements, performance management, best use of IT packages.
- 1.4 Training and development for staff and members, following identification of competencies/expertise required.
- 1.5 Recruitment and retention: including an examination of the reasons for (continuing) high staff turnover.
- 1.6 Resources, including staffing levels.
- 1.7 Implementation of proposals, including timescales and funding.
- 1.8 Production of a detailed office procedures manual.
- 1.9 Recommendations to secure value for money.

2. Progress

Progress “in-house” is limited by pressures on the current service and staff turnover. The caseload of applications, appeals, informal enquiries, etc is currently carried out by 6 planning officers, with assistance from the Principal Development Control Officer (PDCO), who manages the service. Application caseload over the past year averages over 160 cases per planning officer (excluding the PDCO) and nearly 180 per officer if gaps for staff turnover are taken into account. Published DCLG guidance suggests that authorities should aim for a benchmark level of 150 cases per officer per year, although this will vary depending on complexity of cases, level of service given on informal enquiries, number of appeals, etc. Broxtowe therefore appears to be well above average for officer caseloads. This is also exacerbated by the level of experience of planning officers in the team (with only 2 of the 6 having more than 5 years’ experience in development control), and turnover in the team (apart from the Principal Officer, the average length of time at the Council is 2 years).

Preparatory work for the review has comprised:

- Review of the service process map to ensure that it accurately reflects current practice;
- Informal discussions with colleagues in nearby districts to ascertain how Broxtowe compares in various areas;
- Preparation of "benchmarking" questionnaire, to be sent to authorities in Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and family group, plus those who have scored highly in recent best value reviews;
- Meetings with officers of neighbouring districts (Rushcliffe and Erewash) who have agreed to share information and act as critical friends;
- Research into availability and costs of consultants who have a reputation for carrying out work in this field.

3. Proposals

Consideration has been given to carrying out the next stages in house or engaging consultants. With regard to the in-house option, the development control team is already under pressure with officers carrying a caseload well above the recommended maximum set out in a recent report from the DCLG. The review could only therefore be undertaken with additional resources. Alternatively consultants could be engaged and there are already a number who have undertaken similar work for councils. This option has the added benefits of securing an external, independent assessment of the Council's service, a clear timetable for the work and the benefit of knowledge gained through carrying out similar studies elsewhere, including review of best practice.

Either option would involve time spent by planning officers - as consultants would be also expecting to work with the team in understanding current processes and reviewing alternatives - but every effort will be made to maintain performance and service. On balance, and given the difficulties that would be faced in trying to recruit temporary additional resources into the authority, it is felt that the use of consultants represents the preferred option.

Initial discussions have been held with two consultants, and one presentation has already taken place to a panel of officers and members. It appears that consultants are able (indeed prefer) to carry out full reviews of processes, making recommendations for change, (including management arrangements, preparation of procedures guide, and best value), or can tailor shorter, more focused reviews to customers' needs. A full review is estimated to take around 6 months.