

Committee: Development Control

Date: 12 January 2004

Agenda Item No: 6

Title: Planning Services Best Value Review

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Summary

- 1 Scrutiny 2 Committee approved the Best Value Review Improvement Plan for Planning Services on 3 December 2003. The remainder of this report is presented to that Committee.
- 2 The Improvement Plan for Planning Services is presented. There are five Critical Success Areas (CSA's): Focussing on what matters to local people, assuring the quality of development, enhancing customer care, reducing delay in development control and reinforcing management systems to assure quality. There are 10 Action Statements to support the CSA's, each of which sets out outcome measures, action measures, the relative importance of each initiative, timeframes for each and resources where known. The most important action statement is improving development control systems: without robust, simple and clearly-understood systems in place none of the other improvements can be introduced effectively. At the same time the Policy context needs to be progressed and to be "owned" by all stakeholders, including Members, while customer care needs to be advanced in the context of the Council's overall and evolving approach.
- 3 There are 35 outcome measures in total, and 153 action measures. All are SMART and cross referenced, where appropriate, to the draft Quality of Life Corporate Plan. The Improvement Plan has been costed to a fairly detailed level, including costs that are usually hidden, such as the costs of holding workshops and focus groups. The total costs of all the improvements, if implemented, would be in the region of £156,000: this includes the costs of market supplements for some staff and the recruitment of new staff if agreed in the longer term. Not all these measures will be necessary in the short term: indeed many of the key improvements that the Plan identifies can be made at little or no cost, but there will be training and development costs to ensure that new initiatives can be implemented effectively. Many improvements are already being implemented and these are highlighted in the SIP.

Background

- 4 The Planning Services Best Value review was postponed from last year. Consultants were appointed using Planning Delivery Grant: thus it is hoped to have used the Grant to secure a stable framework for sustained improvement in the future.
- 5 The Member Team comprises Cllrs Tealby Watson (chair), Clarke, Rowe and Godwin. There was also an Officer Team comprising representatives of all aspects of the service.
- 6 The SIP was drawn up following a thorough audit of the service under the headings of the four “C”s – Challenge, Compare, Consult, Compete. Some of these overlap: for example the Member workshops were both challenge and consult events while the experimental use of external consultants for handling planning applications can be considered as challenge and compete issues. Throughout the process reference was made to the Business Excellence Model and the Balanced Scorecard. Both of these are tools to enable progress in key areas to be assessed over time. The SIP is not an immediate remedy for all the problems faced by the Service but rather has to be read as a document that sets in train measures to improve the service over time.
- 7 An interim inspection of the Service by the Audit Commission took place on 4 October 2003. This included interviews with the Member team, the consultants, the Head of Service and some staff. At the time of the survey the review process was concentrating on the DC procedure, and the inspection was critical of its apparent reliance on this, and stressed the need to consider the rest of the service and to be more outwardly focussed. The outcomes have been addressed in the SIP.

Challenge

- 8 The service was challenged internally on the basis of why it is provided, for whom and whether it, or some elements, could be carried out externally. One of the key outcomes of the Member workshop was making the planning process more accessible to, and able to be influenced by, Members – consequently it was considered that outsourcing the whole service would not be compatible with this requirement. Certain elements of the service can be outsourced however without detriment to this requirement. Planning consultants, for example, have been used for appeals in the past, but the SIP involves an experimental use of planning consultants to undertake planning applications, so that the effects may be measured in terms of cost, quality and time.
- 9 All planning staff, the acting Chief Executive, relevant Directors, Heads of Service and some Members were interviewed individually and in confidence by the Consultants. A painstaking and detailed review of all the processes within the service – DC, Forward Planning, Enforcement and Appeals was

undertaken. All staff were involved in the critique of the processes and in identifying solutions to problems, of which there are many and complex.

- 10 The service was challenged externally through member and parish workshops, as well as a telephone survey of other customers. The outcomes of the member and parish workshops are appended, with cross references to the improvement plan to show how issues have been taken forward.

Compare

- 11 The service was compared with that offered by authorities in the top quartile and visits made to some local authorities to investigate their processes and procedures. In general the service compares well in terms of forward planning and accessibility but less well in terms of DC performance and systems. The SIP sets out measures to ensure that UDC is in the top quartile within three years, and can sustain its position.

Consult

- 12 Consultation measures included the Member and Parish workshops, telephone surveys of other customers and a questionnaire survey of customers that is still ongoing and will be complete by March 2004. The outcomes are incorporated into the SIP, which also proposes further and structured consultation measures, the outcomes of which will require adjustments to the SIP as it evolves over time.

Compete

- 13 The use of planning consultants for some appeals and to handle some planning applications is being implemented experimentally, with a view to assessing the outcome in terms of cost quality and time. Temporary agency staff have been employed but their costs per hour equate to those of the Head of Service. Initial results suggest that in-house provision is invariably the best cost option but recruitment difficulties mean that external staff are likely to be necessary if even basic levels of service are to be maintained. The Council pays relatively poorly in comparison with other nearby local authorities and a proposal for market supplements as a retention and recruitment measure is being put forward. Consultants have also been employed to verify some aspects of individual planning applications on an ad-hoc basis, for example highway advice and noise issues.

The Service Improvement Plan

- 14 The Improvement Plan is appended. There are five Critical Success Areas (CSA's): Focussing on what matters to local people, assuring the quality of development, enhancing customer care, reducing delay in development control and reinforcing management systems to assure quality. There are 10 Action Statements to support the CSA's, each of which sets out: outcome measures, action measures, the relative importance of each initiative, timeframes for each and resources where known. The most important Action

Statement is improving development control systems: without robust, simple and clearly-understood systems in place none of the other improvements can be introduced effectively. At the same time the Policy context needs to be progressed and to be “owned” by all stakeholders, including Members, while customer care needs to be advanced in the context of the Council’s overall and evolving approach.

- 15 There are 35 outcome measures in total, and 153 action measures. All are SMART and cross referenced, where appropriate, to the draft Quality of Life Corporate Plan. The Improvement Plan has been costed to a fairly detailed level, including costs that are usually hidden, such as the costs of holding workshops and focus groups. The total costs of all the improvements, if implemented, would be in the region of £156,000: this includes the costs of market supplements for some staff and the recruitment of new staff if agreed in the longer term. Not all these measures will be necessary in the short term: indeed many of the key improvements that the Plan identifies can be made at little or no cost, but there will be training and development costs to ensure that new initiatives can be implemented effectively.
- 16 The key actions are:
- To prepare new Local development Framework in line with Regional Spatial Strategy and the evolving Quality of Life Corporate Plan
 - To move beyond consultation to a responsive dialogue that exchanges views regularly with those affected by planning decisions and ensure that this communication leads to real improvement in the service
 - To take a more structured and strategic approach to identify broader objectives that might be secured through planning obligations for the achievement of wider community needs by securing planning obligations which link the overall needs of the area to individual developments rather than ad hoc infrastructure improvements
 - To ensure that departmental & individuals’ targets and objectives are linked to the corporate themes and objectives
 - To appraise the value added to the built environment through development control
 - To identify and apply the requirements for improved customer care
 - To be rigorous in the streamlining of business processes emphasizing continuous improvement
 - To move forward on electronic delivery of planning services
 - To develop partnership approaches to address issues which are common to other councils and reinforce other partnership arrangements to tackle cross-cutting issues
 - To benchmark against the best and ensure that comparisons lead to service improvements
- 17 Each of these Action Statements is accompanied by outcome measures and details of how these are to be achieved, including their importance and cost. Members should be aware that there is a significant cost element attached to increasing involvement and consultation.

- 18 The SIP shows that considerable improvements to the service can be achieved by a re-engineering of existing processes at no or little cost to the Council, but it is emphasised that there will be training costs. It also points the way to a first class service, but this cannot be achieved without investment. Some measures are immediate and some medium or longer term – some of the costlier measures do not have a high importance but would be essential for a “Rolls Royce” service. Members have to decide what level of planning service is reasonably achievable in the context of resources and other corporate priorities.

Next Steps

- 19 The SIP needs to be tested by consultation with stakeholders. This will take the form of focus groups with critical friends, the relevant Committees, agents/applicants, internal customers, members and parish councils, coupled with the on-going questionnaire survey. Following consultation and any necessary amendments the SIP will be presented for approval.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Service Improvement Plan be noted and approved.

Background Papers: Review documents and appendices.

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DEVELOPMENT CONTROL COMMITTEE – 12 JANUARY 2004
APPEAL DECISIONS

APPEAL BY	LOCATION	APPLICATION NO	DESCRIPTION	APPEAL DECISION & DATE	DATE OF ORIGINAL DECISION	SUMMARY OF DECISION
Mr & Mrs D Wilson	Land adjacent to Connlas Well Rook End Lane Debden	UTT/1856/02/OP	Appeal against refusal to grant planning permission for the erection of a dwelling and garage	DISMISSED 9 Dec 2003	18 Dec 02	The Inspector concluded that the development was unacceptable. The applicant argued that the property would be affordable in that it would meet the needs of his daughter who would not be able to afford such a dwelling otherwise. The inspector said that it would not be intended to meet the needs of the local community, but would cause environmental harm at the cost of personal financial or other benefit. The decision is welcomed.
Mr B & Mrs A Flynn	Johns Barn, Cambridge Road, Littlebury, Saffron Walden	UTT/0724/03/FUL	Appeal against refusal to grant planning permission for an amendment to the fenestration of the development already approved.	ALLOWED 18 Dec 2003	22 July 2003	The Inspector concluded that the fenestration as constructed was acceptable.