

Report to: Cabinet

Date of Meeting: 5 September 2016

Report Title: Review of the Development Management Planning Service at Hastings Borough Council – Budget Implications

Report By: Andrew Palmer - Assistant Director Housing & Built Environment

Purpose of Report

This report outlines the findings of a review of the Planning Services undertaken by the new Planning Services Manager. The report has been informed by best practice and highlights opportunities for change and improvement where needed.

The report contains an assessment of the likely impact of the new Housing & Planning Act 2016 and details a revised staff structure which will strengthen the service in terms of key aspects of planning performance.

The report sets out the financial implications of the changes which were considered and agreed at the Budget Pier meeting on 22nd June 2016 for the period 2016/17 and 2017/18. These are considered necessary in order for the Council to address the main Service challenges moving forward.

Main Recommendations

- 1) That the recommendations of the Planning Service review are agreed.
- 2) That the revised staffing structure outlined in Appendix 1 is implemented.
- 3) That the charging structure for Development Control Queries outlined in the report is implemented, subject to the other measures outlined being implemented, including improved public information.

Reasons for Recommendations

The proposals outlined will address a staffing deficit identified in the review and create the capacity for staff to effectively manage the Council's core primary planning functions whilst maintaining and improving customer focus.

The changes are considered necessary to meet service expectations, including current corporate performance targets for planning and the new national performance indicators set by government following the implementation of the Housing and Planning Act 2016.

The introduction of the charging structure outlined, along with other supportive measures, should reduce the number of general enquires received whilst improving the overall availability of planning advice to residents. This will enable the planning team to better balance their workloads, whilst maintaining a focus on service improvement.

1. Planning Performance Targets

There are two means by which to assess Planning Service performance. The first is to measure performance against statutory targets set by the government. The second is to measure performance against the Council's own targets.

Table 1, below, shows planning performance against the Council's own targets from 1/4/2015 to 31/3/2016. This demonstrates that whilst we exceeded the statutory requirement in terms of major applications, we fell short of our own targets.

Table 1

	Major Applications	Minor	Householder	DCQs
End of Year	83%	71%	48%	1295
Council Target	90%	85%	65%	

Table 2, below, shows planning performance against the proposed new Government targets from 1/4/2015 to 31/3/2016. This demonstrates that whilst we were above the proposed targets in respect of major and non-major applications, we would have fallen short of the target in terms of appeals last year.

Table 2

	Major Applications	Non Major	Appeals
End of Year	83%	80%	48%
Proposed Stat Target	50%	70%	90%

The new statutory targets set by Government now apply to all Local Planning Authorities. Failure to meet the above could result in Local Planning Authority designation. Designation is likely to mean that planning application fees and the ability for the Council to make decisions are placed in the hands of another approved body outside of the borough, such as the Planning Inspectorate.

It is suggested that, given the significant impact of possible designation, that performance within the 70% to 85% range for non-major applications is too close to the designation threshold. An improved performance is therefore required. A performance target for 'non major' applications is suggested as 85%.

2. Constraints on meeting Statutory Performance Targets

The following are considered to be factors that affect the ability to meet Council's own performance targets and future statutory targets:

- Work Load
- The number of general queries received, known as 'DCQs'
- FOI's & Complaints
- Information Technology

3. Workload

Of those points noted above the most significant impact on the Planning Service performance is its workload. Based on guidance found within 'Key Lessons for Development Control: An Overview of the Evaluation of Planning Standards Authorities', CLG it is clear that the number of planning staff (4.6 FTE) is insufficient to deal with the number of planning applications received. Attached at Appendix 1 is the current staff structure.

Two additional Planning Officers are being recruited with interviews scheduled for August. This will assist the Planning Team in progressing outstanding applications, which had arisen from the staffing shortfall and to cater for new planning applications. Appendix 1 shows the proposed staff structure.

The budgetary implications are as follows. The total Planning Services Budget for 2016/2017 is currently £791,127. The full year cost of 2 additional posts will be an additional £80,223. However, as the posts are only being implemented part-way through 2016/17, the full cost in the current financial year will be £45,436. The Grant Officer post is being amended to a Conservation and Grant Officer post from September 2016, thereby achieving a previous PIER identified saving of £22,000 in respect of a reduction of the Conservation Officer post. The total budget spend figure for 2016/17 will be £881,744 and the budget for 2017/18 will reduce to £854,744. The budget figures are based on normal business, on the proposed revised staffing structure and on appointments being made for both planning posts by November 2016. This will ensure that no further agency staff are required to meet the day to day working requirements of the Planning Service.

However, should the Council take a view that it would wish to further extend the grant programme in future years by retaining the current post holder for 4, rather than 2 days a week (as proposed); then the total resourcing figure would need to be reconsidered. It is suggested that this matter is further reviewed once the PIER programme has been finalised and conservation area appraisals undertaken. This work will inform the Council's Heritage Strategy and the Town Centre White Rock Area Action Plans.

Other matters identified that affect workload are:

4. Development Control Queries (DCQs)

The Planning Service currently receives a high number of general enquiries, which is a significant demand upon the existing staffing compliment Table 1, above, shows the number general queries received in the last financial year. This is over and above the persistent complaints and queries received from specific groups or individuals that directly relate to the Planning Service. It is being recommended that the Council introduces a new policy of charging for general enquires. Table 3 at Appendix 2 shows charges that other Councils provide for general queries.



It is recommended that a charge is set for general queries to the Planning Team of £50 plus VAT. To support this, the following improvements to Council web site are recommended:

- Updating and enhancing planning information
- Introduction of self-assessment forms – ‘Do I need planning permission for...’
- A publically accessible GIS mapping system or alternative means to publically access site constraints
- Uploading planning history onto GIS mapping system or public access system

In respect of the improved planning information this is now ready to be uploaded to the Council’s web site.

The public access tool has the potential to provide for members of public to view site constraints but at present does not correctly list all of the constraints within the borough. It could therefore mislead in some circumstances. Work is now underway to see how best this can be resolved. In the meantime members of public are able to view all site constraints using the proposals map attached to the Local Plan. Ideally a publically accessible GIS system would provide all relevant planning information in one place and this might perhaps be considered at a later date subject to resources. However the measures outlined above provide an acceptable alternative and will support the use of self-assessment forms.

In addition several options are being explored for uploading all planning history to the Council’s web site. The 2017/18 corporate budget contains provision for the employment of six apprentices and one option might be to employ some of their time on uploading planning decisions and dealing with the associated paperwork. This would need to be done carefully to ensure their time at the Council is used in a way that supports their skills growth.

It is not possible to fully assess the impact of the changes, particularly charging, upon service demands and staff time until the improvements outlined have been approved and implemented.

5. FOI’s & Complaints

Most complaints received in the last financial year were from a small number of people or organisations, but were excessively high in volume. Between April 2015 to March 2016 the Planning Service received 43 complaints, 25 (58%) of these were from 3 individuals and of the 77 freedom of information requests, 40 (52%) of these were from 4 individuals. Many of these complaints/FOI raise similar issues repeatedly. Moreover the complaint letters are disproportionately lengthy in respect of the perceived errors. A new Corporate Complaints Policy has now been adopted, which includes measures to deal with unreasonable and unreasonably persistent complaints. This will allow the Planning Service to respond more appropriately.

6. Information Technology

The Planning Service is supported by a number of IT systems which facilitate service efficiency. Whilst most systems work well, two areas have been identified which could benefit from further improvement.

As outlined earlier in this report, one relates to the uploading of all planning history onto a publically accessible system, either through the existing public access tool or via a GIS mapping system which could be made available to view by the public. Whilst improving public access, this would have the added advantage of saving planning officer time in assessment of planning applications and responding to queries. Various

Options for uploading planning history are currently being considered.

In addition to the above allowing members of the public to view site constraints and other relevant information such as tree preservation orders or listed buildings without the need to ask the planning officers, would further improve the public offer and save additional officer time. Whilst the use of a GIS mapping system would have the advantage of providing all this information in one place, it should be noted that this information, bar the full planning histories and tree preservation orders, can be accessed from various parts of the Council's web site. Additional tabs can be placed on the web site to assist members of public to find this information. The self-assessment forms can also include relevant links to the web site and this will further assist.

It should be further noted that whilst tree preservation orders cannot be plotted on current systems, it may be possible for these to be identified by the Arboricultural Officer and listed on the website.

As not all parts of the system will be accessible to the public it will still be necessary for people to write into the Council to confirm planning status. Further because the information is not held at present in one place this will necessitate that officers spend some time collating this information.

Open access to this level of information will support:

- The self-certification of queries and guidance for an enquirer to check the history of the site
- Enhanced assessment of planning applications so that matters such as relevant conditions attached to previous consents can be easily found
- Improved access for contact centre staff so that they can provide an advanced information service to customers in cases where answers cannot be readily drawn from the web site.

7. Other Modifications to Working Practices and Procedures

Following the Bahcheli Review undertaken previously, a number of procedural changes were implemented. Whilst many of these have proved to be very useful, some require further modification. These cover, for example, further changes to the validation process but also proposals to move forward with the establishment of a Design Review Panel. The full list of improvements is highlighted in the conclusion to this report in paragraph 9.

8. Opportunities for additional streams of revenue

An aspect of the Planning Service which is performing well is the Enforcement Service and specifically 'Grotbusters' which seeks to improve, through various legal powers, the improvement of run down sites and buildings. In addition to this, the Council has an active Empty Homes programme which through compulsory purchase powers seeks to advise to owners on how to bring a property back into use, we can assist owners who wish to sell, advise owners on how to find a suitable contactor or surveyor to help with renovations and also advise potential purchasers on buying an empty property. Both these are important to the regeneration of the borough. The quality and experience associated with this service is such that other authorities look to Hastings Borough Council for guidance and training. It is suggested that there is potential to either offer at a charge our services to other authorities and/or to offer training to enable authorities to do similar works in their authorities. However this should be carefully investigated to ensure that it does not compromise the statutory function of the service.

9. Conclusion

This report concludes that whilst progress has been made there is still room for further improvement in the way that the planning services operates. Work in many of these areas has already been commenced and the successful recruitment of two new planning officer posts will do a lot to increase the capacity of the team to effectively deal with applications.

The following is a list of improvements:

- a) Introduce a charge for general queries, 'DCQ's';
- b) Appoint two additional staff (interviews to be held in August)
- c) Improve the validation process (to be considered in process review)
- d) Create a Design Review Panel; (invitations ready to be issued)
- e) Measures to further improve general planning information available on the Councils website; (information package ready to be added to website)
- f) Introduce a Geographical Information System on the Council's website to allow public access to planning information;
- g) Create a 'Self-Certification' form, (in progress)
- h) Adopt a more pragmatic approach to Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas in accordance with its statutory duty to preserve heritage assets; (day to day)
- i) Provide training for staff specifically in areas of conservation and listed buildings;
- j) Produce conservation area appraisals for the Council's 18 conservation areas;
- k) Reports to be robust and thorough in content; (new report template produced)
- l) Introduce new performance measures regarding non-major applications and appeals;

Officer to Contact

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Wards Affected

None

Policy Implications

Please identify if this report contains any implications for the following:

Equalities and Community Cohesiveness	No
Crime and Fear of Crime (Section 17)	No
Risk Management	No
Environmental Issues	No
Economic/Financial Implications	Yes
Human Rights Act	No
Organisational Consequences	No
Local People's Views	No
Anti-Poverty	No

Additional Information

Appendix 1 - – Staff Structures – existing and proposed

Appendix 2 – Council charges for general queries

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