

Bolsover District Council

Executive

2 February 2015

Staffing in Planning Development Control Service

Report of Councillor D Kelly, Portfolio Member for Environment

This report is public

Purpose of the Report

- To provide a service update on ongoing planning transformation work;
- To provide an overview of current roles and capacity of planning technicians, planning and enforcement officers and seek Member approval for the appointment of an additional technician to support the service.

1 Report Details

1.1 The Development Control Team provides the Planning Application and Enforcement functions. The officers are split into application case officers and enforcement officers but these roles do overlap. They are supported by a technician team to provide the technical support.

1.2 Planning Business Transformation

1.2.1 The team is currently implementing a business process review as part of the Council's transformation agenda. This is mainly aimed at a more efficient use of current resources and leaner processes to deliver the application and appeal work, as the core of the development control service. There are deadlines imposed on the decision periods for all applications and appeals and it is important that the service can meet the majority of these deadlines- both to facilitate the development needed but also to avoid being placed in special measures by the DCLG. (The current measure is that 40% of "major" developments are determined within 13 weeks of receipt (over a two year period) although the Government has now indicated that it is to be raised to 50%. An overview of the transformation work is set in the following paragraphs.

1.2.2 External consultants were commissioned to assist Planning in reviewing business processes and reviewing service capacity. The external consultants recommended various improvements to processes and the use of IT systems to achieve improved efficiencies of approximately 20% on the throughput of applications. A summary of work completed to implement these improvements (undertaken in 2013/14) is attached at **Appendix 1** together with a summary of the proposed and ongoing tasks for 2014/15.

- 1.2.3 During 2013/14 compatible document management software was installed, and data was migrated from the old systems resulting in the more efficient retrieval and use of historic records and efficient methods for the management of current files and planning application processing. Other refinements, such as auto e mailing of documents, were also configured, and microfiche and paper records were digitised to improve efficiencies and reduce storage space. Various workstreams were carried forward into 2014/15 including the configuration of performance management methods through the Enterprise module and the upgrading and development of Public Access to improve the information available to customers and to enable customers to self serve. Additionally the service is moving towards dual screen working which will improve efficiency and reduce the need for paper.
- 1.2.4 The service has embraced the efficiencies and opportunities offered by the new software and systems and is driving through further improvements. A business transformation officer is currently being recruited to specifically focus on the implementation of further improvements. Moving forward, it is proposed to further develop the consultee access software, purchased and installed in 2013/14, to enable more efficient and improved interaction with consultees and to reduce the need for paper. The service is also looking into opportunities for efficiencies through, for example, the use of iPads or other remote devices for use on site and for home working.

1.3 Planning Technicians

- 1.3.1 As part of budget constraints the numbers of technicians have been reduced and vacancies not filled. This has led to the current position where the team is not working efficiently, with delays and backlogs of applications and technical functions needing to be transferred to planning officers.
- 1.3.2 The external consultants advised that best practice for planning administration and technician work would indicate around **300** applications per year per technical officer in a Local Authority.
- 1.3.3 At BDC the team of 2 technicians currently register and process:

Table 1 – 2013/14 applications

573	Applications (all types) - a large number of these will be handled more than once due to being invalid on first submission
522	Pre-application enquiries (householder and pre-application development enquiries)
150	Registration and scanning of enforcement complaints (between 150-250 per annum approx.)
9	Appeals (varies annually);
1254	TOTAL (All figures for 2013/14)

- 1.3.4 The technicians are also involved in updating back office systems when regulations change or new software is introduced and amending standard letter templates to reflect changed requirements (including changes to the standard letterhead paper).
- 1.3.5 Peaks of work in one activity mean delays in processing work in other areas; as does any absence (leave and sickness). The mail received, including emails, needs, preferably, to be processed on the day received to avoid potential errors (it is maladministration to determine an application without taking account of a consultee comment or public comment which has been received before the decision is taken) and minimise lost time in responding or processing essential information. Applications should be registered and processed within three working days to meet best practice and good customer service (and reduce time lost to progress chasing calls).
- 1.3.6 Delays currently occur in processing work due to conflicting demands on this limited resource. To cope with peaks of application work other activity, such as pre-application advice, is not progressed until resources allow. This results in poor customer service; complaints (and additional lost time dealing with them); and the perception that the Council is not open for business (deters inward investment).
- 1.3.7 The numbers of applications as set out in table one above justify the need for an additional technician, and experience over the last few years has shown there is an urgent requirement for three technicians to make the service run effectively and ensure business continuity.
- 1.3.8 The tasks this section would undertake with an additional technician include:
- (i) the first contact on the Duty enquiry system (officers would be available for those queries which require a professional input - but would not be involved in more routine matters);
 - (ii) householder permitted development enquiries;
 - (iii) planning register/land charges planning questions/Environmental Information Requests;
 - (iv) site notice posting and checks (in conjunction with officers who are going on site); and
 - (v) Enforcement registration; letters and reports to Members.

1.4 Planning Officers

- 1.4.1 Following the reduction in the number of technicians as set out above Planning Officers now undertake the following work that would have previously been undertaken by Planning Technicians:
- (i) Pre-application (is planning permission needed) advice for householders;
 - (ii) Posting, checking and removal of site notices;
 - (iii) First call as duty contact (telephone and personal callers);
 - (iv) Planning register/land charges planning questions;
 - (v) Environmental Information Requests;

(vi) Freedom of Information requests

- 1.4.2 This is not the most efficient or effective use of Planning Officer resource and the work on business transformation has shown that these tasks should be undertaken by Planning Technicians in order to achieve efficiencies and increased numbers of applications being undertaken by Planning Officers.

Table 2: Application numbers and Officer Requirements based on capacity modelling

2013-14 actual:		Total staff time (from TQ review formula)	
Others	230	1,118 hours	0.9fte
Non PS1 Apps	177	786 hours	0.7fte
Minors	138	1,628 hours	1.4fte
Majors	24	1,037 hours	0.9fte
Strategic	2+ 2 AVBC	896 hours	0.9fte
TOTAL	573	5,465 hours	4.6 FTE
Fee Income (Budget £325,000)	£603,132		

This excludes appeals, pre-application and duty work. PAS benchmarking exercise in 2011 showed case officers spending the equivalent of one full time officer on all duty and pre-application enquiry work, and FOI and EIR and general information requests.

- 1.4.3 If general non application work was passed back to technicians it would also allow the officers to provide more resource and more timely responses to informal pre-application enquiries and the team leader to focus on more management issues. These currently get delayed in favour of statutory duties (applications, appeals and enforcement work). This would support the growth agenda by providing a positive engagement at the formative stages of schemes and proposals. It would also allow for the potential creation of a fit for purpose charged service, should the Council consider introducing charges in the future for the pre-application service.
- 1.4.4 The current number of officers in the team aligns approximately with the capacity model with 5 FTE planning officers and although 2013/14 achieved a high income target, this was an exceptional situation caused by a number of large employment applications including Sports Direct. Performance and staffing capacity will be kept under review and where opportunities occur for further alignment of staffing with caseload these will be explored.

1.5 Enforcement

- 1.5.1 Enforcement is a specialism within the development control team and the enforcement officers are relied upon to provide the expertise to the whole team on enforcement matters. It is important that the team has leadership and expertise available at the principal level so that effective delivery can be ensured at all times.

The Enforcement officers also participate in the duty contact system in rotation with the case officers, and assist in posting site notices.

- 1.5.2 The registration of complaints and scanning or indexing of complaint forms and letters is undertaken by the technicians, but this is not a priority when the application and appeal work demand is high. Having an additional technician resource would assist in keeping this work stream progressing in a timely manner. The Council has a target of 85% of all complaints registered within 3 working days and the initial site visit within 14 days. This is currently not being met.
- 1.5.3 Delays in pursuing complaints do not reflect well on the service and often results in additional time lost dealing with complaints about delays. It would assist this element of the service if a technician resource for speedy registration and sending routine letters and managing the consultation with Councillors could be provided. This would allow officers to focus on the investigation and assessment work.
- 1.5.4 The Principal EO has for the last year been contracted to reduced hours with the additional hours funding the Business Transformation Project. A backlog of enforcement work has built up and complaints have been dealt with too slowly leading to further complaints and unnecessary additional work responding slowly. Sufficient capacity is needed to cope with complex cases including defending appeals and the current establishment of 2 FTE officers will be maintained.
- 1.5.5 It is proposed that enforcement officers will take on the formal role of monitoring S106 Agreements when the additional technician support can be provided. Enforcement officers are regularly on site visits so could add monitor starts on site as well as trigger points for works in progress; then working with the additional technician resource could send requests for payment; reminder emails/letters; and in liaison with case officers chase up the delivery of the projects required by the Agreement to avoid clawback. By creating a formal monitoring role it is feasible to try to introduce a monitoring charge within S106 agreements to reflect some of the costs incurred (estimated at £200 per agreement; annual income anticipated at about £1000).

2 Conclusions and Reasons for Recommendation

- 2.1 Current arrangements within the Development Control do not provide a resilient or efficient service as set out within this report. The appointment of an additional technician will reduce service risk and allow for improved and leaner processes within the Development Control team allowing planning officers to focus on casework and improving efficiency and capacity within the team.

3 Consultation and Equality Impact

- 3.1 Consultation and an Equality Impact Assessment are not needed.

4 Alternative Options and Reasons for Rejection

- 4.1 The alternative option is not to appoint the additional technician and maintain the service with existing staffing. This is considered not to provide the most efficient or resilient service as has been set out in this report.

5 Implications

5.1 Finance and Risk Implications

- 5.1.1 The cost of an additional technician would be £25,640 per annum. (There will be a one off cost of setting up a new workstation, computers and software for the post-approx £3,000).
- 5.1.2 The Planning Service sets anticipated projected Planning income for each financial year with Finance and monitors on a monthly basis. This is governed by nationally set fee standards and variable depending on the types of applications received. The current target for 2014/15 is £325,000 and the service is slightly ahead of projections. For 2013/14 an exceptional income of over £600,000 was received for the Council and the service managed this with existing staffing capacity although putting it under extreme pressure. The quality and level of service provided to applicants and developers was also reduced.
- 5.1.3 The cost of an additional technician would be £25,640 per annum. (There will be a one off cost of setting up a new workstation, computers and software for the post-approx £3,000). It is proposed to fund the new post of Planning Technician for 2 years from the remaining Planning Delivery Grant Reserve ensuring that the post has no impact on the revenue budget. Over the next 2 years as the efficiencies and benefits realised through ongoing business transformation take effect and through ongoing staffing change the post will be integrated into the structure and within the existing establishment budget so there will be no impact on the underlying revenue position.

5.2 Legal Implications including Data Protection

None

5.3 Human Resources Implications

Included in the report

6 Recommendations

- 6.1 That Executive:
- (1) Notes the progress being made as part of the planning transformation work;
 - (2) Approves the costs associated with the appointment of a planning technician (1 FTE, grade 5) to be funded from Planning Delivery Grant Reserve.
 - (3) Notes that the Chief Executive will use his delegated powers to create the post of planning technician.

7 Decision Information

Is the decision a Key Decision? (A Key Decision is one which results in income or expenditure to the Council of £50,000 or more or which has a significant impact on two or more District wards)	Yes/No
District Wards Affected	
Links to Corporate Plan priorities or Policy Framework	

8 Document Information

Appendix No	Title
Background Papers (These are unpublished works which have been relied on to a material extent when preparing the report. They must be listed in the section below. If the report is going to Cabinet (NEDDC) or Executive (BDC) you must provide copies of the background papers)	
Report Author	Contact Number