

Decision Maker: **DEVELOPMENT CONTROL COMMITTEE**

Date: **Tuesday 29 January 2013**

Decision Type: Non-Urgent Non-Executive Non-Key

Title: **PLANNING PERFORMANCE AND PROPOSED DIRECTION OF IMPROVEMENTS**

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Chief Officer: Marc Hume, Director of Renewal & Recreation

Ward: (All Wards);

1. Reason for report

1.1 This report responds to the need to stimulate economic growth, to the downward trend in planning application performance, to changes in national planning requirements, and to the periodic need to consider service delivery. The report responds in particular to a request of the Renewal and Recreation Policy and Development Scrutiny Committee (R&R PDS) for these matters to be brought before this Committee. A parallel report will be made to the R&R PDS of 17th January 2013 and Members will be given an update.

2. **RECOMMENDATION(S)**

2.1 **That the Outline Planning Improvement Plan be endorsed as a framework for improvement and that reports on specific improvements be brought to the Committee as necessary.**

Corporate Policy

1. Policy Status: Existing Policy:
 2. BBB Priority: Excellent Council
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Financial

1. Cost of proposal Not Applicable:
 2. Ongoing costs: Not Applicable:
 3. Budget head/performance centre: Planning
 4. Total current budget for this head: £2.725M
 5. Source of funding: Existing revenue budget 2012/13
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Staff

1. Number of staff (current and additional): 76ftes (excluding Building Control, Land Charges)
 2. If from existing staff resources, number of staff hours: 14
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Legal

1. Legal Requirement: Non-Statutory - Government Guidance:
 2. Call-in: Not Applicable:
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Customer Impact

1. Estimated number of users/beneficiaries (current and projected): those promoting and commenting on about 3,000 planning applications per year.
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Ward Councillor Views

1. Have Ward Councillors been asked for comments? Not Applicable
2. Summary of Ward Councillors comments:

3. COMMENTARY

3.1 The Outline Planning Improvement Plan

The Outline Planning Improvement Plan is intended to demonstrate our ambitions to improve service delivery. It also gives direction and provides a framework to guide the more detailed actions that should follow. It is envisaged that the Committee will play an important role in the future stages of the Plan, for example through liaison between the Chairman and senior planning officers.

The proposed Outline Planning Improvement Plan is set out at Appendix One. It is structured around seven objectives:

1. To support Economic Growth.
2. To improve Customer Service.
3. To improve efficiency, producing savings.
4. To respond to pressure to change e.g., National Planning Policy Framework and Development Plan.
5. To improve the quality of Councillor/Officer decision making and the quality of the completed development.
6. To deliver Training and Development programmes for staff and Councillors.
7. To improve Planning Enforcement and Untidy Sites Communication.

The main reasons for including these seven objectives are as follows:-

1. We aim to support the local economy in the current wider economic circumstances, in the interests of local residents and businesses. Furthermore, there is to be a financial incentive to the Council based on business floorspace completions;
2. We aim to improve our knowledge of customer satisfaction with the service, including applicants, agents and local residents, and to respond accordingly;
3. With the financial circumstances of the Council, we aim to improve the efficiency of our operations;
4. We need to respond to actual or proposed changes in the national legal and policy framework in which we operate, for example the Community Infrastructure Levy, the National Planning Policy Framework;
5. We know that planning issues attract strongly held views and need to ensure that the quality of planning decision making and the completed development is evaluated;
6. Given the demands placed on all planning decision makers, we need to ensure that there is suitable initial training and thereafter a programme of updating;
7. Planning enforcement is often a difficult matter for Councils, prompting a need for a clear strategy and clear communication of expectations on all sides.

It is proposed that the Committee will receive future reports on individual topics within the framework of the Improvement Plan.

3.2 **Planning Application Performance**

In order to guide future action, it is relevant to analyse some of the main factors that can influence performance and this information is summarized at Appendix Two. From this, we can see that the trends in the volume of applications and level of income are relatively steady when compared to the time taken to determine applications.

We can also use an indicator of around 190 cases per Development Control case officer to measure whether staff workload is reasonable. This benchmark is based on the analysis of performance of a wide range of local planning authorities carried out for Central Government. At present, the Council has about 200-210 cases per D.C. case officer which is not an unreasonable level.

However, the number of cases that are in a 'backlog' (awaiting a decision and beyond the target date for decision) is significantly higher than the national average.

In that context, we have focused on the stages of application processing and already commenced with remedial action.

At the early stages – receipt of an application and its initial processing – it is clear that the time taken for a planning application to be validated and reach the case officer is too long.

We therefore completed a review of the planning validation process in November/December 2012. Our objective is to achieve a 'receipt to D.C. Case Officer' time for 80% of applications in 5 working days.

The main changes to reach this objective are:-

- to introduce a new method of processing the applications – focused on a multi-tasked team rather than specialist roles.
- to reduce the high proportion of applications that are invalid upon receipt and more rapid resolution of reasons for invalidity.
- to ensure that our consultees normally accept electronic details rather than paper copies.

The new methods of working have been introduced in December and the Committee will be given an update on the initial results of the changes.

3.3 **Planning Enforcement**

Planning Enforcement information is attached at Appendix 3. This shows that the Council is active in pursuing cases to formal notices. This is important to avoid undermining planning controls in general. Nevertheless, it is also appropriate in some cases to seek remedial action where there is a breach of control without recourse to formal action. In many cases, reports of breaches of planning control are found not to be a breach and this is reflected in the total of around 900 queries received by the Planning Enforcement Team each year.

In common with many Council Planning Enforcement services, issues arise in Bromley from the powers available to Councils and from communicating progress with the stages of enforcement action. This includes both development in breach of planning control and the 'untidy sites' cases. To address this, it is proposed that Planning Enforcement be included in the Outline Improvement Plan shown at Appendix 1.

4. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

4.1 None for the purposes of this report.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 There are no direct revenue implications arising from this report.

5.2 A breakdown of the latest budget monitoring position is shown below for information: -

Type of expenditure/income	2012/13 Latest budget £'000	2012/13 Projected outturn £'000	2012/13 Projected variance £'000
Employees	3,060	2,798	(262)
Premises	10	10	0
Transport	19	27	8
Supplies & services	618	580	(38)
Income	(1,675)	(1,375)	300
Controllable budget	2,032	2,040	8
Net recharges	693	693	0
Total Net Budget	2,725	2,733	8

6. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1 None for the purposes of this report.

7. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

7.1 None for the purposes of this report.

Non-Applicable Sections:	[List non-applicable sections here]
Background Documents: (Access via Contact Officer)	[Title of document and date]