

Decision Maker: **Development Control Committee**

Date: **12th September 2013**

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

Title: **PLANNING SERVICE IMPROVEMENTS, AND PROGRESS
WITH ACTION TO MINIMISE PLANNING APPEAL COSTS**

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Chief Officer: Marc Hume, Director of Regeneration & Transformation

Ward: All

1. Reason for report

- 1.1 The Development Control Committee endorsed a revised Outline Planning Improvement Plan as a framework for improvement at its 20th June 2013 meeting. It identified Customer Service and Planning Enforcement as priority areas. A report on progress is given, and an update will be presented following the Member Enforcement Working Party meeting of 4th September. An updated version of the Improvement Plan is attached at Appendix Two. Proposals to support Economic Growth are presented for Members to consider.
- 1.2 In April, the Development Control Committee agreed that action be taken to minimise future planning appeal costs awarded against the Council, including the formation of a Panel Group to assist with the preparation of an action plan. This report updates the Committee on progress and in particular seeks the Committee's endorsement of informal Guidelines for Members sitting on Planning Committees.

2. **RECOMMENDATION(S)**

- 2.1 That the Planning Service Improvements be noted and that the next priorities set out in the report, be endorsed.
- 2.2 That the attached (Appendix 3) informal Guidelines for Committee Members be endorsed by the Committee and be reviewed within 6 months time.

Corporate Policy

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

1. Cost of proposal: N/A
 2. Ongoing costs: N/A.
 3. Budget head/performance centre: Planning and Renewal
 4. Total current budget for this head: £2.618m
 5. Source of funding: Existing revenue budget 2013/2014
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Staff

1. Number of staff (current and additional): 64ftes (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: Call-in is 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? N/A.
2. Summary of Ward Councillors comments:

3. COMMENTARY

3.1 Background

The approach we are taking follows the revised Outline Improvement Plan endorsed by the Committee at its June Meeting. This enables the improvements to be introduced in a prioritised way and for the Committee to influence those priorities. This report also seeks endorsement of the action arising from the Panel Group on Planning Appeals.

3.2 Customer Service

Performance in the processing of Major applications has improved and in the financial year to date it reached 75%, the Council's aim being 60%. However, the performance for Minor applications is 50% (aim is 65%) and for other applications is 66% (aim is 80%). At the same time, the number of applications pending has kept steady at around 600-650 compared with the historic level of over 1,000. This enables case officers to focus on fewer pending applications so as to assist with improvements in the quality of processing decisions and development.

We have collected data on Customer Satisfaction and this is presented in the Table below:

July 2012 – June 2013				
Customer Satisfaction – Planning Services Survey				
How satisfied were you with the following:	Very satisfied	Fairly satisfied	Fairly dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
The ease of making contact with the service	37%	32%	15%	16%
The helpfulness of pre-application advice	47%	28%	16%	9%
The time taken to deal with the planning application	42%	39%	10%	9%
The helpfulness of the planning officer during the progress of the planning application	59%	26%	6%	9%

This data is based on the period June 2012-June 2013 and shows that a clear majority of applicants and their agents were 'Fairly' or 'Very' satisfied with the service received. However the data shows that, based on the levels of dissatisfaction, we need to give attention to the ease of making contact with the service. The survey is on-going.

At its June meeting, the Committee was informed of actual and intended changes to the way in which telephone calls are dealt with by Planning. This did enable more calls to be answered but has taken up a longer amount of staff time than anticipated, with a detrimental effect on validation time. In the short term, we have reallocated staff duties to manage the telephone response and validation performance. After taking further advice from the Customer Services team, we are installing improved software so as to reduce the number of steps that callers take to reach an officer who is able to respond to their query and so as to improve overall efficiency.

In order to improve performance and respond to the increased workload arising from fee income exceeding expectations, as set out in section (5) below, it is proposed that additional temporary staff be employed during 2013/2014.

3.3 Enforcement

At its June meeting, the Committee identified some existing service issues and resolved that a Member Working Party be formulated to examine barriers and constraints in the enforcement process. The Working Party is due to meet in early September and an update will be given to the Committee.

In the meantime, some comparative information for 2012/2013 with other local authorities is presented at Appendix 1. This is based on DCLG information and shared local authority data. It shows that Bromley is the most active at pursuing formal Enforcement Action amongst the neighbouring Councils.

3.4 Supporting Economic Growth and Other Planning Objectives:-

Actions so far and Planned Action

Perhaps the most fundamental step that the Council as Local Planning Authority can take to support Economic Growth, in a way that is balanced with other Planning objectives, is by the preparation of the new Local Plan.

The Council's preferred options for the emerging Local Plan include three economic growth areas:- Bromley Town Centre, Biggin Hill and Cray Valley. This responds to evidence such as the DTZ study (2012), that sets out the requirement for economic development. When finalized, the Local Plan will create a clear policy lead for economic development in appropriate quantities and locations.

It is also proposed that that the Council's requirements for validation be revised and reissued by December 2013.

3.5 Planning Appeal Costs

At its April meeting, the Committee decided to take action to minimise cost awards against the Council at planning appeals. The Chairman of the Committee together with the Chairman of Plans Sub-Committees, with officer advice, have met as a Panel Group. The Group considered a wide range of related issues and as a result the Chairman led on the preparation of Informal Guidance on Good Practice for Committee members.

This is attached at Appendix Three and it is proposed that the Committee endorse its contents on the basis of Informal Guidance. It is expected that the Panel Group will reconvene to consider the result of the guidelines. In addition, a short briefing note will be prepared to assist Ward Councillors who wish to address the Committee or put forward local residents' views.

Meanwhile, monitoring reports on Planning Appeal Costs will be made separately in the normal way.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

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

4.2 The budget for 2013/14 and variance to date is shown below for information: -

Type of expenditure/income	2013/14 Latest budget £'000	2013/14 Projected outturn £'000	2013/14 Variance £'000
Employees	2,668	2,668	0
Premises	10	10	0
Transport	21	21	0
Supplies & services	284	284	0
Income	(1,187)	(1,287)	(100)
Controllable budget	1,796	1,696	(100)
Net recharges	822	822	0
Total Net Budget	2,618	2,518	(100)

Non-Applicable Sections:	Policy, Personnel and Legal Implications.
Background Documents: (Access via Contact Officer)	