

**Wiltshire Council**

**Environment Select Committee**

**1 November 2012**

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### **Development Services Transformation Programme Task Group**

#### **Purpose**

1. To present the findings and recommendations of the Development Services Transformation Programme Task Group for endorsement by Committee and referral to Cabinet as appropriate.

#### **Background**

2. The Development Services Transformation Programme Task Group was established by the Environment Select Committee at its meeting on 10 January 2012 when it received an update on the Planning Services Peer Review.

3. The Task Group met on four occasions (23 March, 25 May, 20 July & 28 September 2012) and had the following membership:

Cllr Chris Humphries (Chairman)  
Cllr Trevor Carbin  
Cllr Peter Fuller  
Cllr Leo Randall  
Cllr Tony Trotman

4. The Task Group was set up to monitor delivery of any action plan to emerge from the recent peer review of the Development Control Service and agreed its terms of reference as follows:

“To examine the implementation and scrutiny of a new county-wide planning system due to come into operation in 2013.”

#### **Methodology**

5. The Task Group considered the Development Services Transformation Programme PID, received a brief explanation of the process and considered in particular the following key issues:

- The need to be more customer focused.
- To redefine measures of success as more than the quantity of work completed.
- The implementation of a new county-wide planning system later in 2012.
- Progression of a current public consultation on the planning service.

6. The Task Group considered a list of potential projects as follows:
  - Strategy
  - Performance & Process Improvement and Customer Focus
  - Culture, Focus & Behaviour and People, Management & Leadership
  - Member Development
  - ICT, Telephony & Systems
7. The Task Group also:
  - (1) received a copy of the Peer Group Challenge, which was carried out in September 2011 which was generally welcomed; and
  - (2) considered:
    - project and work stream updates;
    - the results of the Wiltshire Council Staff Survey 2011 and action taken;
    - details of the following new processes:
      - i. Development Management
      - ii. Building Control
      - iii. Enforcement.
8. A copy of a report summarising progress with the Development Services Transformation Programme as at September 2012 is attached at Appendix 1.
9. The potential restructuring of the Council's planning committees (currently four Area Planning Committees and one Strategic Planning Committee) was initially considered as a topic for discussion and concern was expressed that reducing the Area Planning Committees from 4 to 3 would result in areas geographically too large to be manageable. However, although the Cabinet Member is discussing preferences with members of the four area planning committees, no change in the current committee structure will take place before the Council elections in 2013 and this issue was therefore not considered at length by the Task Group.

## **Conclusions**

10. The Task Group supports the work undertaken and the results to date of the progress of the Development Services Transformation Programme (DSTP) for the period from 1 February to September 2012, subject to the following comments:
11. The establishment of a new single joined-up service, which should eradicate many of the inconsistencies in working practice currently in operation within the three development control teams for historical reasons, is welcomed. The Task Group believe that the introduction of a new centralised IT system can help in standardising working practices and also lead to an improvement in the level of service offered to customers and clients. The Task Group particularly welcomes the Planning Control and Building Control teams

working in a more joined-up way. Although these teams have different roles, the way they operate must be viewed from the customer's perspective as a single joined-up service.

12. Members have expressed concerns about the difficulty members can experience contacting planning officers and obtaining information about planning applications quickly. The Task Group is therefore supportive of the proposal that a planning officer will always be available for these kinds of queries and that officers in Development Services working at home must always be contactable.
13. Part of the redesign of the service was a review of the location of staff around the county. A preliminary assessment regarding the potential to centralise the Technical and Administration Support Team concluded that centralisation may adversely impact the efficiency of the planning process and hence the customer experience. The Task Group therefore supports the proposal not to centralise the Technical and Administration Support Team.
14. It was reported that an analysis of telephone calls received by the Development Control team showed that a significant proportion were requests for progress updates on planning applications, which could easily be reduced by more effectively publishing their progress on the Council website and by communicating more proactively with customers through the process. Much of the systems thinking work now underway with this team was about addressing these kinds of inefficiencies.
15. The Peer Review had identified that there is a need to review the councillors' interaction with the planning process in a number of areas, such as the process of decision making in Area Planning Committees and the interaction between officers and councillors. The Task Group agreed that training for members of the Council could be improved. It was appreciated that, with the current planning committee structure, not all councillors were directly involved in determining planning applications, but nevertheless as local councillors they were required to be proficient in the planning process and have knowledge of the call-in mechanism. At present not all local councillors contact case officers to discuss issues prior to calling an application in and the Task Group agreed that there was a need to provide more information to members on the process.
16. The current system for 'calling-in' planning applications has led to a high number of 'failed' call-ins, often due to a general lack of communication between member and planning officer.. There was room for making improvements to the existing process, which hopefully would be addressed by more regular informal communications between officers and members.
17. The potential proposals to provide displays of planning applications at committees and a Q&A session for members prior to meetings with the possibility of these being open to the public is noted. However, the Task Group would have concerns about any proposals for additional meetings between members and officers outside of formal planning committees. It is felt

that these can reduce the perceived transparency that is vital to the planning application process.

18. The Task Group believe that the 30-second warning given to members of the public when speaking at some planning committees does not create a customer friendly environment and therefore recommend that a different system should be explored.
19. The Task Group favours the suggestion that more junior planning officers could attend chairmen's briefings and present their applications at committee, feeling that this will help their professional development. It is acknowledged, however, that the planning committees could appear intimidating for more junior officers and that initially they would require support to gain confidence.
20. The Task Group recommend that a greater focus should be placed on enforcing planning conditions laid down at planning committee. Part of this is ensuring that the conditions are enforceable at the point that they are drafted. It is acknowledged that at a time of reducing funding there were not sufficient resources to proactively check adherence to all planning conditions, but the Council must be able to react effectively when members of the public report breaches of control.

## **Proposal**

21. The Committee is asked to support the ongoing work of the Development Service Transformation Programme, to endorse the conclusions of the Task Group, and refer these to the Cabinet Member for Waste, Property, Environment and Development Control Services.

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## **Cllr Chris Humphries – Chairman of the Development Services Transformation Programme Task Group**

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## **Appendices**

Appendix 1      DSTP Progress Report September 2012 (Agenda Pages 25-54)

## **Background documents**

Development Services Transformation Programme PID