

Item 5

REPORT TO PROSPEROUS & ATTRACTIVE BOROUGH OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

29 JANUARY 2008

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF PLANNING SERVICES

BUILDING CONTROL SERVICE PERFORMANCE

1. **BACKGROUND**

1.1 At its meeting held on 6 November 2007, the Prosperous and Attractive Borough Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered Performance Indicators relating to its ambitions for the period 1 April to 30 September 2007. As a result of its deliberations, the committee raised concern and requested that further information be presented to a future meeting of the committee with regard to improving performance of the following indicators:-

1.2 LPI 32 Percentage of applications considering the building control service good or better, and
LPI 34 Percentage of building control plans approved/responded to within three weeks.

1.3 The purpose of this report therefore is to provide an explanation of the current performance levels and to identify actions to improve the performance of these indicators.

2. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

2.1 It is recommended that the Prosperous and Attractive Overview and Scrutiny Committee accept the explanations provided in the report to justify the current performance of the Building Control Service and the actions proposed to improve performance.

3. **BACKGROUND**

3.1 **Reasons for the Building Control Service Performance Deteriorating in the Period 1 April To 30 September 2007**

3.2 It is important to understand the background against which the Building Control Service has to operate. It is widely recognised that local authority building control services nationally, regionally and locally have been experiencing difficulties in recent years. Members will be aware that Building Control Officers top the national local authority league tables as the most difficult to recruit and retain, together with Planners and Environmental Health Officers. This is partly attributable to the low

numbers of people entering the profession, many of the more senior officers retiring and others leaving council work in favour of the private sector. As a consequence, the pool of available suitably qualified and experienced officers in the Durham County area has diminished of late and for some time the service has been understaffed. Against this backdrop it is difficult to provide an effective and efficient Building Control Service.

- 3.3 The service is also unique within the Planning and Technical Services Section in that it has to compete with the private sector that has made significant gains in recent years at the expense of traditional local authority building control services. The Council is aware of these challenges and it is for these reasons that it endorsed changes to the staffing structure of the Building Control Team and the principle of pursuing inter authority working with adjoining councils in order to safeguard the future of local authority led building control services.
- 3.4 Turning to the specific period in question, it is important to acknowledge that the long serving manager of the team left this Council's employ in August. As a result of the problems experienced in attempting to run the service with inadequate staff resources, the previous manager had on occasions to both manage the Team as well as contribute to the day-to-day operation of the service. It was also somewhat inevitable that with his imminent departure some momentum was lost as a result of him concluding his work commitments with this Council. Moreover, the ongoing staffing problems were made worse by his departure. His departure therefore had a profound effect on the service during the period in question.
- 3.5 To compound the difficulties the Team were facing, one of the remaining officers had to attend a training course for the whole of July with the consequent adverse affect on maintaining office cover over the traditional summer holiday period when staff resources are usually depleted in any event.

4. **ACTIONS TO REDRESS THE PROBLEMS**

- 4.1 It is encouraging to note that a new Building control Manager is in post and that the post he vacated to take up his new role has also been filled relatively quickly. (The new Building Control Surveyor starts work on 28 January 2008.) The new manager is crucially aware of the difficulties facing the service, having himself worked in the Team for many years before his recent promotion. He is eager to provide a new impetus to service delivery. Whilst comparatively new to the job, he has already demonstrated a willingness to introduce different methods of working with a renewed emphasis on performance management.
- 4.2 For instance, new monitoring measures have been implemented within the Team to enable the manager to apportion the workload more fairly in an attempt to improve motivation amongst the officers. Staff have

been made aware of the deterioration in service delivery identified by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and have been encouraged and reminded to hit targets to the best of their ability. Additionally, the outsourcing of plan vetting to an external consultancy has been reviewed and steps taken to carefully assess the type of work to be kept in house in order to improve performance. Whilst the outsourcing of plan vetting is a necessary measure because of staff shortages, it is important to be more selective. Clearly, dealing with applications in house has benefits in terms of familiarity with the scheme and consistency of approach, thereby reducing the time taken to undertake inspections on site for example. Furthermore, the new manager identified a drop in the standard of service provided by the outside consultancy which appeared to coincide with the former manager's departure. The new manager has been in discussion with the consultants about this issue and a marked improvement is expected.

5. **OTHER MATERIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Human Resources

The improvements to the Building Control Service outlined in this report can be met from existing staff resources.

Financial Resources

The improvements to the Building Control Service outlined in this report can be met from the existing budget.

Sustainability

One of the original motivations for producing a Masterplan for the three priority neighbourhoods was to ensure that they could be seen as sustainable communities in their own right.

Consultation

The members of staff in the Building Control Team are aware of the current performance issues.

Links to Corporate Ambitions/Values

Corporate Ambition: A Healthy Borough.

Community Outcome: Safeguarding Public Health

Planning and Technical Services Key Action: To provide an efficient and effective Building Control Service.

Risk Management

None required.

Health and Safety

No additional implications have been identified.

Equality and Diversity

No additional implications have been identified.

Legal and Constitutional

No additional implications have been identified.

6. **LIST OF APPENDICES**

No appendices

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Wards:

All Wards

Examination by Statutory Officers

Yes **Not
Applicable**

- | | | | |
|----|---|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. | The report has been examined by the Councils Head of the Paid Service or his representative | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. | The content has been examined by the Councils S.151 Officer or his representative | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. | The content has been examined by the Council's Monitoring Officer or his representative | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. | The report has been approved by Management Team | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |