

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C/017/2006-07.

Date of meeting: 10 July 2006.



**Epping Forest
District Council**

**Portfolios: Planning and Economic Development.
Finance, Performance Management and Corporate Support.**

Subject: Planning Services Performance Issues and Progress Report.

Officer contact for further information: John Preston (01992 – 56 4111).

Democratic Services Officer: Gary Woodhall (01992 56 4470).

Recommendations:

- (1) That the progress made with the Restructure of Planning Services be noted;**
- (2) That, with effect from 1 September 2006, the post holder in post PBC17 (P/T) be made redundant at a cost of £1345.40;**
- (3) That post PPE22 be made full time rather than four days a week at a cost of £5,000 per annum;**
- (4) That the positive impacts of the hit squad achieved so far be noted.**

Planning Services Restructure:

1. It is considered timely to update Members generally as to the position concerning the implementation of the Restructure agreed in October last year, and to raise some issues which arise.

Planning Services Hit Squad:

2. When Members agreed to put extra resources into this, it was subject to a report being made to explain the impact of this team; this is that report.

Implementation of Restructure:

3. The new structure agreed last year has been fundamentally implemented by 1 April, and has involved interviewing many staff, together with their placing in new teams, and the commencement of training so that staff can fully undertake new roles. Virtually all positions have now been filled, so that the Service is not seeking to operate with vacancies, or so many casual staff and so on.
4. Unfortunately, one member of staff did not secure a post in the Restructure, despite being interviewed for several different roles, and receiving one to one support from an independent coach, and the possibility of corporate redeployment opportunities; it is therefore necessary to consider whether that post holder should now be made redundant. The estimated cost of this redundancy from 1 September would be £1345.40p
5. It is also clear that one minor adjustment should be made. The former Principal Officer Heritage and Conservation succeeded in becoming the Assistant Head of Planning Services (Forward Planning and Environment) and an external appointment was made to the new permanent Assistant Conservation Officer post. However, the

latter was only funded for four days a week because the previous temporary post was occupied on that basis. Workload has been increasing generally, and has increased to assist development control performance improvement, and to meet BVPIs. The new officer would be happy to work a full week, and is working overtime to achieve that at present, funded from Planning Delivery Grant. It is recommended that post PPE22 be made full time, at a cost of £5,000 per annum.

6. The Restructure was costed on the basis of salary mid points; because that is the convention, however, several posts were occupied at the bottom of the grade, and many only started on 1 April. Accordingly, both the one off, and the ongoing costs set out above can be funded from the budgets already agreed without a further call on funds.

Impacts of the hit squad:

7. The original intention of the hit squad was to have a four-person team for a six-month period; in reality the assembly of the team took place more gradually, and only after the new computer system had gone live. The team is also being brought to an end more gradually. £100,000 was allocated, and at the end of May £91,500 had been spent.

8. General Record since July 2005 until end of May 2006:

Major applications –68% in 13 weeks, whereas previous year was 42%
Target is 60%

Minor applications – 63% in 8 weeks, whereas previous year was 57%
Target is 65%

Other applications – 79% - in 8 weeks, whereas previous year was 77%
Target 80%

9. Since October 2005 the number of applications on hand that are over 8 weeks old (one of the definitions of the backlog) has fallen by over 50%:

October	– 106 out of 322 on hand at the end of the month	– 33%	of all applications
November	– 85 out of 321	- 26%	“
December	– 95 out of 224	- 42%	“
January	– 83 out of 270	- 31%	
February	– 51 out of 307	- 17%	
March	- 53 out of 229	- 18%	
April	- 42 out of 271	- 15%	
May	- 46 out of 313	- 15%	

10. Accordingly, the hit squad has been a significant factor in improving performance over the last six months. Application numbers are reasonably steady at present, but it will be necessary to keep a close eye on this; if the numbers rise there will have to be a commensurate increase in staff resources. In addition, the professional staff dealing with planning applications remains under a number of pressures to perform; the teams are at reasonable numerical strength, but the loss of senior staff over time cannot be replaced by the immediate skills of new more junior staff.
11. It also needs to be emphasized that the members of the hit squad were allowed to concentrate fundamentally on the task of processing and negotiating planning applications. That is in contrast to the normal wider range of professional duties of dealing with pre and post application issues, including appeals. The Principal officers in the team, at least, also had to assist the hit squad and supervise it.
12. In the next few months it will be important to see the impact of other steps that have

been, or are being, taken to take work away from the professionals into the application processing and the customer contact team, and to automate and further change work processes.

13. The report concerning the Restructure contained the following paragraphs that are worth repeating;

(a) The Government states that: *“ If authorities are to achieve the BV109 targets, provide quality outcomes and service, and ensure case officers are not overloaded or stressed, caseloads should be in the order of about 150 per case officer or less. There should be lower caseloads where the proportion of major applications is above the national average of 3% of total applications determined. Account needs to be taken of the numbers of applications not included in the PS1 returns e.g. approval of conditions, tree applications, where this work is undertaken by case officers. Similarly the scale of enforcement and appeal work undertaken by case officers should be assessed. In authorities where delegation is lower or there are complex committee structures this will also affect caseloads.”*

(b) The defined application workload is described as follows: *The case officer must study and assess the application, undertake the site visit, handle any negotiations, liaise with consultees, consider neighbour and other responses to consultation, consider any revisions resulting from consultation and negotiation, write a report for committee or delegated decision and possibly check any final decision notice before despatch. It does not take into account case officer input into other work e.g. pre-application meetings, appeals, applications not included in the PS1 return, policy work, duty planner duties, corporate initiatives, or training.* (Source: ODPM Research Summary No 4 2005)

14. That previous report also gave the following analysis in a table, which is brought up to date below:

Year	No. of applications	% in 8 weeks	No. of case officers (people years)	Average no. of cases per officer per year.
1996/97	1438	63%	8	180
1997/98	1622	53%	7.5	216
1998/99	1745	44%	7.5	233
1999/00	1866	48%	7.5	248
2000/01	1908	52%	9.5	201
2001/02	1998	70%	9.5	210
2002/03	2115	72%	10.5	201
2003/04	2252	74%	10.5	214
2004/05	2086	72%	10.5	199
2005/06	2024	74%	12.25	165
2006/07 Apr to May	323	87%	11	176

Extract detail of hit squad cases dealt with wholly by them:

2005/06	229	92%	1.75	131
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By way of contrast for that same period the establishment staff figures were:

2005/06	1795	72%	10.5	171
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15. The focus and priority now being given to performance was neither intended to diminish the quality of decisions being taken, nor to remove the provision of a quality

service to applicants. There is no evidence to suggest that the quality of decisions taken has diminished; for example the success rate at appeal, as one test of this, is unchanged. What may happen is that a previous position of significant negotiation may be curtailed, and an initial application gets refused, but a revised better-described application then gets approved; eventually the “quality” of the initial submission may rise. This is uncomfortable for some who have long been used to the older ways, or who have a fundamental dislike of the target culture, but it is where we are.

16. Up to date development control performance information is now being provided monthly in the Members Bulletin, and training sessions on the new computer system for Members will commence shortly, so that they are aware of the range of information which is now publicly available.

Statement in support of Recommended Action:

17. The arrangements made to interview for posts in the Restructure were carefully conceived and agreed with all relevant parties before they commenced; in particular post holders whose posts were deleted from the new structure were ring fenced, and had first call for posts in the new structure. Those arrangements have now been completed, and all relevant permanent posts have been filled. Accordingly it is now for Cabinet to decide if a redundancy is to be made.
18. The Assistant Conservation Officer is particularly important, both to support the relevant Assistant Head, and because of the Best Value Performance Indicators which have been introduced concerning management plans for the 25 Conservation Areas in the District.
19. It was agreed to report on the impact of the hit squad when that was instigated; the squad has done what was expected of them. Future performance needs to be kept under close scrutiny, and resourced accordingly.

Other Options for Action:

20. These comprise:
 - To make a particular post holder redundant, or not.
 - To increase the hours of the one post, or not.
 - To note that the hit squad is now coming to an end, or not.

Consultation undertaken:

21. Unions and staff side have been consulted about this report, and any views received will be reported orally.

Resource implications: As indicated in the report.

Budget provision: From existing resources.

Personnel: From existing resources.

Land: Nil.

Community Plan/BVPP reference: The Restructure had a particular focus to achieve further performance improvements and to address weaknesses.

Relevant statutory Powers: N/A.

Background papers: None.

Environmental/Human Rights Act/Crime and Disorder Act Implications: None.

Key Decision Reference (if required): Not required.