



**Report To:** Planning Portfolio Holder  
**Lead Officer:** Director of Planning and New Communities

10 August 2015

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## **Review of Consultancy Team**

### **Purpose**

1. To provide the Planning Portfolio Holder with an update following the implementation of the new Consultancy team, its vision and ways of working in April 2014. The report also sets out the direction and priorities of the team for 2015-16, which will be incorporated in a team plan.
2. This is not a key decision.

### **Recommendations**

3. It is recommended that the Portfolio Holder notes the progress the Consultancy team has made and endorses the outcomes and recommendations in paragraph 7 of this report to be taken forward in the Team Plan and endorses the new team vision, as set out in paragraph 22.

### **Reasons for Recommendations**

4. To enable the Portfolio Holder to comment on the work of the team, and its priorities for the year ahead.

### **Executive Summary**

5. Following the Service Review concluded March 2014, the team has made considerable progress in working differently. The team members have been committed to working together to deliver improvements to customer service. Prior to the review, there were concerns about the level of complaints. Over the last six months, no complaints have been received, and feedback from internal and external customers is good.
6. Over the last year, the team has delivered:
  - Up skilling of planning officers on the historic environment,
  - Improvement in response time
  - Set up a respected Design Enabling Panel,
  - Set up a Design Workshop service offer to developers, that has been taken up 8 times
  - Led the 'Work Experience Programme' winning a 'Going the Extra Mile' award in December 2014.

- Supported the Northstowe phase 2 planning application, and the Local Plan examination, and provided specialist advice on planning applications for unallocated sites.
7. The team will build on these successes by formulating a team plan to set the direction for the next year. The following priorities have developed by the Consultancy Unit:
- Empowering the team to make best use of their professional skills, competencies and resources;
  - Optimising the use of ICT with more rigorous performance management, to further enhance efficiencies and performance ;
  - Deepening understanding of customer requirements to strengthen the consultancy offer, particularly to parishes producing neighbourhood plans and considering village design guides;
  - Giving priority to strategic sites and major applications, particularly those on unallocated sites.

### **Background**

8. Approval was given by the Portfolio Holder Planning and Economic Development in July 2013 to explore the options for the delivery of the Conservation Service. An in-house solution was recommended in December 2013, and implemented following consultations with staff and stakeholders.
9. The in-house solution comprised the creation of a Consultancy Unit providing Urban Design, Historic Buildings, Ecology and Landscape advice to internal and external customers. The Tree service was transferred to the Development Control Manager
10. The changes proposed to the consultancy service were outlined in the reports to the Portfolio Holder Planning and Economic Development on 22 October 2013, and to the Scrutiny and Overview Committee in February and April 2014.
11. The implementation of the service was carried out in 3 phases:
- Phase1: Creating a sound foundation: by 5th May 2014
  - Phase2: Launching the team and developing the detail: May 2014 – October 2014
  - Phase 3: Review and adapt: (October 2014 – April 2015)

### **Review of Past Year**

12. This report outlines progress since May 2014, made by the Consultancy Team in delivering its vision “To achieve a consistently high standard of service by striking the right balance between quality, timeliness and customer satisfaction”.
13. The period following the Review concentrated on putting the new team in place, developing new ways of working with the planning officers and providing training to support this. A permanent Team Leader came into post in January 2015, and the post was covered with interim arrangements until that time.

14. New processes put in place in autumn 2015 have enabled the team to manage Development Control consultations effectively and monitor the timeliness of service. The team meets weekly to review cases and work together to monitor performance. Performance has therefore continued to improve from autumn 2014 to present.
15. Good progress has been made in order to make best use of specialist resources. Training, mentoring and guidance for planners has enabled case officers to assess Conservation Area applications and proposals within the setting of listed buildings without consulting specialists. This has freed up specialist officer time to deal with more complex applications and provide pre-application service.
16. The first phase of implementation prioritised Historic Building upskilling. Consultancy officers have cited examples where their mentoring, combined with the new ways of working has encouraged planning officers to approach their decision making in a different way, becoming increasingly aware of design, landscaping and ecological considerations.
17. The introduction of the Design Enabling Panel and Design Workshop Service has been widely praised by internal and external customers. The Design Enabling Panel draws on external skills and expertise to provide a high quality independent design review service that is cost-neutral to the Council. Between April 2014 and June 2015, the Panel has reviewed 33 schemes. The Design Workshop is a new Service offered to customers to inform scheme development at project inception stages. The consultancy team has enjoyed working together to shape developments at this early stage and found that it developed their understanding of other specialist areas with the team. The provision of these services has helped raise the profile of the team and created an excellent environment for collaboration, learning and development.
18. In May 2015, we interviewed some of the agents whom we previously contacted during the Review of the previous Conservation Service. Feedback has generally been positive including: quality of advice has improved considerably; it is largely clear, proportional, pragmatic and based on common sense. Officers are open to negotiation and discussion. Responses are generally timely and officers are available to meet on site when needed. These are all things they originally asked for from the new Consultancy service.
19. The Consultancy team has supported the delivery of key projects including Northstowe phase 2, the local plan examination process and specialist advice on sites coming forward outside the site allocations in the last year
20. There is still work to be done to develop the team and enable it to work in the most effective way. This includes refining and putting new processes in place and consistently using and optimising technology to support service delivery.
21. Further work is also needed to support officers to provide advice and undertake projects in the most efficient way,. There is a need for further training and development, to develop refreshed management processes in the team to support

this. More work is also needed to forward plan resources and incorporate more regular analysis of customer feedback into discussion with the team.

## **Future Actions**

### **A: Team Vision**

22. The team vision was formulated as part of the conservation service review, responding to feedback from customers at that time. In light of the findings of this report, based on the progress the team has made over the last year and acknowledged by customers, the team seeks to further build on the vision to reflect the purpose and priorities of the team.

The revised draft vision for the team is as follows:

*'We will strive to protect and enhance the rural character of our built and natural environment whilst promoting sustainable growth, thriving communities and beautiful places. We will encourage high quality design through design advocacy, positive engagement with partners and customers, and provide advice that strikes the right balance between quality, timeliness and customer satisfaction'*

23. The team has made significant progress over the past year. The vision, structure, new ways of working, innovation, and drive from individuals in the team has enabled them to deliver evident improvements to customer service.
24. The Team Plan now needs to be developed to provide clarity on the direction of travel over the forthcoming year. It is recommended it should achieve the following outcomes:
- Empowering the team to make best use of their professional skills, competencies and resources;
  - Optimising the use of ICT with more rigorous performance management, to further enhance efficiencies and performance ;
  - Deepening understanding of customer requirements to strengthen the consultancy offer, particularly an offer to parishes producing neighbourhood plans and considering village design guides;
  - Giving priority to strategic sites and major applications, particularly those on unallocated sites.
25. Specific projects and measures will be developed as part of the Team Plan , these should also include:

### **B: Performance**

- Deeper analysis and review of both individual and team performance including at 1 to1s and team meetings
- Engaging with the automated performance management reporting through the planned upgrades to the APAS system.
- A new target of 85% for return of consultation responses within the agreed time with respective teams.

**C: Training and Development**

- Training Plan & preparation of guidance for training Development Control officers on other specialism within the team such as ecology, landscape and urban design. This will be programmed dependant on capacity within the Development Control Teams
- Training and development plan for each of specialists within the team including wider mix of projects and consultations to optimise use of their professional skills, knowledge and competencies.

**D: Processes**

- Development of processes which support efficient working including allocation of case and, managing input of consultancy advice where one or more professional is involved on an ongoing basis into large developments
- Resource planning, refinement and active management of the Service level agreements with internal customers
- Work with APAS project to ensure all staff are trained and using the System and that the system is optimised to maximise efficient ways of working

**E: Innovation and customer focus**

- To explore use of neighbourhood plans to engage our local communities in preparing guidance which seeks to enhance the special (design, ecology historic buildings landscape) characteristics of our local authorities whilst balancing it in the context with major growth and development.
- To develop customer insights and promote and market our service
- To refine the Service Level Agreements and include more regular reviews of our internal customer's requirements and level of service provided
- To promote the Consultancy Unit's specialist advisory service externally to generate income and raise the team's profile.

**F: Forward Planning**

In the following months, it is anticipated that there will be an increase in demand of the Consultancy service due to:

- The submission of reserved matters on Northstowe Phase 1 and 2 following the determination of phase 2 outline application.
- The high probabilities of further planning applications on sites outside the site allocation (5 year land supply), following the Public examination on the Local plan being put on hold.
- Intention from Waterbeach and Bourne airfield to progress masterplanning of their sites.
- Increased interest from parishes with regard to Neighbourhood Planning
- On-going commitment on Cambourne West and other strategic sites such as Trumpington Sports Site coming forward as planning application.

- Input into the Cambridge Northern Fringe East AAP.
- Conservation Projects such as the Sawston Tannery and Tithe Barn at Landbeach

The team workshop held on 16<sup>th</sup> & 17<sup>th</sup> July 15 clarified the strategic priorities for the consultancy unit, which will be reflected in the teamplan. This will include proactive engagement on key sites such as Waterbeach, and Bourne Airfield, involvement in neighbourhood planning and supporting the delivery of Northstowe. In addition, the team will continue to provide specialist advice on planning applications.

### **G: Resourcing**

If we are to meet the anticipated demands on the service, the existing staffing levels within the team need to be sustained. The team plan should look in detail at the resource implications for the team and develop business cases accordingly. The daily rate of officers in the council is generally 50% of those charged in the private sector.

### **H: Budgets**

The overall salary cost including overheads for the last financial year 2014-15 was £316,163.42. For the same year, the team generated fee income of £13,322.89 through the administering of the Design Enabling Panel and Design Workshop service. Both of these services have been well received by applicants with positive customer feedback. The fee earning work in the team was 5% of its annual salary costs in 2014-15.

There is potentially fee earning work this financial year in conservation service and on design workshop and design enabling panel. The conservation team will also look into the potential of a premium service for speedy advice, site visits and listed property enquires from estate agents/owners intending to sell or buy. The team's contribution to PPA and planning application fee income will be monitored, probably by way of financial ratios that measure comparisons of the team with private consultant suppliers.

### **Implications**

26. In the writing of this report, taking into account financial, legal, staffing, risk management, equality and diversity, climate change, community safety and any other key issues, the following implications have been considered: -

#### **Financial**

27. The cost of training and resources has been budgeted for this financial year.

#### **Legal**

28. There are no specific legal implications arising from this report

#### **Staffing**

29. As part of any future training, external expertise may need to be bought for upskilling of existing staff. Council policies and procedures will be adhered to

### **Risk Management**

30. There are no risk identified as part of this report or recommendations

### **Equality and Diversity**

31. We will prepare a training and development plan as part of the recommendations and will follow council policies.

### **Climate Change**

32. The training and development plan will include best practice on energy saving/conserving measures into design and conservation

### **Consultation responses (including from the Youth Council)**

33. The team identified a list of agents who regularly use the conservation service. A telephone Survey was carried out and feedback reported above. It will be used for benchmarking. The feedback will contribute towards any further recommendations moving forward. No consultation was carried out through the youth council.

### **Effect on Strategic Aims**

34. The recommendation seek to achieve the Council's three A's
35. Conservation has an important role to play 'in offering an outstanding quality of life for our residents, however we are aware that measures are put in place to ensure that officers consider Conservation in relation to wider considerations such as the Council's growth agenda including to create "opportunities for employment, enterprise, education and world leading institution.

### **Background Papers**

Annual Review, Consultancy Unit: Analysis of Primary Data Appendices, June 2015

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