

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL:
DRAFT SERVICE PLAN FOR:
THE PLANNING & SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES SERVICE
2009/10 TO 2011/12

Corporate Manager: Gareth Jones

Portfolio Holder/s: Cllr Nick Wright & Cllr Dr David Bard

SERVICE PLAN OVERVIEW

1. Key Functions and Responsibilities

Statutory Services

The service is divided into 4 main task orientated sections as follows:

Planning Policy – Its main role is delivering the policies and proposals for the development and use of land in South Cambridgeshire through the preparation of the Local Development Framework (LDF) as required under section 17 of the 2004 Planning Act, and this includes one of the largest growth agendas in the country. The Local Development Framework is also the delivery vehicle for the Local Strategic Partnership's Sustainable Communities Strategy. Section 35 of the Act imposes a statutory requirement to produce an annual monitoring report. The Planning Policy Team will also service the new section 29 Cambridge City Fringes Joint Committee.

At the regional planning level, through representation and joint working, the Planning Policy Team endeavours to secure realistic policies and proposals in the statutory Regional Spatial Strategy which will benefit the residents, businesses and the built and natural environment of South Cambridgeshire.

In addition, the section helps deliver the Government's concessionary bus passes scheme

Development Control – Its main role is to determine the approximately 2,400 applications (including almost all the major applications with the exception of those relating to the major growth sites) and 1,500 significant amendments to these applications. Our customers have varied agendas ranging from applicants and developers, to neighbours, interest groups and parish councils. In an extreme case we received and processed over 30,000 individual representations on one application. It also includes sub-sections responsible for defending the Council's case at appeal and enforcing and monitoring development within the District, as well as High Hedge applications.

Building Control - Its main role is to determine building regulation applications and carry out site visits to check the works at specified stages of the development. As well as being concerned with building safety, building regulations are the most significant tool for delivering the Government's sustainability agenda. The sub-section also provides a dangerous structures service.

Design and Conservation – its main role is to protect and improve the built and green environment. Its responsibilities include determining the applications relating to Conservation Areas, Listed Buildings, Tree Preservation Orders, ecology, protected woodlands and hedges.

Administration – Its main role is to register all planning applications, and provide the planning arm of the council's searches service.

Non-Statutory Services

Complementing its statutory plan-making duties, the Council works with its partners to secure the transport and other infrastructure to deliver the planned growth and to address the needs of the existing population.of services,

Pre-application meetings, duty officer

The establishment of an urban design team will enable improved quality of development through work with the policy, design and development control teams, as well as advice to the growth team.

The admin team is now leading in the development of the new Devcon system designed to deliver the Government's new agenda for delivery of the planning system electronically.

Advice on design issues, green and built to the Policy, Development Control, and Policy sections as well as the Growth team.

Provision of tourist advice and promoting the tourism sector working in partnership with the City Council.

2. Context

a) External Drivers

Political:

The Government's growth agenda continues apace, and there will be continued pressure to deliver the high levels of housing development in the Regional Spatial Strategy. This scale of growth will generate unplanned proposals which the Coouncil cannot ignore, as has been witnessed by the proposal at Hanley Grange.

Whilst political change locally or nationally could have an impact on the growth agenda, the dynamism of the South Cambridgeshire economy has driven high levels of growth throughout the post war years.

The importance of Climate Change within the wider political framework has, and will continue to make this an important area of work for the Council. Building Control has a strong role to play in delivering more sustainable development. The Government plans step changes to the regulations to new house build to reduce their carbon footprint

Changes in legislation result in either additional or reduced requirements for applications e.g.'s new General Development Order and legislation on Biodiversity (NERC Act 2007), the 2008 changes to the Local Development Framework Regulations and the impending changes still being debated in the 2007 Planning Bill.

Economic:

The strength of the economy of South Cambridgeshire and Cambridge City is driving one of the highest levels of job growth in the whole of the United Kingdom. The two Districts have the highest concentration of high technology jobs in Europe which is underpinned by a strong service sector including a growing administrative sector as more public services concentrate in Cambridge.

In addition, national planning policy imposes a duty on local planning authorities to deliver regional plan housing targets and we are having to address the shortfall in housing completions following the effects of the credit crunch on the development sector through the LDF process and this could also be an issue for planning appeals.

The single issue review by the RSS re Traveller and Gypsy sites will determine how many sites the Council will have to plan to provide.

Delivery of growth is highly dependent on appropriate progress being made by our key partners. Transport is particularly key to this and any delays in delivering transport infrastructure such as the Cambridgeshire Guided Bus or the improvements to the A14 will have significant impact on this service and its ability to deliver.

Socio-Cultural:

The local population has heightened expectations about its rights and ability to influence the planning process. Increased availability of information through the Internet continues to increase demand on officers' time. The press is quick to pick up on planning issues and given that in most cases there will be one party not satisfied with the outcome of a planning application, it can be a productive area for stories.

Technological Environment

The development of a new planning application processing system (DevCon2) and the use of the planning portal impose new demands on staff to scan plans and documents. In addition, there's an increased demand for information and an expectation of an instant response.

b) Key Partners

Partnership working is integral to the Planning service with a number of organisations, including other statutory partners, businesses, and third sector organisations. Key partners include, but are not limited to, the following:

- The RSS
- Go-east
- The Local Strategic Partnership

- Cambridgeshire Horizons
- Cambridgeshire County Council
- Cambridge City Council
- Parish Councils
- County Building Control teams
- Developers
- Agents

For our major partnerships, robust partnership arrangements are in place and have been checked through the corporate review of partnerships and corporate partnerships register.

For example, our relationship with Horizons and others working on growth is shaped by the Horizons Board, and managed through the Senior Officer Board, which regularly review progress, risks and issues.

List major partners and partnerships available to enable you to deliver. What steps do you take to maximise the impact of the partnerships?

c) Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths

- Core Strategy in place
- Most of the DPDs to deliver the Core Strategy are in place
- Highly skilled, motivated staff
- New joint urban design team (now established and additional officers soon to be in post in post), community infrastructure technical/ procurement skills; for smaller sites
- S106 implementation officer soon to be in post
- New performance manager soon to be in post
- Good and developing community engagement practice
- Good relationships with most partners and communities
- Developing relationships with Parish Councils
- New development control teams in place
- New registration team in place
- New IT system, Devcon being developed to supplement the IT systems used for plan-making
- Low staff turnover
- Staff development and progression embedded within the section's culture

Opportunities

- Professional development of staff
- Increase management and leadership capacity
- Improved customer service and satisfaction through better service delivery and new Duty Officer system
- Develop clear, understandable targets and systems for reporting on progress against them
- Developing member engagement in the growth agenda

- Development of the Parish Panel to improve relationships and training program with parish councils
- Implementing the Task and Finish Group improvement plan
- Using the slowdown in the housing market to maximise affordable housing delivery, eliminate backlogs and put in place plans and processes to respond to the upturn in the economy
- Promoting carbon reduction in existing as well as new settlements
- Increase community involvement on planning issues by producing and implementing a Statement of Community Involvement
- Improve delivery of affordable housing on exceptions sites by setting up a forum including parishes and housing associations
- Taking a more proactive role in ensuring the quality of new developments is ensured through the delivery phase as well as in its planning.
- Provide an appropriate proportion of retirement accommodation in new developments
- Better meet the needs of the Gypsy and Traveller population by contribute to a revised strategy
- Identify sites to meet the need for Gypsy and Traveller sites that will be identified within the emerging RSS single issue review
- Develop, with others, a Community Transport Plan
- Increased income through charging for pre-application meetings
- Increase market share for major developments from approved inspectors

Failures

- Still not reaching the Council's response target for correspondence
- Unable to check the setting out of new development
- Not able to deliver all the planned improvements within Design and Conservation

Threats

- Slippage in delivering parts of the LDF framework including the Gypsy and Traveller Development Plan document
- Less Income from Housing and Planning grant due to down turn in the market i.e. fewer housing completions
- Additional major development sites either through the LDF or section 78 appeals
- Failure of core strategy due market situation
- Development of Devcon slowed due to financial considerations
- Loss of fee income from planning and building regulation applications
- Loss of market share due to increased competition from approved inspectors in our core business area following shake out from development sector due to financial situation

Some PI data may be useful here – Ian to help

3. Service Objectives

To deliver, enable and enhance the social, health, environmental and economic well-being of new and existing communities in the district.

In pursuit of this we have sub-headings as follows:

- To ensure the preservation of the district's built and natural heritage and secure the enhancement of urban and rural design quality across the new urban extensions and major developments, securing lasting improvements to the district's environment.
- To deliver the LDF and all its component parts in accordance with the agreed program
- To deliver an improved development control service that meets all its statutory requirements and improves response rates to customer inquiries
- To deliver an improved building control service that meets all its statutory requirements and improves market share
- To enable greater electronic use of the planning service
- To improve the quality of development through increased monitoring
- A commitment to delivering high standards of design

The objectives of your service – taking into account the Council's Objectives and Service Priorities, the functions of your service and external drivers and partners. These will be used in the Operational Plan.

All relevant services will need to include objectives which reflect cross cutting service priorities such as growth areas, equalities and customer service.

4. Your Customers

Our services impact upon everyone within the District, especially through the Local Development Framework.

Customer satisfaction surveys have been in place for users of Building Control and the conservation sections for some time, and feedback on these services is generally positive. We have now introduced a similar service for planning applicants and the first results show a marked improvement in comparison with the results of the last national survey.

However, to ensure that we take those future customers' likely needs and aspirations into account, we now have agents' forums for both Building and Development Control, and attendance at both continues to grow, as does the positive feedback.

To reach harder to reach elements of our area we have also introduced specialised forums, including a disabled users panel and supported initiatives to bring Travellers and Gypsies into the planning system.

The Policy team, will produce our first Statement of Community Involvement over the coming year which will encourage greater public participation in our planning processes.

To build on our successful training sessions with Parish Councils, a new forum is to be set up. Planning will always be a significant local issue, and several new initiatives to keep parishes informed have been implemented and been the subject of positive comment from the parishes.

Learning from complaints is an important part of our culture and recent improvements introduced include sending delegation reports to Parish Councils, a training program for Parish Councils as to what are relevant planning issues, and the provision of a Duty Officer system.

5. Progress/Performance Overview

- Highest Housing and Planning Grant (HPG) in the country awarded in recognition of how far advanced we are in delivery of our LDF
- One of the highest HPG awards in the country for delivery of new, including affordable, housing,
- No reduction in HPG as we achieved all our development control targets
- Increase in Development Control user satisfaction increased from 57% to 73%
- Complete overhaul of the Planning Committee including compulsory training for members, public speaking and increased attention to major applications in accordance with best practice
- Building control achieved all its statutory time limit targets
- Development of Devcon2, a new operating system for development control
- Maintenance of performance, especially Design and Conservation, despite key posts being vacant. Should end the year with all posts, including new ones, filled
- Delivery of 300 affordable housing units at Orchard Park
- Set up of the new Joint Urban Design team to provide expert advice to improve the standard of development
- Joint Fringes Development Control Committee resolved to approve 600 houses and associated community and leisure facilities at Trumpington Meadows.
- Cambridge City Fringes Joint Committee will be established once the Parliamentary Order has been agreed
- Receipt and processing of Northstowe application in efficient manner: all documents available on-line, and wide community consultation carried out. Use of new IT system to register representations, enabling all to view comments made. Detailed and timely written response back to applicant.
- Established a Cambourne pre-application advice forum

Ian to provide PI performance table

6. Resources

Your budget and outturn for 2007/08 and budget for 2008/09 summarised. To be added into final service plan in March with info supplied by Finance

7. Value for Money Overview

The creation of the development control and registration teams has been designed to enhance Value for Money by promoting more efficient working. In particular these changes address the need to deliver an electronic service and 1App, and current service delivery problems.

Value for money may be considered to consist of two significant components; efficiency improvements and the value derived by the authority from the work carried out by the organisation.

Value is a comparative concept, and is defined in the context as: an amount of service delivered for a given price, at a given quality that is considered fair and reasonable. In assessing this, then we need to consider the impact of the work being carried out, the quality of the work being conducted and the net cost of this to the authority.

Opportunities to use external resources to fund services have been maximised. This includes

- Outstanding HPG, one of the highest in the country, and one that came in at 3 times what was estimated for our budget
- funding from Cambridgeshire Horizons has been negotiated, which has benefited a range of service areas, including development of our IT system and the funding of our new urban design team

IT systems have been developed for plan-making to increase efficiency of the consultation and reporting processes giving officers more time for the consideration of consultation responses whilst reducing the overall time taken.

Does your service provide VfM? Use national and local comparisons or unit costs to demonstrate? What changes could you make to do things differently to provide the same for less; or more for the same? Or stop doing some things? Set out the options you have considered and why you have adopted or rejected them.

Actions to implement VfM improvements could be included in the Improvement Plan.

8. Workforce Overview

We have a highly skilled workforce from a range of technical backgrounds, and the majority have at least one qualification at degree level. We continue

to train a significant number of our staff and a number are long-serving. However in certain key areas, retirements have meant that there has been a decrease in experience and hence an increasing mentoring role for the remaining experienced staff. If skilled staff are to be retained and to continue to develop. Development of individuals is also a high priority, with a focus on both increasing professional skills, and on developing management and leadership capacity.

In addition, certain gaps in the teams have been difficult to fill due to skills shortages: This has particularly apparent in the posts for urban designers, conservation and the performance management. They have now been filled. Where appropriate, interim staff was successfully used to plug the gaps, although not without some loss of service delivery.

There have been concerns from staff about the loss of our successful Growth team that had been grown over the last 15 years, and retention of strong links and continued professional and technical support to them in their new corporate team needs to be a high priority for 2008/09.

Worries have also been expressed about the new job evaluation scheme, and reported national problems where posts requiring high levels of academic achievement have been marked down relative to those involving caring skills with the concomitant problems of staff motivation and retention.

What are the factors affecting the capacity of your workforce? For example, recruitment or retention difficulties or skills shortages. Actions to address the problems might be included in the Improvement Plan.

9. Equalities Overview

One Equality Impact Assessment has been completed this year in collaboration with the City Council in connection with the North West Area action plan. However significant work remains to be carried in other areas of the service.

The service seeks to address the needs of a wide range of people in the district including marginalised groups by:

- Consulting and engaging the population in planning for growth, including through events aimed at engaging young people (e.g. the design event in schools), older people and faith groups
- Delivering affordable housing for people on low incomes, people with disabilities, older people, and people with special needs
- Work with Travellers to involve them in the GTDPD
- Work with Travellers to engage them in the planning process
- Working to ensure that design of new communities will meet the needs of a diverse population, including physical access, access to services, faith facilities, etc

What are the main equalities issues facing the service? What are your plans to address these in 2009/10 – eg actions arising from completed EQIAs or equalities policies; or plans to carry out EQIAs?

10. Risk Overview

There are risks facing the service in the coming year that have a short or medium term impact on the ability of the service to deliver on its priorities. However, given the long-term nature of the projects in which this team is involved, there are also very significant longer-term risks, which could be mitigated or worsened by actions taken and leadership.

Current, short and medium term risks:

- Economic slow-down, and non availability of credit results in the non-delivery of new housing areas, affordable housing and the inability to negotiate a suitable or satisfactory S.106 agreement.
- Failure of core strategy due to Economic slow-down
- Loss of market share to approved inspectors and decline in income leading to decline in service standards
- Failure to meet traveller and gypsy demand for sites leads to new breaches of planning control
- Lack of capacity in support services – Graphics, ICT, etc. leading to inability of team to deliver.
- Inability to recruit and/or retain appropriately skilled staff..
- Under funding from application fee income could reduce resource in Development Control and jeopardise the delivery of high quality services
- Teams reliant on small number of specialist staff with significant expertise and skills. Loss of experienced staff to other organisations
- Changes to Government policy on Heritage Protection and Biodiversity result in increasing demands on specialist staff and team workload. Diversion of staff resources from existing tasks, reduction in capacity to address existing issues, impact of staff morale, failure to meet targets

Identify major risks for the service and action to be taken to address them – link to risk register. Actions to address major risks might be in the Improvement or Change Plan.