

15 December 2015

Policy, Finance and Resources

Review of Modern Planning Service Findings

Report of: *Gordon Glenday*

Wards Affected: *All*

This report is: *Public*

1. Executive Summary

1.1 On 2 November 2015, Policy, Finances and Resources Committee agreed to undertake a 6 monthly review of the Modern Planning Service. It was agreed to set up a Members Working Group to review the service. This report outlines the findings of that review.

1.2 In addition to the Members Working Group, the Council also commissioned an internal audit of the Modern Planning Service. Its findings have also been taken into account in the recommendations of this report.

2. Recommendation(s)

2.1 That given the findings of the Member Working Party review, the Council continues to implement and develop its Modern Planning Service, subject to the Actions listed in Appendix 1.

2.2 That the service continues to be monitored and that any further improvements identified will be implemented as soon as practicable. Approval of any such improvements will be delegated to the Head of Planning and Development in consultation with the Chair of the Planning and Licensing Committee.

3. Introduction and Background

3.1 Following the recommendations of the 2nd November 2015 Policy, Finances and Resources Committee, a cross party Members Working

Group was set up to review the Modern Planning Service. The Working Group has met on 3 separate occasions to assess the on-going Modern Planning Service and the various options available to improve the Council's Planning Service in the light of the current resources and corporate priorities.

- 3.2 The Member Working Group concluded that the Modern Planning Service was now generally working well for all of the Council's customers. However, it concluded that there were still improvements to be made and these are highlighted in the Action Plan highlighted in Appendix 1.

4. Issue, Options and Analysis of Options

- 4.1 The Modern Planning Service has been operating for just over 6 months now. It is therefore prudent to review the processes and procedures to make sure that they are helping deliver the level of service that the Council and its customers expect.
- 4.2 As well as looking at best practice elsewhere in Essex for certain elements of the service, an internal audit was commissioned to look at how well the Modern Planning Service was operating in terms of email alerts and the recently introduced online planning system. The conclusions were that, overall, the new processes were in line with best practice elsewhere throughout Essex and that the new online service was now being used successfully.
- 4.3 However, it was acknowledged that there were still ways of making the service more effective and efficient. An Action Plan, as set out in Appendix 1, is therefore recommended. By implementing these actions, it is considered that the Modern Planning Service will operate even more efficiently for all of our customers.
- 4.4 The Member Working Group also stressed the importance of reviewing the service regularly to continue to improve its performance. Members and Officers will therefore continue to monitor and improve processes that will continue to make the overall service better for customers and more efficient to operate. Improvements will be implemented under the delegated powers of the Head of Planning and Development in consultation with the Chair of Planning and Licensing Committee.

5. Reasons for Recommendation

- 5.1 The Modern Planning service has been in operation for around 6 months now and so there was a need to review it to make sure that it is fit for purpose. Subject to the recommendations in the Action Plan in Appendix 1, the Members Working Group agreed that the Modern Planning Service is a more efficient and effective way of delivering our planning service to our customers.

Consultation

- 5.2 The review of the Modern Planning Service was undertaken by a cross-party Member Working Group.

6. References to Corporate Plan

- 6.1 The Modern Planning Service supports the Modern Council theme of the Corporate Plan. It also relates to the Vision for Brentwood 2016 – 2019 purpose to ensure the provision of efficient and effective services. A review of the service will ensure that these objectives are maximised.
- 6.2 The Planning Service as a whole also supports the Prosperous Borough theme by promoting quality development and growth.

7. Implications

Financial Implications

Name & Title: Chris Leslie, Finance Director

Tel & Email: 01277 312 542 christopher.leslie@brentwood.gov.uk

- 7.1 Implementing and continuing to review the Modern Planning service will ensure that any new efficiencies to the Council's processes are incorporated into our day to day operations, leading to potential savings in the future.

Legal Implications

Name & Title: Daniel Toohey, Interim Monitoring Officer

Tel & Email: 01277 312 860 daniel.toohey @brentwood.gov.uk

- 7.2 By reviewing as a matter of good practice the Modern Planning service, the Council will discharge its statutory duty under section 3 of the Local Government Act 1999 to secure continuous improvement in the way in

which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness and also ensure full compliance with the Council's constitution and other statutory obligations.

Other Implications (where significant) – i.e. Health and Safety, Asset Management, Equality and Diversity, Risk Management, Section 17 – Crime & Disorder, Sustainability, ICT.

7.3 No other implications are identified.

8. Background Papers (include their location and identify whether any are exempt or protected by copyright)

8.1 The 24 March 2015 Ordinary Council “Modern Planning Service” report is available as part of the 2nd November 2015 Policy Finance and Resources report that instigated this review.

9. Appendices to this report

- Appendix 1 “Modern Planning Service Action Plan”

Report Author Contact Details:

Name: Gordon Glenday

Telephone: 01277 312512

E-mail: Gordon.glenday@brentwood.gov.uk

APPENDIX 1: MODERN PLANNING SERVICE IMPROVEMENT ACTION PLAN

1. Officers to engage proactively with members throughout the planning application process. This includes officers using initiative to alert members to information they are likely to find useful even though they haven't expressly asked for it. This would include alerting ward members to the referral deadlines when they have expressed an interest in a particular application. **IMMEDIATE**
2. Planning application case officers to "own" their cases throughout the process until decision notice is sent out. **IMMEDIATE**
3. Provide regular briefings for members and officers to share ideas on planning issues (e.g design, enforcement, local plan etc). To include legislation updates and emerging government policy. **JANUARY 2016**
4. Officers to work alongside members to continue to review and improve planning processes for all of our customers. **IMMEDIATE**
5. Committee meetings need to be refined and streamlined to use committee time more efficiently and effectively. Where possible, more reports should be delegated to the Head of Planning to determine in consultation with Committee Chair to lessen Committee time. **JANUARY 2016**
6. Members need to make appointments to see officers to discuss applications. This will help officers prepare for the meeting in advance and also manage their time more effectively. Members will also always be assured that they get to meet the appropriate officer when they need to see them. **IMMEDIATE**
7. Members to send all requests to refer queries to "Referrals" inbox to channel enquiries to one place so we can coordinate/prioritise. Failure to do this will mean referral requests will not be considered. **IMMEDIATE**
8. Members should use a specific "Cllr X" email address so that officers can easily identify member emails regularly. This is also good practice re ensure clear delineation between officers and members in internal and external communications. **JANUARY 2016**

9. Whenever possible, referral requests must be submitted by day 28 of process (having liaised with case officer beforehand). This has been demonstrated to be best practice throughout Essex. **IMMEDIATE**
10. Members should not meet/discuss planning applications with applicants/developers on their own. Officers need to attend/lead these discussions so as not to prejudice the Council's position and ensure a consistent Brentwood Council message is always delivered to our clients. **IMMEDIATE**
11. Once the Committee agenda is published and reports have been made public, officers will arrange Planning Committee information sessions to allow any member to clarify any aspects of the reports being presented for decision. These meetings will normally be held within 5 days of the Committee meeting itself. **JANUARY 2016**
12. Neighbourhood notification letters to include details of ward members for reference – **IMMEDIATE**
13. Monthly “Live” Enforcement cases to be circulated to all members – **JANUARY 2016**
14. Appeals notification letters to be sent to members preferred address (home or pigeon-hole). **IMMEDIATE**
15. Continue to send list of applications “due to be determined” list. Members to be given 5 days (currently 2 days) to request referral prior to decision notice being sent out. This needs to be reviewed again in 3 months time to assess impact on the service to customers and performance figures. **IMMEDIATE**
16. Officers to produce a chart to show the timelines of the planning application process for members information. **IMMEDIATE**

