

Parish Liaison Meeting 22nd October 2014

Update Concerning the Resourcing of the Planning Enforcement Section

Current Situation

Over the past six months the Planning Enforcement team has gone through a complete transformation which has been challenging however has presented an opportunity for real change.

We have recently appointed three full time members of staff. Two new members joined the team at the beginning of October and the final member starts on the 27th October.

The team now comprises of myself as the Principal Officer and I have one part time senior officer and four full time officers.

The new team is made up of planning professionals all of whom have experience of planning from varying backgrounds. The team will be dealing with both the investigation of enforcement complaints as well as considering retrospective planning applications drawing on their relevant experience and knowledge.

In addition to the recruitment of new staff we continue to work in accordance with the Local Enforcement Plan which was adopted in 2013. The Plan sets out how we priorities cases, how we deal with complaints and what the customer can expect from the service. I can provide copies of the Plan to any Parish that has not yet seen it.

By way of an update in terms of the team taking direct action, it is regrettable that the press have not run our “good news stories” however we have secured three successful prosecutions this year; two for an unauthorised dwelling in the green belt and one for the felling of a TPO protected tree. In addition we have recently utilised our powers to halt works on a building that was diverging from its approved plans (allowing us the time to work out the most appropriate course of action in the face of significant local interest).

Direct action is of course always the last resort and I am pleased to inform you that we have managed to resolve the majority of complaints through negotiation and have seen a rise in the number of retrospective applications being submitted to regularise unauthorised works.

Aim of the Restructure

My primary consideration when recruiting the new team was to ensure that we have a team made up of planning professionals who are equipped with the knowledge and expertise to tackle difficult issues, offer advice in a timely manner and present solutions or compromises through negotiation.

It is my aim to have a team who will bring continuity to the job. With professional planners in post it is my expectation that they not only investigate breaches in planning control but, where appropriate, negotiate acceptable solutions which could include seeking retrospective planning applications to ensure the breach is dealt with in the most appropriate, legitimate and democratic manner.

I am confident that the new team brings a level of professionalism of the section which in turn will improve the public perception of planning enforcement in a more transparent manner, ultimately improving the overall level of customer service.

Priorities

I would like to thank all of the Parishes for their patience and support during the recent months whilst we have reformed the enforcement team.

My biggest priority at present is to clear the existing backlog of complaints. At the start of October, following the resignation of one officer and the move of two other officers into the development management team, we had a backlog of nearly 150 cases that had not been allocated to case officers. I have managed to reduce the backlog to under 40 and with the new member of staff starting on the 27th I anticipate we will be back on top of our workload.

The team are currently engaged in contacting complainants to provide a new point of contact and conducting site visits to establish the facts of investigation. In the past two weeks the new members of staff have managed to get on top of over 60 cases and are continuing to work hard to ensure the section does not fall behind.

Communication is my second major priority, I am aware that there have been issues regarding the level of communication with the public and the parishes and town councils as to the progress of cases. It will not always be possible to provide a running commentary on each and every cases (and in some instances it will not be appropriate to disclose all the information due to political or legal sensitivities), however we have a commitment set out in the

Local Enforcement Plan to provide an update when necessary or every 4-6 weeks and I have instilled this doctrine in the new team.

Better negotiation is my third priority. Formal enforcement action is always regarded as the last resort and in my view is an indication that we have failed to negotiate properly. In most cases it will be possible to find a resolution through negotiation and this is a course of action enshrined in government policy, in some cases however negotiation will not be possible and only then will we seek more formal action provided it is appropriate and proportionate to do so.

My final priority is to make enforcement information more accessible. Clearly we cannot disclose all information relating to enforcement cases however enforcement reports and notices should be publically available and it is my intention that these will be available on our website. Allowing the public to access the reports which set out why or why not action is being taken will make the whole process more transparent and will assist with bringing consistency and integrity to the enforcement section.

Rich Stott
Principal Planning/Enforcement Officer
Development Management