

# Development Annual Report 2014-2015



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## 1. Summary

Overall RAG Status		Performance/Targets	Customer Service	Resources	Income	Risks
This Report	Last Report					
<b>G</b>		<b>G</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>A</b>

## 2. Significant Progress since last report

### Member Involvement in pre application discussions

Officers now provide a briefing to the ward Councillors, the portfolio holder, and the spokes. Members can ask questions, discuss and comment on the proposals. These comments are then included within the Development Team response letter.

Applicants are able to present their scheme to all Councillors followed by a question and answers session. Care is taken to ensure that members are aware of the need to avoid pre determining applications and training has been given through our bespoke planning training programme which covers issues of probity and mainstream planning topics.

This process will help to reduce uncertainty in the decision making process.

### Agent accreditation

We have introduced a system of accreditation for agents creating a fast track approach to planning registration. Regular applicants who have been able to demonstrate that they can consistently submit 'valid' planning applications (a minimum of 3 in a row) are offered the opportunity to become 'accredited agents' and the planning registration team register applications from these agents within 24 hours of submission in all cases. This scheme is a success with accurate applications validated more quickly. We currently have 24 accredited agents.

## **Transformation project**

We undertook a process review of the way in which we process planning applications in order to improve performance and customer satisfaction levels. As part of the review we were able to cross train all planning support staff to undertake all aspects of the registration and general support services. We are proactive in contacting applicants to avoid invalidating applications where possible. The number of invalid applications, at the first instance, dropped by 18% in 2013 compared to 2012 this in conjunction with the agent accreditation scheme has saved the equivalent of one full time post within the team. Applications are now being registered on average 10 days more quickly than previously and a pre-existing backlog of unregistered applications has been eliminated.

The team commit to contacting any applicant whose application we are unable to support prior to making a decision to seek a resolution by negotiating on the application. This has allowed us to reduce the number of resubmission applications which we deal with by 10%. This is positive because resubmissions are non-fee generating and result in delays in developments being brought forward. Our approval rate on applications has likewise been improved over the last two years from 85% in 2012 to 89% in 2013.

We are utilising standardised legal agreement templates and have worked with our legal team to support the drafting of legal agreements in parallel with the consideration of planning applications to accelerate the process.

## **Flexible working**

Through the 'Transformation Project' we have introduced more flexible ways of working and utilised technology to improve our service over the last 18 months. For example we reduced printing of paper in relation to application proposals (saving nearly £1,000 per month). Officers are piloting mobile devices to improve efficiency further.

## **Improved performance and Income**

The Service has consistently exceeded all Government performance targets for this financial year despite operating within a challenging and unique environment. Planning application income has been increased considerably over the last two financial years with income being around £1,200,000 compared to £900,000 in 2011/12. The number of pre-application enquires made to the service has been growing year on year from 749 in 2011/12 to 827 in 2012/13 and 933 in 2013/14. Building Control and Land charges continue to meet their budgetary targets.

Planning Registration times are now 4-5 days.

No backlogs in the Technical Support Team (emails, consultations etc)

Land Charge Searches now around 10 days.

RAG Report has been developed to project manage major applications. This is monitored by the Divisional Director and Group Manager on a weekly basis to ensure that these projects are dealt with effectively and efficiently and is also used to brief the Strategic Director Place and Senior Members.

### **Planning Enforcement**

A new team structure has been introduced to focus on planning enforcement performance and customer service. The workload figures for the last 12 months for the enforcement team are set out below.

Enforcement cases received: 942

Enforcement cases closed: 864

The team have received a high number of complaints in the last 12 months and they have dealt with and closed the majority of them without having to serve more formal notices, which is in line with Government Guidance.

### **Agent's Forum**

This is designed to improve communications and partnership working with agents and it meets on a quarterly basis. Training and updates are provided via a shared agenda. There is a high attendance at these meetings and positive feedback from attendees that has fostered an excellent working relationship with agents who act as critical friends.

### **Planning Performance Agreements (PPAs)**

We first used PPAs in 2012/13 when there were 7 PPAs completed. In the following year 2013/14 we have secured 31 PPAs. This has resulted in the equivalent of over one full time employee being resourced from the private sector because we charge for the Officer time spent dealing with the proposal from inception to discharge of conditions. The use of PPAs has allowed us to invest resources in junior members of our own staff who are shadowing highly experienced planners thereby up-skilling our own staff at the same time as offering a bespoke work programme to challenging timescales to facilitate development.

## **Policy Framework**

The Core Strategy for Bath and North East Somerset Council was formally adopted by the Council on 10th July 2014. No legal challenge was received in comparison with many of LA's which demonstrates the robust approach adopted here.

The Core Strategy now forms part of the Development Plan for the District and will be used in the determination of all planning applications submitted to the Council alongside policies in the Joint Waste Core Strategy (2011) and those saved policies in the Local Plan (2007) not replaced by the Core Strategy

Work on the Placemaking Plan is underway and this will complement the strategic framework in the Core Strategy by setting out detailed development principles for identified development sites and other policies for managing development across Bath and North East Somerset.

The Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) is a new tariff system that allows local authorities to raise funds from developers to contribute to the costs of providing some of the infrastructure needed for new development. Following extensive cross service working and a comprehensive programme of consultation and engagement the Council adopted CIL at its meeting on 11 February 2015.

CIL replaces Planning Obligations or Section 106 contributions for many forms of infrastructure, although Section 106 agreements will still be used for site-specific mitigation measures and for affordable housing provision.

We have produced a revised Planning Obligations Supplementary Planning Document (SPD). The SPD replaces the current Planning Obligations SPD approved in 2009 and Appendix C of the Bath Western Riverside SPD.

The Planning Policy Team have been working with Parish Council's and B&NES Council has been identified as a Neighbourhood Planning Champion nationally –indicating that we are leading the field.

## **Building Control**

We surveyed approx. 290 customers including builders, developers, surveyors and architects. We received 74 replies which is a 25% response which is not too bad for an email survey.

The overall satisfaction is running at over 98% which is excellent.

B&NES Building Control had some winning schemes in the LABC West of England Building Excellence Awards 2014.

**Best Domestic Extension** - Copperlea, Mead Lane, Saltford – builder Gratton Ltd , architect whiteBOX

**Best High Volume Housing Development** – Holburne Place, Bathwick St, Bath – builder Ashford Homes, architect SPD & BBA architects

**Best Partnership** – Highly Commended – Agrarian and B&NES Building Control

## **Training Plans**

The service has developed a training plan from which Team Managers split resources between individuals. Team Managers feed requests from individuals through their PDRs into the plan. In order to maximise training opportunities where common training needs are identified the Council undertakes internal training sessions either led by Officers within the Council or by experts brought in.

We have cross trained Planning Officers within the service as planning/conservation officers who sit within our Planning/Conservation team. This has increased the skill base of staff, increased our flexibility as a service to deal with different work pressures and motivated staff who have been able to build up a specialism in conservation along with their more general planning training.

## **Annual Planning Survey 2014 – Where next for the UK's planning system? (produced by the British Property Federation and GL Hearn)**

We have recently been awarded in the Annual Planning Survey 2014 undertaken by GL Hearn and the BPF as one of the top five leading LPAs in the country for dealing with the largest volumes of major applications most quickly and 1 of only 2 outside of London.

This award represents a significant achievement for the service. The survey concentrates upon timeliness of decision making on major application proposals as an average end to end timescale rather than simply on the percentage of applications determined within 13 (or 16) weeks, the degree of certainty of outcome for the development industry and qualitative data about individual LPAs was also fed into the system.

The district has the highest concentration of listed buildings outside of Westminster, the only World Heritage Site in the country which covers an entire city, 37 conservation areas including Bath City as a whole, two AONBs and vast tracts of green belt land which makes this achievement all the more significant.

As a result of this award a representative of the service was invited to a discussion at No.10 Downing Street with the other top performers, GL Hearn the BPF and key No.10 policy officials to disseminate best practice on

accelerating the planning system and delivering the growth we require. The service is involved in producing guidance with the other participants to advise the Government and hopefully be rolled out nationwide following a further meeting at No.10.

### **Royal Town Planning Institute**

The Royal Town Planning Institute has shortlisted the Planning Team in two award categories, Local Authority Planning Team of the Year and Excellence in Decision Making. Judging takes place in July 2015.

### **Compliments increasing and declining complaints**

The service has been recording compliments received and a selection of recent ones are included in Appendix 1. The number of compliments has been increasing in recent months and within the service we have been focussing on customer service training for staff to ensure that this trend continues. Correspondingly the service has received a reduction in complaint levels by 28% in the last year.

### **Customer Excellence**

The service has a strong commitment to professional development. Over the previous 5 years the service has funded 7 Planning Officers to undertake and complete their MA in Town and Country Planning at the University of the West of England. Five of these officers have gone on to achieve Corporate membership of the RTPI whilst the other two are licentiate members. The service has hosted an individual from the university on a placement to undertake a Conservation Area character appraisal. Likewise we have had students support our undertaking of Building for Life assessments. We are discussing making formal links with the Course Director of the Town and Country Planning MA course at the University of the West of England to host students within the Service. The Service, and the wider Council, will be seeking to be accredited for Customer Service Excellence (CSE) in the Autumn of 2015.

## **3. Planned Improvements for the coming year**

### **Officer and Member Training**

The main purposes of the Training Plan for officers are as follows:

- Establish a framework of key training priorities for the Service
- Identify training needs across the Service for the coming year
- Facilitate a structured and fair approach to training opportunities and the apportionment of the training budget

- Outline key training methods to be utilised
- Outline a monitoring framework of training undertaken against this Plan

New Member Planning Code of Conduct has been adopted. This will form part of a package of comprehensive training for Members of the Development Management Committee.

### **Joint Working**

Within the Council :- A planning protocol to guide development coming forward in the district and in particular in the Enterprise Area has been agreed with planning and community regeneration working with other departments to provide prospective developers and entrepreneurs with a high level steer on whether their idea is likely to be supported by the Council.

With other LA's :- B&NES Building Control section already undertakes calculation checks on behalf of NS Council. NS has sought additional support at Management level which will provide an income for this Council. Early discussions are underway in relation to Archaeology and Conservation advice.

### **Innovation Group**

Following the launch of the Customer Service Improvement Project in December a group of officers have volunteered to organise and run an Innovation Group.

The group exists to look at new and innovative ways of service delivery, to support improvements to the service for customers and staff across Development and to provide a network of support for new ways of service delivery. The group has agreed to undertake a review of the pre application process as its first task.

### **Business Plans/cases and Team review**

As part of our preparation for CSE, the Service is preparing business plans to guide future performance and customer service improvements. In addition, team reviews are underway which will focus on improving performance within existing budgets or to drive income generation. For example, in Development Management a review of the Heritage Team is linked with analysis of how we can improve our pre application advice service.

### **Closer links between Building Control and Planning**

We are working to facilitate closer working between the two groups. This will involve building control officers attending the Agents Forum as well as pre application discussions where planning and building control advice can be

given at the same time thereby extending the pre application offer to cover the whole design and build process. In addition planning will investigate the possibility of increased face to face meetings with building control so that advice can be given in person and in one go. This will save applicants having to prepare and submit documentation which will save time and money and will also reduce the administrative burden for the service. This should also result in increased building control applications for LABC Building Control applications on line making it easier to submit them

**4. Risks to be escalated for decision, action, or information**

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Decision/Action Required</b> <i>Enter "for information only" if no action/decision required</i>	<b>Latest date for action/decision</b>	<b>Action on</b>
Insufficient resource to improve pre application advice	Business plans and Innovation Group to address	Sept 2015	
Capacity and loss of key staff	Good PDR Process; Review of structure	On-going	
VfM not addressing the key issue impacting on efficiency and effectiveness	Agree and complete a Programme Brief to measure this against.	On-going	