

Housing & Community Safety Select Committee

A meeting of Housing & Community Safety Select Committee was held on Thursday, 8th October, 2009.

Present: Cllr Mrs Liz Nesbitt(Chair), Cllr Jackie Earl, Cllr Mrs Jean O'Donnell (Vice Cllr Robert Gibson)Cllr Mohammed Javed, Cllr Jean Kirby, Cllr Bill Woodhead

Officers: Andy Bryson(RES), Ian Short(CESC), Mike Batty, Barry Jackson, Carol Straughan, Ray Sullivan (DNS), Peter Mennear, Sarah Whaley (LD)

Also in attendance:

Apologies: Cllr Julia Cherrett, Cllr Robert Gibson, Cllr Bill Noble, Cllr A Trainer,

HCS 18/09 Appointment to Chairman

The Committee were asked to appoint a Chairman in view of the absence of the Chair and Vice Chair, nominations were sought for this meeting only.

RESOLVED that:

Cllr Mrs Liz Nesbitt be appointed as Chairman.

HCS 19/09 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

HCS 20/09 Minutes of the Meeting held on 28th May and 16 July 2009 - To confirm as a correct record for signature.

CONCLUDED that the minutes of the meeting held on the 28th May and 16th July 2009 were signed as a correct record.

HCS 21/09 Draft minutes from the Meeting held on 27th August 2009

Consideration was given to the minutes of the meeting held on 27th August 2009.

CONCLUDED that the minutes of the meeting held on the 27th August 2009 be agreed as a true record.

HCS 22/09 Efficiency, Improvement and Transformation Review of Regulatory Services -Baseline information for Development Services and Building Control

The Committee were asked to consider and challenge the baseline information for Development Services and Building Control, as part of the review of Regulatory Services.

The Development Services Manager introduced the baseline report for Development Services and gave Members a brief history of the service highlighting the following areas of the report:

1. Reduced staffing levels minimising overheads.
2. The effect of the economy on commercial developers and householders not wanting to improve properties and how this has had a negative effect on the service. Keeping planning costs down to a minimum to encourage developing.
3. Service Performance and budgets.
4. Fee Structure of the Service and the revenue it generates.
5. Government guidelines regarding fees for applications, reductions in fees and the lack of increments for future planning applications. Members noted that in future, should an application be returned for further consideration after an initial consideration, the fee would be at a flat rate of £500; this is in contrast to the fees that now could be as much as £50,000, for example.
6. Improved web based Planning facilities for the public including annual royalty/maintenance charge.
7. Future planning applications.

Members attention was drawn to the fact that costs for planning applications were difficult to determine; as much officer time could be spent on small minor applications dealing with residents queries and complaints, Environment and Ecology departments etc as could be spent on major applications and until the project was underway and complete this was an unknown figure.

The Committee asked if more detailed financial information could be provided for these services to help them when arriving at any decisions in relation to this review. It was stated that the accounts were collated on a regular basis however the projections for planning income were unpredictable to an extent and could become out of date. It was agreed that the Finance manager would provide further financial analysis for all services in order to provide an updated budget projection for 2009-10, and a comparison with the 2009-09 budget, and report back to the next meeting of this Committee on the 19th November.

The Head of Planning informed Members of new guidance produced by the Planning Advisory Service entitled Managing Excellence Planning Services (MEPS), although this guidance was not compulsory it was a guide to undertaking Business Process Re-engineering and was being viewed as best practice. By undertaking MEPS, planning departments could gain a detailed picture of the costs and processes involved in running the service, and comparisons between authorities where there had been differing costs for the same service. The Head of planning indicated that there was a seminar to be held in London for the next stage of the guidance and reported to the Committee that what had been learned so far was favourable with the view that Stockton adopt this way of working in the future. There was however a proviso attached to this method of working which was to find 3 other authorities in the same group willing to bench mark with Stockton before proceeding. The Committee also discussed that for the MEPS initiative to be meaningful working patterns over a period of one month would need to be recorded to provide a baseline and although this would be time consuming initially it should prove beneficial in the long run. The Head of Planning stated that for a realistic result

from using the best practice outlined by MEPS a period of four months would be required for the process as a whole.

Members discussed the Options which had been highlighted by the Officers as follows:

1. Working with neighbouring authorities to minimise cost
2. Contracting out to an outside company, however this would be dependent on economic climates and whether or not these companies would be interest in such work.
3. Charge for pre application advice. This approach had led to increased income for some authorities, however Middlesbrough Council had introduced this and the quality of applications had declined due to low take-up and leading to higher costs further along in the process. Members noted that Regeneration Services and Technical Services were of the view that charging for pre-advice would be detrimental to economic development, and would be resource intensive in terms of being able to provide a quality level of service.

The Building Control Manager introduced the baseline report for Building Control and gave Members a brief history of the service highlighting the following areas of the report:

1. Statutory function
2. Budgets/ Expenditure. The Building Control budget is made up of a trading and non-trading account. Surpluses from the trading account are re-invested or lead to a reduction in fees.
3. ICT Pilot-3G mobile working allowing officers to work on site creating efficiencies in relation to officer time.
4. Recent staff changes
5. New legislation.

Members learned that over recent years there had been a reduction in building control applications which resulted in a drop in revenue. The service was unique in that it had to compete with the private sector's approved inspectors. Due to the need to publish local authority fees, approved inspectors were at an advantage in terms of the fees they could levy. In addition small projects such as home extensions could impact on officer time, as much as larger ones.

The Building Control Manager informed the Committee that unlike Development Control Services where the government set the fees, Building Control Services can in fact set their own fees however there was implications due to the competition within the private sector offering the same services and if fees were too high the Council could price themselves out of the market.

Members discussed the Options contained within the report as follows:

1. Work Smarter, continue as a financial viable service including providing

statutory function and other supporting services.

2. Operate as a financially viable service providing statutory functions only.
3. Partnership working with other Tees Valley authorities.
4. Contract the service to a private organisation.

The Committee agreed that further information such as costs and implications for each of the above mentioned options would need to be presented to members to aid them in any future decision making in respect of this review.

CONCLUDED that the options raised at the meeting be considered further and brought back to the next meeting of this committee on the 19th November 2009 together with the updated budget breakdown.

**HCS
23/09**

Work Programme

Members considered the project plan for the review of Regulatory Services. It was noted that the next meeting on 19th November was scheduled to consider all options raised during the review. Recommendations for the review would be presented at the meeting dated the 9th January 2010.

Members requested that the relevant Cabinet Members be present at the next Committee meeting for the Review of Regulatory Services for Development Services and Building Control.

CONCLUDED that the next meeting would consider the additional information requested at this meeting and all options suggested so far in order to clarify the future direction of the review.