

BUILT & NATURAL ENVIRONMENT EIT REVIEW

Introduction

The Urban Design Team was formed in 2006 as part of a re-organisation bringing together engineering and landscape architects professionals. The team provide a co-ordinated input into the planning service on aspects ranging from transport to renewable energy.

The team also design and deliver a range of projects that include high profile strategic projects such as the town centre public realm improvements as well as the alleyways programme, community participation budget schemes and the playbuilder programme. There are linkages to other service areas within the Authority such as parks and countryside which can be perceived as overlap and need to be examined and clarified to ensure efficiencies are in place.

The Urban Design Team currently operate a trading account budget which requires the generation of fees, largely internal, to support their income requirements. This can lead to tensions with other service areas.

Urban Design – functions

The Urban Design team is part of the Technical Services Division. It operates across a range of professional disciplines, including:

- Landscape Architecture;
- Highways Development Control;
- Small Environmental Improvements and
- Urban Design.

The key functions of the team include:

- Development Control (Planning) Advice;
- Strategic Design Advice;
- Landscape and Urban Design;
- Contract Procurement;
- Contract Site Supervision.

The origins of Urban Design as it currently exists are important to note. Prior to 2006 staff were organised by professional discipline in different Departments of Development & Neighbourhood Services (DANS). Landscape Architects & Urban Designers and Project Officers associated with small environmental improvements were based in Regeneration & Economic Development with Highways Development Control Officers based in the former Integrated Transport and Environmental Policy Division of DANs.

These teams were brought together to form a multi disciplinary team to bring all design services under the Head of Technical Services and to facilitate better support to the Planning Division under the Built & Natural Environment (BaNE) area of Technical Services .

The role that Urban Design provides to Planning Services is distinct in that it affords co-ordinated comments to be made on Highways, Landscape Architecture, Renewable Energy proposals and Urban Design. This ensures all aspects of highway, visual appearance and functionality and environmental policy are reflected in consultations on planning applications. As a result Planning Case Officers and Elected Members are able to make more informed decisions. Prior to the team coming together inconsistencies in approach could result in poorer designs being approved.

Locating Landscape Architects and Urban Designers within Technical Services also permits multi-disciplinary projects to be better served with the appropriate profession leading with input from a range of other disciplines. In addition to leading or supporting strategic schemes e.g. Stockton

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Town Centre Regeneration, the design service element of Urban Design has a number of other strands that include the development of policy, production of design guides and master planning as well as managing individual construction projects.

Recent projects include:

- Mandale Housing renewal;
- Romano park;
- Clarence street surgery;
- Cultural quarter – green dragon yard;
- Stockton town centre design guide;
- The 8 Bridges cycleway.

The urban design team also manage some of the smaller community based projects such as those funded from the community participation budget and the alley gates scheme.

In addition to developing funding opportunities for small scale environmental improvements Urban Design also seek to secure contributions from developers via Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act. Presently there is no budget for this work and as a result the requirement to provide the designs and costings from a range of Technical Services teams has to compete against fee paying commissions.

Urban Design - the team

Urban Design employs a team of 9 staff, with this staff resource being funded partially from revenue budgets with other fees being generated via a Trading Account.

The main areas of fee generation to support the Trading Account coming from Planning Services, Regeneration, plus Countryside & Green Space within Direct Services. Other fees are generated from individual appointments as part of new build projects lead by Technical Services Consultancy Team (mainly Architects and Civil Engineers) and other development and divisions of the Council.

Recently fees have been gained from Darlington Borough Council as this authority did not have the necessary in house skills to carry out a particular project. The appointment was won on competitive terms from other potential service providers, including those in the Private Sector.

Urban Design also benefits from the Technical Services Framework Partnerships e.g. ARUP and can draw on their expertise and assistance in service delivery, for which a fee is payable.

As part of Stockton Borough Council, Urban Design is expected to carry out its share of corporate work including servicing council wide activities and responding to Elected Member/Planning Committee. Although such activities are not fee earning they must be absorbed within the overheads which form part of the hourly rate for fees. Management Structure and Corporate overheads also have to be included in the total fee recovery which further increases the hourly rate. The trading activity requires that Urban Design not only covers its costs including overheads but also returns an operational surplus to the Council.

This surplus is also contained in fee generation from other local Authorities and whilst this could make future fee proposals less competitive the generation of a “surplus” it is not compliant with Local Authority regulations. It is regulated that in trading between authorities, the service providing authority should not make a surplus at the expense of the appointing authority. All such services must be done at cost.

The trading account status of part of the team places a constraint on the Urban Design. Options to fund the full team could further improve the service by directing services to meet the strategic or corporate role rather than meeting the needs of clients who can pay.

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Potential Improvements to Service Delivery:

Since inception there has been positive response received to the service delivered by the urban design team from other officers, members, developers, and external bodies. However there are still improvements that can be made and there are issues that need to be addressed if the service is to move forward.

- Review the trading account status to establish if the Urban Design team can be made more responsive to clients needs if internal trading activity was to cease;
- Review corporate and management overheads and requirement for operational surplus to reduce fee rates to make Urban Design even more competitive in its service delivery and compliant with Local Authority regulations for any services provided to Tees Valley Authorities.

Reduced fees could improve the competitiveness and provide a complaint service to Tees Valley Unlimited and other Local Authorities. Currently both TVU and other Tees valley Authorities use a mix of temporary staff, private practices or other external agencies to assist in the delivery of their design services.

As previously noted Urban Design is already operating within Darlington Borough Council but before further opportunities to explore shared service as lead authority role for Tees Valley is taken forward the following questions must be asked:

- Ensure that the Urban Design and Countryside and Greenspace team are co-ordinated in the development of funding opportunities to ensue that all possible sources of funding are maximised thus increasing the range of environmental projects which can be undertaken.
- An appraisal of options to create an advanced design budget for the delivery of professional services associated with S106 Agreements should be considered. This could provide options for how:
 - a) time or fees can be funded;
 - b) result in greater predictability of overall project cost;
 - c) Greater certainty that contributions requested can not be contested by applicant.

The appraisal should consider if the requirement for an advanced design budget would still be advantageous if the trading accounts activities of Urban Design ceased.