

Report to the Cabinet



Report reference:

C-051-2016/17

Date of meeting:

1 December 2016

**Epping Forest
District Council**

Portfolio:

Governance and Development Management

Subject:

Business process improvement in Development Management

Responsible Officer:

Nigel Richardson (01992 564 110).

Democratic Services:

Gary Woodhall (01992 564470).

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) That £51,640 be agreed to fund the appointment of a Grade 5 Technical Officer, Planning Validation from 1 April 2017 to 31 March 2019;**
- (2) That £225,794 be approved for allocation to Development Management Electronic Information/Records Team for 2017/18 and 2018/19 to continue years two and three of the three year strategy to convert Development Control (DC) and Building Control (BC) paper records to electronic format; and**
- (3) That the total expenditure £277,434 for this is sourced as District Development Funding directly linked to the excess over budget of Development and Building Control income.**

Executive Summary:

Development Management is working towards reducing the time taken to process planning applications to meet statutory deadlines. At the same time there is a need to provide a high quality cost effective service that will be responsive to the needs of the district and be able to compete against long term competition from the private sector. This report proposes the creation and funding of Technical Validation Officer on a fixed term basis to support this and also seeks to extend the scanning of Building Control files and other measures to move away from manual paper records and continue the progress towards 'paperless' working within Development Management.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

With the increase in planning applications likely to continue in the foreseeable future there is a need to ensure that the processing of planning applications meets central governments targets of 8 weeks for ordinary applications and 13 weeks for major applications. The appointment of a Validation Officer will jointly relieve pressure both within the Planning Application/Validation Team and Planning Officers who deal with the technical elements of validating planning applications. This will provide a better service to the customer.

There is clear evidence that the Planning and Building Control service is no longer able to economically sustain working with increasingly large volumes of paper. The way forward for all local authority Planning and Building Control Services is to move as far as possible towards 'paperless' working. This is strongly supported by the Department of Local Government and Communities and Planning Advisory Services.

Other Options for Action:

To do nothing; the scanning of the remainder of Building Control, Large Site and Contaminated Land records is essential as they are important records and in some cases developing these sites is strategically important both for the council and district as a whole. If this is not carried out then this will result in slower business processes, increased storage costs and may adversely affect any movement towards mobile and flexible working. Local Land Charges have moved to Development Management and their business processes too are intended to be modernised they will be able to work closer with Planning and Building Control.

Report:

1. Development Management has identified the workflow processing of planning applications is an area of weakness where government targets for the processing of planning applications may not always be met. With the increase in planning applications likely to continue in the foreseeable future there is a need to ensure that central governments targets of 8 weeks for ordinary applications and 13 weeks for major applications continue to be met. The appointment of a Validation Officer will jointly relieve pressure both within the Planning Application/Validation Team and for Planning Officers who deal with the technical elements of validating planning applications.
2. Appendix A attached demonstrates the current processes taking place in dealing with planning applications where a planning application is in effect validated by a planning officer with the application being passed at different stages both from and back to the Applications/Validation Team. The average working days taken to process applications is 44 – 67.
3. Appendix B shows the proposed work flow process with the changes to planning validation an Integral part of the Applications/Validation process. The proposed new Business procedure demonstrates that the time to process planning applications may be reduced to 39 – 52 working days a minimum improvement of five working days to assist planning in meeting government targets for the processing of planning applications and providing better service to customers.
4. The appointment of a Grade 5 Technical Officer will facilitate the validating of planning applications within the Applications/Validation team and will assist in the faster processing of planning applications as well as relieving some of the pressure on Planning Officers. A key indirect result of this will be to enable planning officers to be able to manage their caseloads in a more flexible manner. For example the proposed changes in processing of applications may well help planning officers to focus more time on contentious and complex planning applications.
5. Approval is sought for a two year fixed term duration for the appointment of a Technical Officer Planning Validation at a cost of £25,820 per year. The fixed term will allow time to make an impact on the processing but retains flexibility for future transformational changes.
6. The funding DC and BC improvement will be used to carry out Year Two Electronic Improvement 2017/18:
 - (a) year two of the three year plan to scan BC files and business process improvements to BC database information to support mobile and flexible working;
 - (b) concurrently carry out quality improvement processes to improve address and planning history accuracy of Northgate M3 database;
 - (c) scanning, electronic records conversion and business process improvement of Local Land Charges records;
 - (d) improve the use of mapping information for BC/DC/LLC as part of the process of improving external access to DC/BC/LLC information on iPlan and external mapping applications;

(e) scan and index Large Site Files for Development Control; and

(f) scan and index a large quantity of contaminated land files, reports and aerial photographs.

7. Due to the large volume of work required a significant amount of the above will be carried forward to 2018/19 as part of Year Three to fully complete most of the work required.

8. Local Land Charges have moved to Development Management and there is a need to electronically convert their manual records to electronic format to assist with improving business processes and enable closer working with Planning and Building Control.

9. A key strategy within Development Management is to reduce the amount of space required for manual records. Vacating the first floor DC and BC file storeroom has been identified as a priority for 2017/18 and significant space within Development Management will also be freed up in 2018/19.

10. It is proposed that DDF funding be sought to cover the net expenditure linked to the increases over budget in Planning and Building Control income as detailed in the following schedule.

DETAIL	GRADE	2016 - 2017		2017 - 2018		2018 - 2019		TOTAL
		FTE	ACTUAL & ESTIMATED COST	FTE	PROJECTED COST	FTE	PROBABLE PROJECTED FUTURE BUDGET	ESTIMATED THREE YEAR COSTS
Clerical Assistants	2	5.00	£89,550	6.50	£122,070	6.00	£112,680	£324,300
Administration Assistants	3	1.00	£19,990	1.20	£24,084	1.00	£20,070	£64,144
TOTAL COSTS			£109,540		£146,154		£132,750	£388,444
Less contribution from Planning Admin Budget (Document Scanning)			-£20,000		-£20,000		-£20,000	-£60,000
DDF Saving carried forward ex Microfiche Project 2015/16			-£11,240					-£11,240
Allocation for 0.50 FTE Admin to support Customer Service in Planning Application/Validation Team June 2015 - May 2018			-£9,490		-£13,110			-£22,600
NET DDF COSTS		6.00	£68,810	7.70	£113,044	7.00	£112,750	£294,604

Resource Implications:

£33,110 has been sourced within the 2017/18 Planning Administration budget (including previously agreed DDF funding of £13,110). A further £20,000 is also internally sourced from the 2018/19 Planning Administration budget. Both sets of internally sourced funding totalling £53,110

reduce the overall cost of external DDF funding to £277,434.

Legal and Governance Implications:

There is a statutory duty to ensure that planning applications are processed within specific deadlines and the appointment of a Technical Validations Officer will help Development Management to meet these timescales. Whilst reducing the use of paper and moving towards 'paperless' planning is not a statutory duty, Planning Advisory Services strongly supports Local Planning Authorities to reduce the use of paper and advise that it is best practice to move towards electronic working.

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

Streamlining and improving the way we manage planning applications will indirectly improve the approach by planning officers to consider more fully other linked issues such as 'Designing-Out-Crime'. Specifically there is a duty to identify crime and disorder implications arising from planning design as well as appropriate feedback arising out of site visits and customer contact.

The movement away from paper based manual records towards 'paperless' planning is carbon and green friendly. This has already been demonstrated by the success of iPlan where residents are now able to avoid having to travel to Epping to view plans and planning documentation as this is available via the EFDC website.

Consultation Undertaken:

Financial consultation has taken place with the Development Management Service Accountant who has been able to confirm the funding calculations.

A draft of this report was presented to Management Board on Wednesday 16th November 2016. The initial report to Management Board has been circulated to Human Resources.

Background Papers:

None.

Risk Management:

The cost of processing planning and building control applications may rise due to inability to access electronic records quickly. This may also inhibit the process of making savings based on reducing the use of paper combined with the additional resource costs to maintain these records.

There will be limited ability to implement mobile and flexible working particularly for Building Control. This may place limitations on Building Control reducing their ability to access information while on site via their mobile devices.

Storage space is already at full capacity and unless additional storage space is made available essential records are at risk either due to loss and/or destruction.

The Government has threatened to pilot the validating and processing of planning applications (not decision-making) through the private sector in one or two local planning authority areas with the intention of rolling it out more fully in 5 years' time. The Council needs to improve its processes and speed up its registering and validating of planning applications to remain competitive against this threat of long-term competition.

Equality Analysis:

An updated equality impact analysis has been completed and is attached as required by the Equality Act 2010 requires that the Public Sector Equality Duty is actively applied in decision-making.