

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet

Date: 26 April 2016

Subject: Governance and Development Management

Portfolio Holder: Councillor J Philip

Recommending:

That the report of the Governance and Development Management Portfolio Holder be noted.

1. Development Management

Building Control

Building Control's (BC) income for March 2016 was £46,873, the second highest single monthly turnover for the last three years. BC has slightly exceeded their revised annual year-end budget at £473 000, which was revised from the original, set at £386 000. Given their improved turnover, BC will for the first time in many years be able in the 2015/16 year to exceed the break-even status of their ring fenced Building Control Account. BC's recent upsurge in turnover is linked to the general increase in building activities across the Council district and is £70,000 higher than the 2014/15 total turnover.

The outlook for BC is good, as for the first time in many years BC will have over 98% of their vacant posts filled, although two of these posts are traineeships. This means that BC will be able to compete strongly in a market where there is increased competition for surveyor work. The recent growth in independent approved inspectors who are now competing for the same work means that BC needs to ensure they have enough staff available to respond to competitive pressures.

It is also important to note the positive element of BC's income, which increased by 16% from 2014/15 to 2015/16. This compares favourably to the previous year's corresponding increase of 7% from 2013/14 to 2014/15.

Development Control

Income of nearly £850,000 for Development Control (DC) for 2015/16 was exceptionally good as compared to 2014/15 of £813,000. With the budget revised upwards from £595,000 to £850,000, DC managed to show their resilience by exceeding £800,000 for two years running.

The increase in turnover for DC improving from £538,762 in 2013/14 to £813,120 in 2014/15 was exceptional registering a nearly 51% increase. Any subsequent increase over this in future years was always going to be difficult. However a respectable 4.5% increase over the 2014/15 year demonstrated the how strong the DC turnover of £849,842 has been for 2015/16.

While as already indicated that this is the second year that DC have managed to exceed £800,000, it is particularly relevant to note that prior to April 2014 the average yearly income for DC has been approximately £500,000 per year.

In addition the Pre-Application income for DC was £104,000 for 2015/16 and added to the DC turnover brings the total DC income to £953,842 about £46,000 short of one million pounds.

DC will be strengthening their staffing resources by employing two trainee planning officers in mid-2016. This will add an element of stability to planning officer resources to support the current and expected increases in planning application activity.

Planning Enforcement

The Planning Enforcement section has again taken direct action, this time to remove advertising panel's and supported boarding erected by the same company, Directional Media, in two locations – Highbridge Street Retail Park, Waltham Abbey and next to the London Underground bridge, Chigwell Lane, Loughton. The signs though have re-appeared and we will be taking direct action again and prosecute.

Planning Consultation

Governance Select Committee recently considered a government consultation paper entitled "Technical Consultation on Implementation of Planning Changes", which included planning fee increases in line with the rate of inflation for authorities performing well, introducing a "Permission in Principle" process, separate Brownfield and Small-sites registers and proposed also changes to planning performance. Of most concern though, applicants for planning permission could be given the choice of whether to submit their plans to the local council, a competing council or a government approved organisation. It is claimed by The DCLG that it would tackle a lack of incentive for councils to improve and speed up their planning service and pilot this in specific areas for a limited period. The final decision to grant or refuse planning permission would still be taken by the local council, but only within a short period of 1 to 2 weeks from receipt of the planning officer's report and recommendation.

Development Control and policy officers are also considering a rural planning review call for evidence that has been jointly published by DCLG and DEFRA. It seeks evidence on how the planning system can better support rural life and ideas on how the planning system could further support sustainable rural life and businesses. The Rural Productivity Plan published in August 2015 committed the Government to review the planning and regulatory constraints facing rural businesses and measures that can be taken to address them. It also commits Government to review the current threshold for agricultural buildings to convert to residential buildings. Responses to a number of questions are sought from local authorities by 26 April.

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/499246/Rural_panning_review_Call_for_Evidence.pdf

2. Council Underlines Its Commitment To Equalities

On Wednesday 24 February, I again demonstrated our commitment to ensuring that the Council meets its responsibilities for equality and diversity by leading Councillors and staff for a flag raising ceremony to mark LGBT History Month.

Our society is built on the principles of equality and diversity, and I am extremely proud of the role the council plays locally in promoting those values.

In conjunction with this event the Cabinet, at its last meeting, considered and approved its new equality objectives to take forward its public sector equality duty. This duty requires that

we proactively consider how discrimination can be addressed through the work that we do, and also whether we can advance equality of opportunity and encourage good relations between different protected groups.

The setting of objectives provides a focus on the outcomes to be achieved during the next four years. New objectives have been developed to take the Council up to April 2020, and because the objectives must be specific and measurable, an action plan has been developed to deliver them and sets new targets to improve the lives of people in the district.

3. New Council Constitution

Later at this Council meeting, members will be asked to approve a new Constitution for the Council. This point marks the completion of a programme of meetings by our Constitution Working Party, Chaired by Councillor McEwen, to which Officers from the Governance Directorate have many hours putting together completely new provisions over nearly a two year period.

The new Constitution is a good example of cross council officers working with members and has been supported by input from staff across the Governance Directorate, from Legal to Democratic Services. It is pleasing to note that when reviewed by Counsel, it has been judged as a significant improvement and fit for purpose.