

Bromsgrove District Council (BDC)

Development Management Improvement Plan

Background

BDC in conjunction with Redditch Borough Council (RBC) has done much to transform its services to the benefit of the customer, with a particular focus on securing good outcomes (acceptable schemes) One consequence of this approach is that determining applications sometimes takes longer than the statutory timescale. Notwithstanding this, BDC is proud of its positive approach to schemes, as evidenced by the numbers of applications granted planning permission.

Bromsgrove applications granted				
	2012/13		2013/14	
	% Granted	Overall % Granted	% Granted	Overall % Granted
Majors	80%	80%	100%	91%
Minors	80%		82%	
Others	84%		93%	

The Council's approach as a whole is to work to this end, and not be driven by a target culture. Nevertheless BDC recognises that timely decisions are part of a quality service and wants to improve the times in which it determines applications.

Identification of issues

From analysing the timelines for major applications over the two year period on which designation was based, we have identified these reasons as contributing to the lengthy times taken to determine majors.

- Lack of staffing due to recruitment and retention issues
- Time taken between application receipt and getting to the case officer
- Officer assessment and negotiation (delay in initial scoping and discussions with applicants; limited proactive case management – chasing responses etc)
- Late responses from the public, and statutory consultees
- S106 agreements – delays in establishing Heads of Terms and completing the legal aspects

Overall, there has not been a focus on the timescales.

There are other aspects of the service which we want to improve as part of our drive for continuous improvement. For example a focus on resourcing to ensure staff are deployed in the most effective way, training for committee members to understand the implications of delays in determining applications, using peer support from Wolverhampton Council to help identify waste in the system and where processes are not working, taking part in the Planning Quality Framework project to ensure we benchmark appropriately against others.

Timescales

There are a number of improvement actions either already implemented, or underway. The majority of the Councils' services are now shared with RBC and Planning Managers have been working over that same time period to bring together the two planning departments which includes, alongside the transformation work, stream lining of processes, recruiting staff to ensure the team is fully resourced, introducing new IT software and considering two schemes of delegation.

It is considered that with a full team and a transformed service that the following table of actions will result in more timely major decisions within the statutory timescales. There is a particular focus on directing the improved resources towards major proposals and working with the developer to achieve bespoke timescales as appropriate.

The implementation of the improvement plan will continue to improve the way of working in BDC and improve the service to customers. The actions set out a structured programme of improvements which is supported by advice from the Planning Advisory Service and Wolverhampton City Council acting as a critical friend.

Key Improvement Aims

Based on the areas identified above as contributory factors to the time taken to deal with applications, we have identified these main areas for improvement.

1. Improve initial stages (registration and validation)

Faster registration and validation of applications to reduce non-productive time at an early stage. Working with customers to improve quality of submission to enable validation. Remove backlog and get applications to officers more quickly.

2. Greater focus on timeliness of decisions during the assessment and negotiation phase

Whilst still working to achieve the best outcome and giving applicants the chance to amend schemes to work towards approval, ensure that a project management approach gets everything in place for a timely decision. Use PPAs and EoTs where appropriate.

3. Improve consultation response times from consultees

Make sure consultees are aware of the timescales they need to meet; early identification of late responses to enable action to be taken; early identification of issues by consultees to ensure they can be resolved wherever possible within timescales.

4. Streamline the planning obligation process

Ensure HoTs are discussed with applicants early in the process (including at pre-app stage) to make sure that these discussions don't result in delays to determinations. Dual recommendations (as many other authorities) giving delegated authority to determine applications if no PPA/EoT signed or deadline extended to help to address the most significant cause of delays to major applications.

The improvement plan contains other actions relating to resourcing and service improvement which were a fundamental reason for BDC not hitting the statutory timescales.