

COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (SPECIAL)

25th November 2002

**PRESENT:-**

**Labour Group**

Councillor Harrington (Chair), Councillor Bambrick (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Evens and Rose.

**Conservative Group**

Councillor Mrs. Robbins.

CYS/42. **BEST VALUE REVIEW OF DEVELOPMENT CONTROL –  
IMPLEMENTATION PROGRESS**

Prior to commencement of the meeting, the Committee were given a tour of the Planning Department.

The Committee received an update on implementation of the Action Plan following the Best Value Review for Development Control. This service had been judged to be fair, but not going to improve. An Implementation Plan had been prepared, based on the Inspector's recommendations and it had formed the basis for development activity since that time. The Audit Commission had advised of its intention to make a follow-up visit to review progress with implementation of its recommendations.

Reports had been prepared to address the main issues of concern and these were submitted for the Scrutiny Committee's consideration. They detailed actions taken to implement the recommendations of the Inspectors. They also demonstrated that the service met, to a large extent, the Performance Standards required by the Government.

Comparison with other Councils and the experience gained through staff vacancies had shown that the service needed more staff to reliably deliver the Government's Best Value requirements and standards. In particular, affording the public better access to decision making and being able to address the Committee in person lacked adequate resources at present.

An outline was given of the office staffing changes that had occurred since the Best Value Review and the efforts that were being made to meet performance targets. The number of planning applications had increased by an average of 5% each year since 1997/8.

The Committee discussed the benefits of the Best Value Review process and proposed new computer software which would assist the department.

Members enquired whether the forthcoming review might increase the rating of the Service. It was clarified that the scoring would not be reviewed at this stage, although improvements had been made. A further more detailed Best Value Review was planned for 2003 when the rating may be reviewed.

Consideration was then given to a series of planned actions which had been prepared to respond to issues raised by the Best Value Inspectors. It was evident that considerable progress had been made in responding to the

recommendations in the Action Plan, especially considering the level of staff resources and Members acknowledged the achievements made.

Under Action 10, the Chair commented that the web site was not particularly user friendly. The comments were noted and an outline was given of recent efforts to improve the accessibility of information on the website.

The Committee discussed Action 7, particularly customer satisfaction and the Customer Charter. This had been published in 2001 and details were given of its dissemination. Levels of response had been limited and there had been no criticism or adverse reaction. The review arrangements were also considered.

Under Action 14, Members asked for an update on the production of a policy to monitor breaches of Planning Control. A draft Strategy was to be submitted to the Development Control Committee and would then be subjected to formal consultation.

It was questioned whether Officers were satisfied with the conduct of Members on site visits. Officers responded and also explained the issues associated with the public speaking at committees.

Members enquired whether there was demand for translation of council documents into other languages. This issue was being researched and, it was considered, could be improved. IT solutions were available to simplify the process. The Council had an arrangement with Derby City Council to provide a translation service but this was expensive. Discussions had also taken place with Councillor Pabla. Members considered that the Council should make every effort to provide literature in other languages and formats to meet residents' needs.

Members discussed service development proposals and it was noted that a previous bid for a Building Control Officer had not been re-submitted. Officers commented on other staffing pressures and on sustainability issues.

Members asked about the review of Council documentation and whether all application forms were available via the web site. This was intended, but there were software problems, particularly regarding the submission of plans and incompatible software. CAD software is very expensive and negotiations were currently taking place with suppliers to seek a solution.

Action 15 referred to the corporate activities of Planning Managers. It included networking to strengthen lines of communication and enable greater collaboration. Members enquired if there had been any improvement in communication between departments and this was reaffirmed. There was an issue regarding treatment of Central Establishment charges but the new Financial Information system should help with this.

K HARRINGTON

CHAIR

The meeting terminated at 5.05 p.m.

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