

# NORTH DORSET DISTRICT COUNCIL REPORT OF THE MEETING

**Committee:** Service Review Committee

**Date:** Monday, 14 April 2008 starting at 2.00 pm

**Venue:** Council Chamber, Nordon, Salisbury Road,  
Blandford Forum

**Present:** Cllr V G Fox (Chairman)  
Cllr M Jeffery (Vice Chairman)  
Cllr B Anderson  
Cllr D L Beer  
Cllr C Dowden  
Cllr J Hickish  
Cllr S G Hitchings  
Cllr Mrs D L Jones MBE  
Cllr Mrs V Potheary  
Cllr J E T Tanner  
Cllr C Tomlinson

**Also Present:** Cllr M Cox, Portfolio Holder, Economy

**Officers Present:** B Alford, ICT Manager  
N Fagan, Development Control Manager

**41.**

## **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

No declarations of interest were made by Members under the Code of Conduct.

**42.**

## **REPORT OF THE LAST MEETING**

The report of the meeting held on 3 March 2008 was confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

**43.**

## **URGENT BUSINESS**

There were no items of urgent business.

**44.**

## **PERFORMANCE MONITORING – DEVELOPMENT CONTROL**

The Chairman highlighted the questions attached to the agenda which had arisen from the last meeting of the Committee and had prompted the request for the Portfolio Holder to attend, with the Development Control Manager, to

answer them.

The Development Control Manager tabled papers which had been printed from the SPARSE Web Site which provided figures showing the departments performance against others within the group. He advised that SPARSE consisted of a group of 85 rural authorities which allowed comparison with like authorities.

The Development Control Manager and Portfolio Holder then answered the questions raised by members:-

***How does the case load for the authority compare with other authorities in our benchmarking group?***

***and***

***How does the case load for each officer compare with other authorities in our benchmarking group?***

The Development Control Manager advised that a benchmarking exercise had been undertaken in November of 2007 and with 189 cases North Dorset had the highest case load per officer compared with authorities such as Purbeck, Christchurch, Weymouth and Portland etc. He highlighted that North Dorset was the fastest growing area in the South West and workload was heavy compared to others.

Cllr Mrs Jones asked if the recent decision to restrict building within the area had had an affect on workload as she felt that minor applications would not require the same input as large developments. The Development Control Manager stated that fewer applications had come forward than prior to the adoption of the Housing DPD but with the higher figures expected from the Regional Spatial Strategy for numbers of new properties this might change.

Cllr Anderson asked how much officer time was taken up with larger developments compared to minor applications. The Development Control Manager responded that the time spent per house was less pro-rata but that officer time was taken up with other issues such as Section 106 Agreements and therefore the workload was approximately 50 to 80 times as much than for an individual house.

Cllr Jeffery queried the figures for BV 205 and asked how quality of service was measured. The Development Control Manager responded that this was assessed by the type and usefulness of information available and was largely subjective.

***What is the cost of processing each application and how does this compare with other authorities in our benchmarking group?***

The Development Control Manager stated that obtaining a Value for Money figure was not an exact science. The Audit Commission collect the figures but different methods of accounting within authorities meant that these could look totally different. He highlighted that a lot of work was currently being undertaken to assess the Value for Money in the department and a report would be presented to Cabinet by the General Manager, Development and Resources in the near future. He added that it was important to look at and

understand the reasons for the cost.

He highlighted that the costs of the Planning Service included those of others including Planning Policy and the Environmental Health Section. He felt that the financial recharges between sections were double counted and some anomalies had been found. Members questioned whether a review should be undertaken of the way in which costs within the service should be more accounted for. It was felt important that they should be more transparent.

***Is performance in Development Control improving as a result of efficiencies or are targets being met as there are less applications to process?***

***and***

***How will business transformation affect costs and value for money?***

The Development Control Manager explained that the aim of Business Transformation was to improve customer service and cut costs. By having all planning documents on-line it was hoped that customers would find this easier and thus reduce the number coming into the reception and the number of telephone calls. This would allow staff to concentrate more on service delivery and processing of applications. He added that there were still a number of issues to be resolved such as the corporate scanning function.

Members asked if having all documents scanned would incur further costs. The Development Control Manager responded that with corporate scanning specific staff would undertake the scanning and DC staff would undertake the indexing. There would be an initial cost but there could be a saving in costs with less callers to reception and a reduced amount of photocopying. Cllr Cox pointed out that the corporate scanning project was in progress but that this had to be done utilising existing resources. He also highlighted that issues arising from the scanning room itself needed to be addressed such as the lack of space.

Cllr Tanner raised the issue of the sorts of documents which would be available on line and asked if the large plotting sheets would be available as these gave a valuable overview of an area for parish councils etc when making their recommendations. He was advised that although this was seen as an invaluable tool it would incur costs and there were no plans to undertake this work at present. The Committee asked that a recommendation be put to Cabinet to ensure that work to enable plotting sheets to be accessible on-line be expedited as soon as possible.

***How is the issue of abandoned calls being addressed?***

The Development Control Manager stated that figures produced and presented to the Senior Management Team had shown a large number of abandoned calls within the Department. Since questions had been asked steps had been taken to address the issue including the introduction of an automated message when lines were busy asking callers to call back. He highlighted that the number of abandoned calls for the whole Council minus the Customer Contact Team had been reduced from 22% of calls in the period October to December in 2006 to 9% in the same period in 2007. He stated that the numbers of abandoned calls just within the Development

	<p>Control Section had fallen from 48% in September 2007 to 12% in March 2008.</p> <p>Cllr Mrs Potheary queried why there were so many calls, and asked if this was partly due to a lack of information available elsewhere. She was advised that this was the case and a lot of the calls were for pre-application advice which it was hoped would reduce with the introduction of information on-line. The Committee were advised that it was hoped that in the future pre-application advice to developers would be charged for as this took up a lot of officer time.</p> <p>Cllr Cox stated that it was important for planning officers to concentrate on the detailed work required for applications and felt that the option of Customer Contact taking calls could be explored. The Development Control Manager stated that this was being looked into but resources again could be an issue.</p> <p>The Chairman thanked Cllr Cox and the Development Control Manager for their attendance and stated that the issues highlighted needed to be carried forward in order to address issues of performance.</p>
<p><b>45.</b></p>	<p><b>REVIEW OF THE NORTH DORSET DISTRICT COUNCIL WEB SITE</b></p> <p>The ICT Manager talked members through the current web site and the improvements which were currently being undertaken. He stated that the self service facilities currently being included fell into two categories:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public Access Self Service - requests for information and services for the general public.</li> <li>• Assisted Service – facility available for the Customer Contact Team to record requests for services and information etc.</li> </ul> <p>He highlighted that he was currently working with Anite to deliver integrated services allowing just one username and password to be supplied to allow sign-on to all services. He highlighted that the provision of web based forms was being progressed and that several were in the process of being applied.</p> <p>He then drew members' attention to the access to service application portals and their proposed "go live" dates. Cllr Hitchings asked if the dates were fixed, as during the previous item issues had been raised by the Development Control Officer relating to resources for the scanning of documents. The ICT Manager responded that he was confident that scanning of enquiries would be achieved by the end of July 2008. He stated that the issues were not about capacity as the facilities were in place the issue related to the physical space available and personnel resources.</p> <p>He added that at present as the Revenues and Benefits systems had gone live and the Department of Work and Pensions were very prescriptive with how post was dealt with and scanned and this restricted access for other departments. This issue was currently being discussed with the Senior</p>

	<p>Management Team.</p> <p>Once the resources had been put in place it was hoped that historic planning data for the past 2 or 3 years would be available on-line by the end of the year. He added that putting all the information on-line would result in a training and education process for the Customer Contact Team to enable them to deal with queries.</p> <p>The ICT Manager then advised that the content on the web site for each department was the responsibility of the relevant Team Leader and web authors. The pages were under review and all feedback received, whether from the public, members or staff was passed on to enable improvements/changes to be made. He added that it was intended that a review of the website structure would be undertaken with the next three to six months and would look at issues such as ease of navigation. Following this a plan for improvement would be drawn up.</p> <p>Members highlighted the figures in the papers presented by the ICT Manager relating to usage and noted that they appeared to be very static. The ICT Manager felt that publicity of the new services, when they are available, could increase usage.</p> <p>Members felt that the web site was a useful tool which helped to facilitate their work in the community. Cllr Tanner asked whether a request could be made that e-mail addresses for staff be included within the internal telephone directory to enable members to e-mail rather than telephone staff. The Scrutiny Officer agreed to make a request to the Facilities Manager for this.</p> <p>The Chairman thanked the ICT Manager for his attendance. The Committee decided that at the present time they should not undertake a full review of the web site. They felt that as the new facilities and information were about to go live they needed to allow these to settle down and it was agreed that this issue would be re-visited in 2009 to see if a full review needed to be undertaken.</p>
	<p><b>The meeting closed at 4.20 pm</b></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>CHAIRMAN</b></p>