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10 December 2018

Planning Advisory Service - DM Support

Hastings Borough Council

Notes of visits by M Vink 27/28 November 2018

Reasons for visits

The principal aim of the DM support package from PAS is to ensure that LPAs are not designated for poor performance by DCLG in 2018. When PAS suggested the support package, Hastings was at risk of designation principally as a result of low speeds of determining of major planning applications in the 6 months from July to December 2017, which lie within the 24 month measurement period to September 2018. This poor period of performance coincided with a period of inadequate resources as a result of staff vacancies, difficulties in recruitment and long term absence due to illness.

With most of these staffing issues resolved, performance has improved significantly and, as the table below shows, Hastings is performing well and is not now at risk of designation. Hastings is also well outside the designation threshold for quality with a low number of appeals and a good success record.

Nevertheless staff wanted to take the opportunity of an external review of their current ways of working, and utilising the PAS Development Management Challenge Kit, to explore how improvements might be made to become more efficient and provide a more effective service to the Planning Team's various customers.

General Impressions from visits

I found a planning team which is performing to a high level and wanting to improve further.

In recent years the council has found it difficult to recruit appropriate staff to the planning team and this has resulted in high workloads, declining performance and weakening morale. Recent successes in recruiting and developing existing staff means the team will shortly again be fully staffed. The team is rightly proud of the efforts they have made to maintain a good level of service through this difficult period. They should take credit for getting things done quickly, their recovery from a poor spell and for their current performance levels.

I found that the team morale was now good and that there are strong links between the team members with a clear feeling "they are in this together". Any future significant staffing issues will however put performance at risk as there is no spare capacity. Other positive aspects that I encountered include:

- Keeping people in touch
  - discussing applications with applicants and agents to secure a positive outcome

Performance Data for Hastings	published	published	published	published	published	published	published	published	submitted	internal figure	TOTALS	internal figure
Majors	Jul - Sep 2016	Oct - Dec 2016	Jan - Mar 2017	Apr - Jun 2017	Jul - Sep 2017	Oct - Dec 2017	Jan - Mar 2018	Apr - Jun 2018	Jul - Sep 2018	Oct - 27/112018	24 months to end of Sept 2018	24 months to 27/11/2018
Major Decisions	4	10	3	2	3	9	5	8	4	4	48	48
Major Decisions within 13 weeks	1	2	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	1	8	8
PPA, EoT or EIA Decisions	3	7	2	2	3	5	4	7	2	1	35	33
PPA, EoT or EIA Decisions within agreed time	3	7	2	2	1	2	4	7	2	1	30	28
performance measure per Q	100.00%	90.00%	66.67%	100.00%	33.33%	33.33%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	50.00%	79.17%	75.00%
total decisions	48											
within time	38											
performance measure 24 months to December 2018	**79.2%**		target is 60% for 2018									

Minors and others	Jul - Sep 2016	Oct - Dec 2016	Jan - Mar 2017	Apr - Jun 2017	Jul - Sep 2017	Oct - Dec 2017	Jan - Mar 2018	Apr - Jun 2018	Jul - Sep 2018	Oct - 27/112018	24 months to end of Sept 2018	24 months to 27/11/2018
M&O Decisions	151	109	101	137	122	148	123	150	136	93	1177	1119
M&O Decisions within 8 weeks	65	59	48	85	45	30	49	67	73	38	521	494
PPA, EoT or EIA Decisions	65	42	52	48	63	89	70	80	59	49	568	552
PPA, EoT or EIA Decisions within agreed time	58	39	51	46	46	58	58	75	52	46	483	471
performance measure per Q	81.46%	89.91%	98.02%	95.62%	74.59%	59.46%	86.99%	94.67%	91.91%	90.32%	85.30%	86.24%
decisions within time or with EoT	130	101	100	133	108	119	119	147	132	87	1089	1046
Proportion of decisions requiring EoT	43.05%	38.53%	51.49%	35.04%	51.64%	60.14%	56.91%	53.33%	43.38%	52.69%	48.26%	49.33%
Total Decisions	1177											
No within time	1004											
performance measure 24 months to December 2018	**85.30%**		target is 70% for 2018									

Note: Performance has been maintained in the 24 months to November 2018

- using the 21 day letter to outline issues early in the process
- Working efficiently - the Council uses IDOX Acolaid software to assist the processing of applications.
- Processes are clear and recorded in the office manual.
- The Enterprise part of the software is used effectively to workflow tasks between staff and allow for good management control.
- My review of the application process showed that actions followed a clear straight line path between staff with no unnecessary duplication of tasks or "hand offs" which slow the process. A good example is the allocation of applications to case officers by the application validation staff rather than handing this role to senior staff and introducing a delay whilst waiting for senior staff to review the application and allocate. (Note: Examples of senior staff involved in allocation are common elsewhere and always slow the process down.)

During my visit 9 areas emerged for future consideration. These are:

1. Public Perception and Customer Service
2. Resilience and Resources
3. Conservation Capacity
4. Council Planning Applications
5. Planning Committee
6. Smoothing Acolaid processes
7. Scheme of Delegation
8. Paperless procedures/office
9. Enforcement

Public Perception and Customer Service

The service is still feeling the effects of earlier problems handling the Rocklands application. Staff are sensitive to the level of scrutiny by some in the community and the impact of social media on their work. To combat this the team needs to:

- Be outward looking
- Be user friendly
- Develop strategies for involving customers and keeping them informed
- Continue the culture that applications are negotiated to a positive outcome
- Deliver responses within expectations
- Reduce reliance on Extensions of Time requests - currently approximately half of all non major applications require an Extension of Time request.
- Ensure decisions are made as soon as possible and not at the 8 week or 13 week date.
- Be accessible
- Avoid opportunities for complaint and
- Publicise successes.

Resilience and Resources

Staff are keenly aware of the problems in the recent past arising from vacancies in the establishment. These have now been partially addressed and management recognise the fragility of the local labour market. The team is currently has a vacant planning officer post (1 FTE). Hastings continues to develop its staff and to "grow their own"planners where possible. This has resulted in a relatively inexperienced workforce which would be assisted by the provision of informal supplementary planning guidance on a variety of topics. An example is design guidance for household applications for use by applicants and officers. There are several useful examples available online (see Swindon) and most planning authorities are happy for their work to be used by others.

Some parts of the application process rely on the skills of particular individuals (eg validation and Acolaid development). Back up resources need to be in place to cover periods of absence and to develop skills across a wider number of staff to ensure resilience for the future. Some actions to resolve this have already been implemented.

Conservation Capacity

A major barrier to improved efficiency, better working relations with council colleagues and improved public perception of the DM team is the availability of conservation advice. This is not a criticism of the Conservation Officer but the reality of having approximately 900 listed buildings and large areas of conservation Area in the Borough but only 16 hours a week resource available. Clearly the current situation is not sustainable and staff resolved to reduce the workload of the Conservation Officer by taking the following actions:

- Reduce consultation levels by not consulting on small scale applications in Conservation Areas where they are likely to have limited impact. A revised consultation matrix was agreed and will be implemented as soon as possible. Further applications could be included in the future as expertise in the planning team grows.
- Provide additional training for planning case officers
- Research/provide/adopt standing advice/good practice

The Conservation Officer will prioritise her time further to assist in the timely and effective delivery of major applications and Council projects.

Council Planning Applications

Recent events at Planning Committee have highlighted the poor team working between the various parts of the Council and the planning team. Planning is seen as a hurdle and is not involved at an early enough stage to assist effectively in delivering Council aspirations. The following actions were discussed and agreed:

- Active promotion across the Council of the role of planning (both DM and policy) emphasising its ability to facilitate development and deliver Council plans.
- Ensuring the planning voice is heard early in the development of corporate plans and objectives.
- Planning issues considered at initial cabinet discussions on development proposals.
- The planning team ensuring they are readily available to colleagues to discuss ideas and proposals even if that means other work is slightly delayed.
- Encouraging colleagues across the Council to utilise the weekly conservation surgeries so that heritage issues are discussed early in the life of a project when they can be more readily accommodated.
- Ensuring that Planning Committee and Ward Members are involved in the development of proposals need in planning permission at an early stage. This could be achieved via private briefings where members can identify issues of concern yet remain impartial and not pre-determining applications.
- The Council applicant should always be available to speak at committee as required.

Planning Committee

The Planning Committee has undergone significant change in the past year with many experienced members being replaced. New members had little or no experience of the committee prior to joining and are on a learning curve. The Committee would benefit from the following actions:

- Training members on how to make good decisions.

- Ensuring members make decisions for the good of the whole borough rather than on a ward or personal view basis.
- Providing early involvement of members in major schemes via private briefings prior to committee meetings. This works well elsewhere and ensures that members fully understand proposals and their implications when decisions asked to to make a decision on the application at the next or later meeting.
- Amending the constitution to allow a cooling off period for decisions contrary to officer advice where the negative implications for the Council could be significant. Examples of such a process can be found at Colchester Borough Council and the London Borough of Havering. (Links to these have already been provided.)
- Reviewing the role of Chairman's Briefing. In most Councils the briefing session is used to ensure the smooth running of the Committee and happens after the agenda is published. It should not be the Chairman's role to be reviewing or vetting officer reports before publication. Current practice introduces delays and unnecessary double handling of reports. Similarly the role of the legal team in report preparation should be reviewed and their involvement limited to applications which include S106 agreements or have specific legal implications.
- Stopping printing application plans for members of the committee is unnecessary, given the access to plans online through Public Access and mod.gov.

A further review of the effectiveness of the committee to test the above conclusions further might well be beneficial. Such reviews can be arranged through the Planning Advisory Service.

Smoothing Acolaid processes

Staff requested the following modifications to Acolaid to assist working practices.

- Provision of standard paragraphs for reports - This work was completed whilst I was on site and is active.
- A review of standard conditions to update them and to combine conditions with their reasons to simplify report and decision notice preparation.
- Review of report templates to simplify and speed the process. Model checklist templates have been provided.

Scheme of Delegation

The Council Scheme of delegation is clear, effective and does not result in large agendas for the Planning Committee. The delegation from the Assistant Director to the Planning Services Manager (PSM) and from PSM to Principal Officers is also clear and documented. Consideration should however be given to

- how far down the team signing responsibilities could be delegated.
- Principal Officers signing off simple applications individually (ie without reference to a colleague) even where there are objections .

Paperless Procedures/office

Whilst current procedures are effective, the team would benefit from refining working practices further to reduce paper and file handling. This is likely to require additional expenditure on IT to

enable applications to be viewed electronically on site and the provision of some larger screens in the room for viewing bigger applications

The provision of automated emails to alert members of new applications, decisions, Committee reports and appeals should be explored. This should be possible from Public Access but will need to be done with members consent to avoid GPDR issues.

Enforcement

Enforcement was not considered in detail but staff have raised concerns about the effectiveness of the Dangerous Structures service provided by Building Control and the limits levels of expertise of enforcement staff to provide the service. Managers should review this further.

Conclusion

There are many enthusiastic staff in the DM team and a willingness to engage and deliver a good service to its customers. I hope you find the above suggestions helpful and use the ideas to take the service forward. If you require any further advice or assistance please do contact me.

Martin Vink