

Special Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday, 5 February 2014

Present: Councillor Steve Holgate (Chair), Councillor Mark Perks (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Doreen Dickinson, Graham Dunn, Robert Finnamore, Hasina Khan, Keith Iddon, Roy Lees, Marion Lowe, Geoffrey Russell and Kim Snape

Also in attendance

Councillors: Councillors Paul Leadbetter and Dennis Edgerley (Executive Member for Planning and LDF)

Officers: Lesley-Ann Fenton (Director of Partnerships, Planning and Policy), Jennifer Moore (Head of Planning) and Dianne Scambler (Democratic and Member Services Officer)

14.OS.74 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Julia Berry, Mick Muncaster and Rosie Russell.

14.OS.75 DECLARATIONS OF ANY INTERESTS

There were no declarations of any interests.

14.OS.76 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

No public questions had been received.

14.OS.77 CONSIDERATION OF THE REQUEST TO CALL IN AN EXECUTIVE MEMBER DECISION

Members were advised of a request submitted by Councillor Paul Leadbetter for the call in of a decision made by the Executive Member for Planning and LDF on 22 January, for the cessation of notification letters to contributors (those who comment on applications)

The Call in request was on the grounds that the removal of the current practice would reduce the effectiveness of communication between the Council and its stakeholders and that by removing this service the Council is doing less, not more, towards meeting the needs of local residents.

The Call in procedure allows for consideration of the request by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. If the Committee chose to call in the decision it would be reconsidered by the Executive Member for Planning and LDF. If the Committee did not accept the call in, there would be no further action taken.

Councillor Leadbetter attended the meeting to speak in support of his request. He drew Members attention to the Councils' Corporate Strategy, with particular reference to the statement that we are an ambitious Council that does more to meet the needs of the residents and local area by being a Council that consults and engages with residents.

Councillor Leadbetter commented, that at a time when the council is measuring an increase in dissatisfaction in the way it deals with its public, any reduction in communication, with those who contact the council, would increase the level of dissatisfaction and that it was only proper and good practice to reply to those that had taken their time to contribute, advising them of the outcome.

The requirement for written notification would, as stated in the decision notification reduce over time as contributors increased their use of e-channels, resulting in a natural reduction of costs. However, the Council needed to recognise that at present there is still a small percentage of residents who do not have access to internet facilities and as such alternative means are still required.

Councillor Dennis Edgerley, Executive Member for Planning and LDF attended the meeting to explain his reasoning for approval of the decision for the cessation of the notification letters. Councillors Edgerley provided the Committee with examples of the letters that were currently sent out informing people of the decisions made. Given that the letter only served to give the contributor a simple permitted or refusal status for the planning application, he questioned the significance of the letter as they would probably already be aware of this.

Following a review of procedures within the service, it had been considered that it was expedient to cease the notification procedure element of the process in favour of investing more resources in to those processes that took place at the beginning of the process. By providing more information on the whole process at the neighbour notification stage, residents would be better informed throughout, resulting in an improved service and better value for money. Contributors receive information on how and where to view the plans and applications and how they can make comments and advise on proposals.

Benchmarking had demonstrated that most other Councils in Lancashire had taken the same approach with little impact on service delivery and reputation. Councillor Edgerley commented that he was all in favour of communication but that it needed to be relevant and appropriate.

Whilst understanding that the Council needed to make savings across all of its services and accepting that the review of procedures had prompted a change into how processes were carried out and why, Members still considered that there was a sector of the public that either did not have access to the electronic processes available and they questioned whether those people would become disengaged with the planning process and the Council.

Some Members also shared a view that the decision notice letter had some value for those people that were in support of an application and the decision was to approve or that it would help to alleviate neighbour anxiety about the outcome.

Members were informed that the proposal was in support of the move towards greater use of echannels and that whilst it was acknowledged that some contributors may not have access to the Council's website to monitor the progress of an application, the neighbour notification letter would clearly state that residents could contact the Council by telephone to find out the status of an application.

It was suggested that a review of the letter content may be more appropriate than ceasing to send out the letter altogether. In response, Members were informed that this would have no resource implications for the service particularly if individual tailored responses were to be created for each application given the high number of applications handled by the service. Similarly, a revision to the letter which included an invitation to contact the Council to discuss the application decision in detail, with officers, would have an impact on service delivery performance if this offer was regularly exercised. The report including the reasons behind the decision have recently been made available on the Council's website and neighbour notification letters would make reference to this facility. Some Members however remained of the view that it was important that all the contributors were informed of the decision individually rather than being directed to the Council's website.

Members of the Committee debated the representations received by all parties at the meeting and subsequently **RESOLVED (6-5) That the request to call in the**

decision be accepted and that the Executive Member for Planning and the LDF be asked to reconsider the decision in the light of the discussion by Members at the meeting.

Chair