

REVIEW OF THE DUTY OFFICER SYSTEM

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report provides details of a review of the duty officer system operated in the planning reception in the Council's Rochford offices. The review was requested by the Review Committee following a review of the delivery of the planning enforcement service (Minute 104(2)/07). The report also takes into account the recommendations of the Access to Services Review and the work being undertaken by Tribal in that respect.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 The Review Committee was concerned that the duty officer cover arrangements may have an undue impact on the delivery of the enforcement service and concluded that it would be appropriate to consider whether alternative arrangements might be introduced, including the removal of the current requirement for enforcement officers to take part in the duty cover system.
- 2.2 At the time of the review, of the three permanent members of the enforcement team taking part in the duty officer rota, two were also on day release studies pursuing masters in planning courses. It was these two officers in particular that the Review Committee noted had less time remaining available to tackle enforcement casework. A total of nine planning officers are, subject to leave, available to provide advice as duty officers to customers visiting the planning reception.
- 2.3 The delivery of planning advice to customers through the duty officer system cannot be considered in isolation from the work that is being carried out by Tribal to review the way the Council delivers its services to residents. Tribal found during the course of their research that, whilst the Council receives a high level of customer satisfaction, we resolve relatively few customer enquiries at first point of contact, we lose around 12% of calls, and transfer a number of callers before they reach the correct destination; this experience is also reflected in the feedback from the focus groups. There is also a view from our residents that extended operating hours would be welcomed.
- 2.4 The duty officer system provides direct access for customers who want planning advice and is therefore one of the key frontline services offered by the council; it is therefore important that the arrangements for delivery are carefully considered within the wider Access to Services context.
- 2.5 To meet increasing customer expectations Tribal identified that we need to consolidate how we deal with customers to enable us to answer more questions on first contact. They also recommended that our system management of customer records be developed so that we maintain a joined up view of each household/resident that identifies any special needs and also

enables us or the customer to track service requests. We also need to further develop our website as it is a cost effective way for us to deliver services that can release resource to the frontline for those residents who need personal contact. The delivery of advice through the duty officer system is resource intensive and takes staff in both development control and planning enforcement away from their cases; it is therefore essential that the first line approaches for customers through the telephones and our website are handled to reduce the requirement for customers to visit our offices to speak with a planning officer.

3 THE DUTY OFFICER SYSTEM – ITS PURPOSE

- 3.1 The planning system in England and Wales is complex due to its legal basis (split between many Acts, Statutory Instruments and Circulars), tiers of policy and guidance, and the interpretation of case law, which requires careful professional consideration, assessment and judgment.
- 3.2 For this reason Rochford, in delivering its service to its residents, provides open access to a professional planner in the office by phone, email or in person, etc. This 'Duty Officer' service is available to the public and professionals alike to deal with the queries and planning issues that are beyond the competence of the administration staff. Most local planning authorities provide easy access to planning officers for advice, though there are variations – some authorities require, for example, an appointment to be made.
- 3.3 The Duty Officer role is shared by all the planning officers in the Development Control and Enforcement teams. At times, officer(s) in Planning Policy have also taken part but, with the complexity of plan making, that support was withdrawn some time ago. These officers can also get rather distant from the day to day development control issues on which the duty officer advises, and must also deal with the increasing number of enquiries concerning planning policy, which are not answered by the duty officer.
- 3.4 Duty officer coverage has generally been provided from 0800 to 1730 Monday to Thursday and to 1700 on Fridays. This includes providing lunchtime cover and half an hour morning and evening beyond the opening of the reception doors to the public.

4 SURVEY OF ESSEX AUTHORITIES

- 4.1 The Essex Authorities were asked if and how they provided the service to their residents on the issues beyond the competence of the administrative staff.
- 4.2 Seven Essex Authorities responded to the request, six being District/Borough Local Planning Authorities, the seventh being Essex County Council who provided separate responses from Planning & Transportation and from

Highways. All but one of the responding authorities either operates or is in the process of reintroducing (three of the total) a duty officer system. These three (Colchester, Thurrock and Basildon) all explain that this has been found to be necessary for those enquiries that cannot be dealt with by their customer contact centre staff. All seem to provide the service throughout the day. The one authority that does not have a duty system provides a basic service using planning technicians, else enquirers must write in to get a view on proposals for development.

5 TRIAL AJUSTMENT TO DUTY OFFICER HOURS

- 5.1 This review coincided with periods of staff voids in development control, which placed a significant burden on a smaller number of officers to deliver the duty officer system. As a result, in order to seek to manage the limited staff resources effectively, it was decided to undertake a trial change to the duty officer service to provide cover for a maximum of 3.5 days per week, including maintaining a continuous service from 12 to 2pm to cover the busier lunch time period.
- 5.2 This change has had the advantage of reducing the burden of provision to the staff in post to no more than one half day session and one lunch time a week. The key findings from the trial were:-
- Generally the reduced service was accepted by the public.
 - The next duty period after a closed slot has been found to be busier than normal and thus more disruptive to casework.
 - On about 20-25 occasions, the duty officer service was delivered without a nominated officer (as a result of leave, site visits, etc.), but this arrangement was found within the office not to be a practicable approach.

6 DEVELOPMENT CONTROL AND ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS

- 6.1 Providing planning advice to the public is appropriate to the roles of all the nine planning officers in the Enforcement and two Development Control teams. Obviously the less experienced officers, starting out as assistant planners direct from college with a first degree, require a learning/transition period before they are able to offer such advice. But whether they are part of an enforcement team or development control team this provides valuable knowledge and experience, strengthening their competence as professional planners.
- 6.2 Of the nine posts providing the duty officer cover, the 3 team leaders are likely always to be fully qualified officers. The remaining 6 posts, over time, may all potentially be on day release dependent on the experience and qualifications of the incumbents. However, it is unlikely that all 6 will be on such courses at the same time.

- 6.3 At the time, the Review Committee noted the two assistant planners in Enforcement were on day release courses, and that there were also two assistants on similar courses in one of the Development Control teams. The third team at that time had no officers on day release.
- 6.4 Enforcement Officers, as much as Development Control Officers, deal in detail with general planning law and the related regulations, etc. Therefore, being part of the duty officer system helps maintain their wider planning expertise and knowledge.
- 6.5 The up to date position is that the four officers then on day release have now finished their courses. Three of these officers remain with Rochford, having gained career advancement. So of the two teams who had officers on day release none are now so. In the third team, one assistant planner is due to start day release studies in the autumn and recruitment to one vacancy in the Enforcement Team may result in a second post with day release studies being required.
- 6.6 Recruitment and career advancement means that the number of officers on day release at any one time from the three teams involved is cyclical. The current position is favourable, with none at present on day release, but with one officer due to start a course in the autumn.
- 6.7 Nine officers taking part in the Duty Officer system gives a viable number, particularly taking account of leave and other circumstances, to cover the ten half day sessions required to give full week coverage. The greater number of officers involved, the better the resilience in being able to provide the service.
- 6.8 Ideally each officer would do one half a day session per week, this could be achieved by permanently dropping one of the least busy half day sessions. Alternatively, full coverage can be achieved by the officers every ninth week doing two sessions – overall this is considered not to be too burdensome whilst maintaining a full offer of this service to our customers.

7 DISCUSSION

- 7.1 The tried and tested arrangement for the operation of the duty officer system has been for a nominated officer to be available for a morning or afternoon each week to deal primarily with visitors to the planning reception,, but also, where required, to answer telephone enquiries. It is considered that this arrangement should continue, but that there is merit in professional agents being guided towards appointments as proposed by the Access to Services Review.
- 7.2 It is, though, important that we consider the availability of free access to a planning officer against one of the key principles of the Access to Services Review, namely that the majority of enquiries be dealt with at first point of contact. Under the current arrangements, if calls are made to the advertised

planning telephone number or email address, then the planning administration staff will be able to deal with enquiries in this way. If, however, calls are received on our main switchboard number then it will be necessary for calls to be transferred. There, we need to examine options under the current structure to ensure that the planning number is widely publicised to reduce the likelihood of the main reception being the first contact point and to ensure, where this is the case, that calls are correctly re-routed to planning administration. In the longer term, the Access to Services Strategy may provide other solutions to deal with first point of contact enquiries.

- 7.3 It is essential that we use our website to provide appropriate information about the planning system that may also reduce the need for telephone calls, emails or visits in the first instance. The planning section of our website provides much information and guidance, allows the download of application forms, viewing of planning applications, and so on. We will continue to develop the facilities and information available on the website to ensure that we provide as comprehensive a range of facilities as possible.
- 7.4 In the event of the introduction of charges for pre-application advice (an issue many authorities are contemplating), then the duty officer protocol would need to be revisited, and it may be that the freely available access to a duty officer would not be appropriate for professional agents.
- 7.5 The duty officer system is reasonably flexible and, noting the findings of the Access to Services Review, it is likely that it would be possible to offer some extended hours. However, at this stage any move to extended hours would need to be considered within the wider context of the delivery of our services and no decision should be taken about planning in isolation.
- 7.6 At present, visitors to our offices who require information about planning must visit a separate reception area. This means that any visitor who wants information about other matters must then walk to the main reception after they have visited planning. This issue was recognised as being less than ideal in the Access to Services Review. However, in terms of the immediate issue of ensuring that visitors can speak to a planning officer, if required, then it is considered the existing arrangements should, for the moment, continue.

8 CONCLUSION

- 8.1 The Authority should continue to provide the “duty officer” system with full coverage each week from 0800-1730 (1700 on Fridays). To do so, the nine planning officers in Development Control and Enforcement would need to continue to subscribe to it. If staff difficulties occur in the future, it would be necessary to consider a reduction in the service, as appropriate, until resources are again available, balancing the need to process applications and deal with enforcement cases against the requirements of the public to obtain easy access to advice and guidance.

- 8.2 It is proposed to prepare a protocol for publication identifying clearly the enquiries to be dealt with by the duty officer, ie the general enquiry calls, as opposed to those enquires better dealt with by the case officer (enforcement or development control) and administrative team. It will also be important to examine options for ensuring that the first point of contact for planning enquiries is the planning administration section. This should ensure that as many enquiries as possible can be dealt with immediately. The arrangements for dealing with all telephone contacts to the Council may alter in the future as a result of the Access to Services Review, but for now it is essential that we ensure planning contact details are easily available to residents to provide a first point of contact for planning enquiries.
- 8.3 It is important that we continue to look for opportunities to develop the information and facilities offered about planning on our website to ensure that residents can obtain the information they require without needing to call, email or visit our offices.

9 RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 The risk implications concerning this service relate directly to the customers' understanding of the environmental context of the planning process and the resource implications in the provision of the service. This affects the operation of the Planning Department, which is regulatory, potentially its reputation and the way it provides information to third parties.

10 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 Providing this service to our customers helps them understand and appreciate planning controls and the objectives of good design and other environmental policies.

11 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 The objective is to continue to provide this offer to our customers whilst not being too burdensome on the planning officers involved. The greater number of officers providing this service, the less burdensome it is individually.

12 RECOMMENDATION

- 12.1 It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES**

That the duty officer service be delivered as set out in the report, with any future changes considered corporately within the context of the continuing access to services work.

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Background Papers:-

None

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