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The Improvement Plan, with further amendment, has the potential to deliver the improvements desired for the Planning Service.

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Summary

1. Powys County Council (the Council) is seeking to develop an efficient Planning Service (the Service).
2. The 2006 Joint Risk Assessment identified two of the planning services, Development Control (DC) and Planning Enforcement, as 'high' risk areas and appropriate for process re-engineering.
3. The Service has been affected by recent Council re-structuring and proposals for the modernisation of the Service are now being put in place. This project is one of the Council's Aim High Projects and the Recovery Plan for the Service has been approved by the Aim High Board.
4. In order to assess the appropriateness of the proposals to modernise the Service this review sought to answer the question: 'will the Recovery Plan deliver the improvements desired for the Service?'
5. We have concluded that the Improvement Plan, with further amendment, has the potential to deliver the improvements desired for the Service. However, further improvement will be delivered if the remaining significant issues are properly addressed. These include the need for greater clarity in what the Council is trying to achieve, addressing the still significant capacity problems facing the Service and further developing the Council's decision-making process.

Recommendations

6. Our recommendations are as follows:

R1	The Council should invite the new Development Control Manager, as one of his first priorities, to reassess the organisational arrangements currently being proposed and make his own recommendations as to how he feels a 'one-service' approach can best be delivered.
R2	Within the next three months the Council should ensure that a shortlist of measurable outcome-focused objectives is produced for the Service and these should be included within the Service's next Business Plan.
R3	Within the next six months the Council should establish whether capacity issues are likely to affect the targets they have set for service improvement and make the necessary adjustments if they find this to be the case.
R4	Within the next three months the Council should complete its review of the Planning Committee structure having regard to the issues of public confidence and service efficiency raised in this report. The review should give consideration to the establishment of one Planning Committee of well-trained members with meetings rotating between different venues.

Full implementation of the current Improvement Plan will deliver significant improvements if the risks are successfully managed

7. The Recovery Plan 'Meeting the Challenges' if fully implemented, intends to provide a Service that will be back in the top quartile of Welsh local planning authorities by January 2009. It will be a Service where:
 - Planning Policy genuinely shapes events with up-to-date policy and a vision that flows from the Community Strategy and the Corporate Plan;
 - DC is efficient, proactive and user-focused; and
 - Built Heritage identifies and protects assets whilst facilitating regeneration.
8. This will be achieved by moving away from delivery on a Shire basis and by:
 - appointing a County-wide DC Manager;
 - refining the three Shire DC teams to create; a north team, a south team and a team to deal with major applications (north and south), enforcement and special planning services;
 - appointing a new Planning Policy Officer;
 - appointing a Planning Enforcement Monitoring Officer;
 - managing planning technicians as a County-wide resource;
 - transferring administrative staff from the Directorate Team into Business Performance Units; and
 - implementing a three-phased plan to upgrade the Service's IT system.
9. Implementation of the proposals will involve increasing the review budget for the Service by £100,000 per annum and substantial investment in the IT system.
10. There will be significant improvement in the Service if these proposals are properly delivered. However, for these to occur the Council will need to manage effectively the risks that will impact on their successful delivery. We list the more significant ones below:
 - The management of the DC Section as 'one service' rather than three Shire services could be undermined by retaining two Shire services and by predetermining the structure and responsibilities of the staff in the Section before a new manager has been appointed. As a new DC Manager has now been appointed and it would be appropriate to invite him to reassess what has been proposed and make his own recommendations as to how he feels a 'one-service' approach can best be delivered.
 - There are management issues associated with capability and staff morale that need to be tackled.
 - Planning staff are concerned that the administrative staff will not provide the same level of support after they are transferred into the new Business Support Unit (BSU). However, the BSU has agreed to fund reserve posts which would otherwise have had to be deleted. Therefore the level of resource available, whilst not increasing, should not decline.

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- The IT changes proposed are significant and will require tight control on their project management and funding and a significant commitment from staff in introducing, testing and learning how to operate the new systems. Achieving this whilst delivering significant improvements in the speed of determining planning applications is a big challenge.
 - Local planning authorities in Wales are finding it difficult to keep and attract good-quality staff. Powys is no exception to this, although it is encouraging that a new DC Manager has recently been appointed following external advert.

Further improvement will be delivered if the remaining significant issues are properly addressed

11. The remaining significant issues are the need for greater clarity in what the Council is trying to achieve, addressing the still significant capacity problems facing the Service and further developing the Council's decision-making processes.

There is a need for greater clarity in what the Council is trying to achieve

12. The overall Service objective referred to above, of being in the top 25 per cent of Welsh local planning authorities by January 2009, is not sufficiently clear.
13. The Improvement Plan contains a vision, critical areas, quality critical factors, quality outcomes, objectives, and finally performance indicators. There are also Service Business Plans. Taken as a whole there is a lot of information to assess the performance of the Service against but the way the information is presented illustrates a lack of understanding of the difference between what specifically the Service is trying to achieve and how the Service intends to do this. The end result is a confusing picture of what precisely the Service will deliver by January 2009.
14. It will help communication and understanding if a shortlist of measurable outcome-focused objectives is produced.

There are still significant capacity problems facing the Service

15. Funding is not yet committed for one of the two new planning policy officers. The Service intends to bid for this post prior to the 2008-2009 budget being finalised. The Recovery Plan proposes that specialist advice will be procured externally as and when needed but no additional budget has been provided for this.
16. Although planning enforcement is gaining a Monitoring Officer post this is replacing an Enforcement Officer post which was at a higher grade.
17. The Recovery Plan does not include any proposals to address the uncertainty for those staff on temporary contracts in the Built Heritage Service. Also the Recovery Plan does not secure the future of the temporary Planning Liaison Officer post which will be lost when grant funding ceases.

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18. Notwithstanding the £100,000 increase in the revenue budget provided for the Planning Service in 2007-2008, the Service is operating within the context of a declining budget, which supports three separate office locations. In 2001-2002 the net expenditure budget for the Service was £1,149,170 and this decreased to £1,015,549 in 2006-2007, a decrease of £133,621 over the four years. This was during a period when the work load increased significantly and £434,000 of the planning application fee income was absorbed corporately by the service income target being increased. Similarly £52,700 income from search enquiries has been lost to the Service.
19. Finally, the overall budget does not compare favourably with some other rural planning authorities in Wales. Comparative information collated by the Planning Officers' Society in Wales in 2005-2006 is given below:
- In terms of gross expenditure per planning application decision, Powys spent £711. Six of the 10 rural local planning authorities in Wales spent more. The highest was £1,067 and the lowest was £685. This is below average expenditure which is spread across three delivery centres and provides evidence to suggest that the Service is under funded in comparison to other rural planning authorities in Wales. Although it may also suggest that it is more efficient if it can be shown that it is performing better than these authorities.
 - In terms of the gross expenditure on planning policy Powys spent £5.40 per head of population in 2005-2006. Three of the 10 rural local planning authorities spent more; the highest being £10.50 and the lowest being £3.40. Again this resource is spread around the County.
20. In the light of the above the Council should review whether capacity issues are likely to affect the targets they have set for service improvement.

The decision-making process needs further development

21. The scheme of delegation to officers was extended to reflect good practice in autumn 2006 and a code of conduct and site visit protocol was also agreed. These procedures are due to be reviewed in autumn 2007.
22. The Council operates three Shire Planning Subcommittees and a County Planning Committee. This means that there can be in the order of 40 committees a year. In November 2006 a joint meeting of two scrutiny committees agreed that a review of the existing planning committee structure should be undertaken with all options being considered. A small working group of members was set up to do this. No changes have been put forward so far.

23. We have reported previously on the operation of the Planning Committees in Powys, in a public interest report and in inspection reports and these reports have referred to 'the poor quality of member decision making' so we discussed this issue with officers and councillors and attended the Brecknockshire Planning Subcommittee on 11 July to see whether the operation of the Planning Committees had improved. Our observations are given below:

- Although guidance has been produced, there were no guidance notes available at the Brecknockshire Planning Subcommittee meeting for the public or for councillors on the operation of the Subcommittee and the procedures for public speaking. Nevertheless the public interface and public speaking system seem to be working well, largely due to the efforts of an officer who was meeting members of the public as they arrived.
- Members are receiving full and well-organised reports which they can access electronically during the Committee. Plans and photographs are also available electronically and were displayed on a screen in the Brecon committee room.
- The agendas are generally short; in the case of the Brecknockshire meeting only five substantive items were on the agenda and only three at the previous meeting in June.
- The officer at Brecknockshire gave full and clear presentations on each application often repeating what was already contained in the agenda papers.
- Procedural mechanisms are in place to ensure that councillors distinguish between their role as a ward member and as a member of the Planning Sub Committee. However, the Brecknockshire meeting illustrated that there are still issues about how decisions are taken that need to be addressed.

We observed:

- poor chairmanship with no leadership, direction or summing up being offered and members were allowed to speak repeatedly on the same issue;
- some members of the subcommittee either not understanding or not wishing to accept the role that they are required to play in considering only planning matters;
- some members not appreciating what are and are not material planning considerations;
- the subcommittee taking a vote against both planning and legal officers' advice without any material planning reason for doing so;
- one member appreciating this asking to change her vote after the decision had been taken;
- taking a break in the proceedings whilst legal advice was sought on whether the vote could be taken again; and
- voting on what appeared to be a political group basis.

24. These observations suggest to us the need for further development in the decision-making process and we are concerned to learn from some councillors and officers that some councillors wish to revert to the previous arrangements for delegating decisions to officers and the operation of Shire Subcommittees.

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25. Reducing the extent of delegation to officers and servicing a large number of committees will reduce the time officers have available to meet service delivery targets and this will impact on the speed of determining applications and customer satisfaction.
 26. Having Shire Subcommittees with all ward members attending as voting members can give the impression that decisions are not being taken solely on the planning merits of the case. This can undermine public confidence in the decision-making process. It is recognised that the ward perspective needs to be presented and that meetings need to be held close to the sites being discussed to make it easier for the public to attend but the proposed review of the committee structure referred to earlier should consider how these requirements can be met without all ward members having a decision-making role on the committees. One way of doing this would be for the Council to have just one Planning Committee for the whole of Powys of say 15 well-trained members and to rotate the meetings at different venues within the County. Ward members could be invited to speak if they wished but would not be voting members.



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