



# WNDC Board Report

## Report by Director of Planning Services

Paper Reference: 2012-03-08-01

Agenda Item: 8

20 March 2012

**Subject:** Planning Service Review 2006 - 2012

**Advice:** That the Board:

1. Recognise and endorse the achievements of the Planning Service of the Corporation over its 6 year existence.

Key Points:

- Creation of new Planning Service to deliver planning function in 2006
- Delivered 6000 plus housing units
- Delivered up to potentially 30,000 jobs
- Secured over £50.0m through planning legal agreements
- Developed positive working relationships with partners/stakeholders/local communities
- Officers delivered high quality and professional service

## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 March 31st 2012 sees the return of the remaining planning powers to the respective local planning authorities and the dispersal of the planning team. The Planning Service was established at the same time as the Corporation became an entity in April 2006. The types of development the Planning Service were initially responsible for are set out in The West Northamptonshire Development Corporation (Planning Functions) Order 2006. This identified two geographical areas, the 'central planning functions area' which related to Northampton only and the 'outer planning functions area' which related to the remainder of the Urban Development Area (UDA) in Northampton, Daventry and Towcester.
- 1.2 From 1st April 2011 this position changed with the partial return of planning powers for small scale development in the central planning functions area to Northampton Borough Council leaving the Corporation responsible for large scale, strategic development only, across the whole of the UDA.
- 1.3 The creation of the Planning Service initially envisaged service level agreements being entered into with the respective local authorities being managed by a small number of senior planning officers employed by the Corporation. It soon became evident this working arrangement was not going to deliver the level and quality of service the Corporation was set up to achieve. It was decided to bring the delivery of the Planning Service as a whole within and directly under the control of the Corporation and this was fully operational by early 2007.

## **2. Performance**

- 2.1 The core role of the Planning Service has been to determine planning applications submitted pursuant to the development thresholds set out in the two aforementioned Orders. Appendix A displays the total number of applications determined over the six years by showing the total number for each year and breaking them down into the number approved and refused and the proportion that were 'major' in scale and those that were 'minor or other'. For example in 2007/8 the total number of applications received was 167. Of these 152 were approved and 15

refused and further, of the 167, 34 were major and 133 minor or other. It is of note that of the total of the 95 applications refused only 23 went appeal and of these 74% were dismissed.

- 2.2 The total number of applications determined over the 6 years is 739 although it is intended that an additional 10 will be granted planning permission before the end of March. It is evident that the majority of these decisions, 87%, were approvals which is indicative of the pro-active approach planning officers have promoted with regard to pre-application discussions and which has been welcomed by developers and their agents/consultants alike. This has provided the opportunity to identify with key stakeholders the major issues to be addressed arising from proposed developments so as to enable an expeditious determination of the formal planning applications once submitted.
- 2.3 Over the 6 years the main thrust of the Planning Service has been to deliver housing growth and employment generating development in the UDA in response to West Northamptonshire being identified as a growth area. This time period has coincided with one of the most severe economic down-turns the country has experienced which has had a significantly detrimental impact on the development industry, in particular house building. Notwithstanding this, planning approval has been granted for in excess of 6,000 units, with a further 6,000 plus being the subject of applications that have been significantly progressed by officers but will be returned to the respective local planning authorities for final determination as a result of the return of the remaining planning powers at the end of March 2012. This is considered to be a notable success in such challenging economic times.
- 2.4 The delivery of employment generating development has also had a positive outcome. Nearly 2.0m sq m. of floorspace has been granted planning permission, much of which has been delivered on the ground and has the capacity to create in the region of 30,000 jobs.
- 2.5 An integral part of the process of delivering these planning permissions has been the publication and application of a number of key and innovative documents. These include Planning Principles which early on set out the approach to be adopted in delivering the planning service. This was followed by three further publications, the

Design Code Manual, the Sustainability Manual and, of particular importance, the Planning Obligation Strategy (POS).

- 2.6 The POS has been applied, contentiously at times, to secure financial contributions through the signing of planning legal agreements under Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. In excess of £50.0m has been secured through such agreements with the aim of securing funding to assist with the delivery of the necessary infrastructure to facilitate the growth identified for the UDA. However some monies have also been secured and contributed towards local community projects in the UDA. Overall this scale of monies is a significant achievement when set against the background of the financial difficulties the development industry is facing at the present time.

### **3. Planning Service Legacy**

- 3.1 The overriding factor in seeking to deliver planning approvals for what have been in the main large scale, politically charged, contentious schemes has been the development of positive working relationships with the other local authorities and Town and Parish councils that make up the UDA, key stakeholders such as the Highways Agency and Environment Agency and the local communities.
- 3.2 When the Corporation was set up there was uncertainty and suspicion as to what the planning role was to encompass and how it would operate. There was a feeling decisions would be made on an autocratic basis without due regard to the views of the local authorities, the Town and Parish councils, and the local community.
- 3.3 In the event and despite the inevitable range of views on certain, contentious proposals, the supremely professional manner of the WNDC team allowed them to earn the respect of fellow professionals, applicants and developers. All interested parties were given a 'voice' and it was evident in reaching decisions that views were properly taken into account, whatever the outcome.
- 3.4 The lasting legacy of the Planning Service should best be assessed by those external bodies and individuals who have engaged with and whose initial position was one of concern and suspicion but now recognise it has been a highly professional organisation which actively encouraged engagement with all interested parties at all

stages of the process to enable fully reasoned decisions to be reached. It is considered that the Planning Service has achieved this and should be commended accordingly.

#### 4. Appendix

##### Appendix A – Planning Overview – final audit