

Feedback on Agents and developers forum on 3rd July 2009

The event took place in the afternoon and invited agents and developers for lunch at the Design exchange to be followed by an afternoon of presentations and discussions on the Bradford Planning Service and related matters

Attendance was excellent with the event being oversubscribed in the end. 50 attended from a whole range of organisations ranging from designers and plan drawers to national house builders and planning consultancies.

The event was introduced by Julian Jackson – Assistant Director Planning and Councillor Anne Hawkesworth the portfolio holder for Environment and Culture. It was introduced as an opportunity to start a positive dialogue between the Council and its key customers.

The event started with an integrated presentation on achieving high quality design in the district from Andrew Marshall, Martin van Zeller and John Hogg. The presentation concentrated on the challenges that had to be met by Bradford in the next few years and the key role high quality design has to play. Martin talked about what good practice the Council had in place and John discussed the way in which the Council are willing to help more in advising developers and agents on schemes in the natural and built environment.

The audience asked questions about how well resourced The Planning Service were in architectural advice. It was explained that whilst Martin van Zeller has been a key contact as Design Enabler there are resources across not only Planning but across the Regeneration Department that will be brought together to assist in the future.

Whilst agents and developers were encouraged by the Council's approach there was concern that customers were unable to contact planning officers. There was a feeling that when contact was better then progress was quicker.

In relation to the Urban Design strategy for the district there was a comment that the Council should not miss the opportunity to produce planning briefs with a finer detail that ultimately produce successfully planned places.

A presentation was made by Alan Camm of Communities and Local Government on the Planning Portal and on-line applications.

The presentation was received well but there were questions about problems experienced in loading large drawings and payment. Adrian Walker from the Council confirmed that he could give guidance on how large files could be submitted.

Peter Bridgman, Development Manager, gave a presentation on the new Development Team approach for Major applications which included an outline of new internal arrangements for reviewing major pre-application proposals at fortnightly meetings.

Peter explained the benefits of the system and how it would be 'frontloading' the process ensuring all issues have been properly considered in an integrated way before the planning application is submitted. The system provides greater certainty for developers earlier in the process and allows the subsequent planning application to be determined within the 13 week timescale. The system has been in operation for the last three months and is working well. The system is free of charge at present. There was a discussion around charging for this service in the future to ensure that it can be adequately resourced.

Agents and developers in the audience were positive about the new initiative and the opportunity for it to address issues of consistency of approach. However, it was clear that they would also like to see improved pre-application procedures introduced for smaller scale applications as well including Householder proposals.

The need for engagement with Members on major and strategically important schemes was also raised which is acknowledged and the new system will also seek to address.

Jenny Seaman, Service Improvement Manager informed the audience that the Service would be asking for customer views on the Service particularly around access to the Service. It is hoped that the survey will go out in August.

Julian Jackson then opened out the meeting into a general feed back session.

It was made clear by the audience that they had found the Forum useful and would like to see them held every three months rather than every six months.

Questions were raised around existing staff resources being adequate to deliver new initiatives such as the new major application procedures. The audience expressed their willingness to being supportive of the need for a well resourced Planning Service when the economic climate starts to improve.

Agents and Developers expressed concern about the level of service they had received from certain areas of the service. However the over riding difficulty that the forum experienced was not being able to make contact with Planning Officers, usually due to the Contact Centre. Julian Jackson explained that general access to the service as a whole was a priority for improvement.

The Forum was asked what subjects they would like to have discussed next time. The Local Development Framework was suggested as a key item for discussion. Alan Camm offered to report on legislation consultations from CLG currently taking place including the latest on the Killian Pretty Review.

A further briefing on pre-application charges was requested and how that may fit in with the use of Planning Performance Agreements for dealing with major development proposals. The next meeting will take place in October.