

THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL

PLANNING, ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

21 January 2009

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| Agenda Item | 6 |
| Report No | PED 3/07 |

E-PLANNING – ELECTRONIC PROCESSING CENTRE

Report by Director of Planning & Development

SUMMARY

This report sets out the background to and recommendations for the staffing levels of an electronic processing centre which is required for the implementation of e-planning scheduled for late April 2009.

1. Introduction

1.1 Members will recall from previous reports to PED Committee that it was the intention to create an Electronic Processing Centre (EPC) as part of the implementation of e-Planning. This would comprise a team of staff who would receive on-line planning applications via the Scottish Government's Portal, as well as hard copy applications by post direct or those handed in to Area Offices or Service Points. These applications would then be –

- Checked for the correct fee payment, registered, acknowledged and entered into UNI-form (our case management system)
- Validation process completed
- Hard copy applications and plans scanned to create electronic documents
- All documents indexed in a Document Management System,(DMS) with personnel details redacted (i.e. blocked out) prior to publication on the Council's e-Planning web site, and
- Statutory consultation requests issued
- Press advertisements arranged as required
- Finally the application would be sent electronically to the relevant Area Office to be allocated to a case officer for processing and determination.

1.2 This means that shortly after submitting a planning application, the applicant and/or their agent and any other interested member of the public or agency would be able to view the application and plans on the Council's e-planning web site, thus negating the need to travel to an Area Planning Office or the local Post Office, Service Point etc.

- 1.3 In the autumn of last year, the Depute Chief Executive and Director of Planning & Development agreed to consider co-locating their EPCs to explore any possible synergies and also act as a possible launch pad for a larger EPC as more Council Services embrace e-Government. The ICT Strategy approved at 3 December 2008 Resources Committee included future expansion of e-Government wherever appropriate.
- 1.4 The Finance Service already operates an EPC at Headquarters (comprising 6 staff) which handles all Council Tax and Housing Benefit applications. All documents are scanned and then distributed to staff located in 8 offices throughout Highland for processing using 'Electronic Content and Document Management' (ECDM). This has resulted in annual cashable efficiencies in excess of £200k being achieved primarily as a result of the reduction of staff required (13.65 fte), enabled by ICT.

2. Accommodation

- 2.1 Assisted by Housing & Property Services staff, a considerable number of properties were viewed and assessed throughout the inner Moray Firth Area, both those owned by the Council and also offices available on external commercial lease. While Council owned accommodation would enable the greatest efficiencies to be realised, which is particularly important given the current tight budgetary situation, unfortunately those properties viewed required considerable refurbishment with consequent financial costs as well as a delay in availability. The e-planning implementation time scale requires the P&D EPC to be up and running by end March 2009 at the latest. Therefore with the full co-operation and flexibility of both Finance and Planning & Development Services which currently share accommodation on the 1st floor of Block B at Headquarters, sufficient space has been freed up to allow both EPC Teams to be co-located there. The Finance EPC Team has already moved into this area and other P&D staff will be moving to other suitable office accommodation at Hqs by the end of January 2009 to release the full space required for the P&D EPC staff.

3. Staffing

- 3.1 After consideration of the new business processes which will be needed for the implementation of e-Planning, it has been determined that a complement of 5 electronic processors and 2 Professional Support Officers (similar to Technical Support Officers) will be required to undertake all the functions set out in section 1.1 above. One of the Professional Support Officer posts would also carry supervisory responsibility for the Planning EPC Team. From a risk management perspective e.g. maintaining service delivery of **both** Finance and P&D business activities, it is prudent to progress with one of the Professional Support Officer posts also supervising the P&D activities. In time and as the EPC expands to include other functions, it will be possible to review the situation and have only one manager/leader/supervisor. When professional planning advice is required this can be obtained from the planners based at Headquarters.
- 3.2 In creating and filling these posts, the Council's normal procedures for consultation

with staff and Unions will be followed. A report will therefore require to be submitted to the Resources Committee on 18 February outlining the details with proposed grades bearing in mind the relationship with the Finance EPC Team and also implementation of Job Evaluation.

4. Resources

- 4.1 The staffing and other costs associated with a Planning EPC Team can be met from within the existing P&D Revenue Budget in 2008/09 (given agreement to ask for a supplementary budget estimate as recommended in the Revenue Budget Monitoring report elsewhere on this agenda.) Similarly the costs in 2009/2010 can also be met from the P&D Revenue Budget provided the Council acknowledge the pressures which the Service is under on fee income because of the national economic situation.
- 4.2 Staff and other savings will be realised as a result of the creation of the EPC although the time scale will depend on the number of current P&D staff wishing to move to the EPC and vacancy management to release staff resources. Reports will be submitted to future PED Committees outlining progress with the implementation of e-Planning and the benefits (including savings) being realised.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that –

- The Committee **agree** in principle to the staffing of the Electronic Processing Centre as outlined above in section 3.1, and
- The Committee **note** that future reports will outline progress with the implementation of e-Planning and the benefits including savings, being realised.

Signature:

Designation: Director of Planning & Development

Date: 13 January 2009

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