

NORTH DEVON COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of Building Control Joint Committee held at Barum Room - Brynsworthy on Thursday, 7th July, 2022 at 9.30 am

PRESENT: Members:

Councillor Deed (Chair)

Councillors Chesterton and Tucker

Officers:

Principle Building Surveyor, North Devon Council.

Also Present:

Director of Place, Mid Devon District Council and Accountant, Mid Devon District Council.

9. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Yabsley.

10. TO APPROVE AS A CORRECT RECORD THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 12TH MAY 2022 (ATTACHED)

RESOLVED, that the minutes of the meeting held on 12th May 2022 (circulated previously) be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

11. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest announced.

12. APPOINTMENT OF VICE CHAIR FOR 2022/23.

RESOLVED that Councillor Tucker be appointed Vice Chair of the Joint Committee for the municipal year.

13. BUILDING CONTROL BUSINESS UPDATE. REPORT BY PRINCIPLE BUILDING SURVEYOR - NORTH DEVON COUNCIL (ATTACHED).

The Principle Building Surveyor for North Devon Council provided an update (circulated previously) regarding the Building Control Business update.

He advised that Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) activity reports were not currently available to publish and were not included in the report. He added that once they were available a copy would be provided for circulation. Due to the depleted resources within the service it was evident from the information that was currently available that the capacity to maintain plan checking times was diminishing with response times slipping from an average of 7 to 10 days for April and May.

While not critical at the current time, the figures represented the significant efforts staff were currently making with limited resources and it should be noted this level of performance in the allocated time could not be realistically expected to continue. Also this period was prior to validation training commencing and the spike in applications being received. Therefore it was anticipated the response time would slip further as a direct result of the resource shortage within the service structure, the validation training requirements, holiday cover, as well as the spike in workload due to the applications received that were taking advantage of the transitional arrangements for the changes in the Building Regulations. Clearly if this anticipated trend in reduced performance continued it was likely to have a detrimental effect on the market share and income.

The graphs for the remaining activity reports for April and May were attached as an appendix to the report, they indicated a strong performance in relation to number of applications received and income for the first two months of this quarter. Whilst encouraging, the high volume of activity around applications only compounds the current difficulties faced with the current resourcing issues. It was anticipated the final application numbers and income figures for June 2022 were going to very strong. This was because the date for depositing applications to take advantage of transitional provisions to the changes in the building regulations was 15th June 2022.

He explained that 424 applications had been received in the first quarter, which had a positive impact upon the finances. However, the trend for application response times was now slipping due to the increased workload and lack of resources to deliver the service.

Given the current vacant posts and increased volumes of work, individual work load remained high. In addition, the validation training had commenced and the service was now approaching the holiday session. With increased demand for the service, covering colleagues whilst they study and or were away on annual leave with a reduced workforce was becoming increasingly difficult to achieve. This was now having a significant impact on the ability to deliver the service and those pressures were directly impacting on the ability to quote for work, undertake site inspections and plan examination at the appropriate time. As reported at the last Committee Meeting, the 15th June 2022 was the deadline for submitting applications to take advantage of the transitional provisions for the changes in the Building Regulations. As anticipated, the service had received a significant volume of applications in the first two week of June 2022. The Technical Support Staff reported receiving and processing payments for 60 applications in two working weeks. The income from the deposit of these applications was in the region of 80K. At the time of writing the

report the volume of work was hard to explain and quantify as the figures weren't quite as representative of the situation and would not be until the end of June. Once at the end of June officers would have a complete picture that really showed the volume increase and strain on the team that was still to come. The Technical Support staff would now be under pressure to process the applications and put the application documentation on the system in a timely manner. This process was time path critical so that the Surveying staff could undertake planned examination on the applications in the required time frame to avoid having to return fees and default approve applications if they were not processed in the correct time scales.

He added that resourcing issues continued to impact the service. The vacant Building Control Managers post had not yet been re-advertised. The delay in this appointment continued to place significant pressure on the remaining members of the building control management team and in turn the rest of the team. Additional 20 hour Technical Support Staff had not been re-advertised and it was anticipated this post would be reviewed again once the new Building Control Manager was in post. Having completed their notice period a member of staff had now left the Partnership. The vacant Principal Surveyors post had been vacated had yet to be advertised. The Senior Surveyor who returned from long term absence had been signed off again.

The Building Control trainee with the support of North Devon Council Human Resources was in the process of applying for a place on the distance learning Building Control Surveying Degree at Wolverhampton University. This training and qualification would be funded by the training levy. Morale remained very low amongst staff and this continued to relate to the uncertainty around vacant posts being advertised, lack of structure, additional workload and the pressure the validation training was having on individuals and the wider team.

Short term measures were being introduced to try and alleviate the pressure on the existing workforce. Senior Management from both authorities had just agreed to the use of temporary contractor Building Control Surveyors to provide some of the cover required. With £74K being made available to provide cover for the validation training. There were plans to seek two agency surveyors to provide cover for the summer and autumn months. The vacant leadership gaps left by the departing Manager and Principle Surveyor had left the Partnership vulnerable. There continued to be a lack of formal recognised structure and lines of responsibility. Discussions were continuing with regard to formalising a temporary structure so that individuals remained adequately supported and work load was monitored sufficiently.

In light of the lack of a formal temporary structure discussions were continuing with regard to honorarium payments being provided in recognition of five team members who had had to temporarily to step up in an adhoc manner. In addition, discussions were continuing with regard resourcing the spike in workload due to the regulation changes and how best to re-numerate staff for the additional hours they were working beyond the core 37 hours.

Due to the current situation with the partnership and local market conditions, surveying staff were being attracted to offers from other LA Building Control Teams in the South West, where salaries and conditions were more favourable. Adjoining Local Authority Building Control Authorities were offering better basic pay, terms and

conditions, a £3K market supplement and the promise of a pay review. Surveyors were also being directly approached by a local branch of an Approved Inspector looking to fill their vacant post as the vacant Managers post at Torridge had been filled by one of their employees.

The revisions to the building regulations were now in place and applications received after the 15th June 2022 would be required to comply with the revised Approved Documents F and L and the newly introduced Approved Documents O and S for Overheating and Electric car charging points. The new thermal standards were onerous and represent a 20-30 percent uplift on the 2013 requirements.

Following the update, the Joint Committee discussed the following:

- There was frustration at the lack of ability by the partnership to recruit employees.
- Questioned why there had been such difficulty in recruiting a candidate to the Building Control Manager's post, which had been vacant since 1st April 2022.
- Acknowledged the issues faced with being unable to attract candidates at the current salaries advertised.
- The aspiration to set up a management company for the partnership and the progress that had been made with that proposition.

In response to the questions raised, the Director of Place, Mid Devon District Council advised that the partnership had been unsuccessful in its recruitment of a Building Control Manager due to the salary that was offered, as the partnership was unable to offer a competitive wage on the open market. In light of this contact had been made with South West Councils to ask them to regrade the post and benchmark against other local authorities. The service was currently awaiting a response and would then re-advertise the post.

He added that work was progressing in relation to the proposal to set up a management company. However, the current workload and lack of resources within the service had hampered the progression of the proposal at the current time.

The Chair addressed the Joint Committee and expressed his serious concerns with regards to the resources issue within the service and requested that officers from North Devon and Mid Devon District Council report back to the Committee by 15th August 2022 to begin the process of establishing a management company.

The Director of Place, Mid Devon District Council advised that a date nearer the end of August would be more realistic to allow officers from both authorities to meet and discuss a way forward.

The Chair acknowledged the request but added that he would prefer to stick to a deadline of 15th August 2022.

He added that he did not want the joint arrangement to fail and there was an urgency to proceed with plans to ensure that the service was brought back to standard.

The Vice Chair added that the partnership was in a very serious position with resource issues and increased workloads on both sides and that it was important that those issues were addressed.

RESOLVED, that the Chair liaise with the Head of Planning, Housing and Health, North Devon Council and the Director of Place, Mid Devon District Council to agree a suitable timeline to ensure that the correct time scales for a final decision in relation to the establishment of a management company were met.

**14. DATES AND LOCATIONS OF FUTURE MEETINGS. TO AGREE
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COMMITTEE FOR 2022/23.**

The Joint Committee noted the scheduled dates of the meetings for 2022/23, which were scheduled to be held on the following dates:

- Thursday 10th November 2022 at 9.30am.
- Thursday 16th February 2023 at 9.30am.

In response to a question regarding whether the meeting dates were scheduled to ensure that financial information would be available, the Corporate and Community Services Officer advised that the dates for 2023/24 would be discussed and agreed with the accountants.

Chair

The meeting ended at 10.00 am