

## **REPORT TO EXECUTIVE AND COUNCIL**

**Date of Meetings: 15 July 2014 & 29 July 2014**

**Report of: Assistant Director City Development**

**Title: CREATION OF AN ADDITIONAL POST OF PROJECT SUPPORT OFFICER IN CITY DEVELOPMENT**

### **Is this a Key Decision?**

No

\* One that affects finances over £1m or significantly affects two or more wards. If this is a key decision then the item must be on the appropriate forward plan of key decisions.

### **Is this an Executive or Council Function?**

Council

#### **1. What is the report about?**

The report outlines the recent redesign of City Development, issues that have arisen in relation to the level of administrative and technical support from Project Support Officers (PSOs) and recommends the creation of an additional full time PSO post (Grade 4) at a direct cost of about £20,600 per annum including overheads.

#### **2. Recommendations:**

That the City Development establishment be increased by a further full time post of Project Support Officer with effect from Council on 29 July 2014 and that budgets be adjusted accordingly.

#### **3. Reasons for the recommendation:**

- 3.1** The City Development team was restructured with effect from 1 May 2014. The objective of the redesign was based upon systems thinking and meeting its purpose of 'Deliver Good Development'. The establishment of 39.24 fte posts (4 vacant) of whom about 10 were administrative/technical staff prior to the review was replaced by 29.5 fte of which 5.3 fte are Project Support Officers who provide technical and administrative assistance to project officers. The change in establishment is about a 45% reduction on 2008.
- 3.2** The new structure replaced 2.3 fte devoted to Land Charges with 1 fte with the expectation that other PSOs would assist when required. Land Charges is a 'trading account' it should cover its costs and not make a profit in any three year period. The redesign of Land Charges identified a list of seventeen actions that would enable it to be delivered with such reduced staff resources, this list included some items that could be implemented immediately and others that require some time and investment such as data capture of paper record systems. Processes have been redesigned, searches are now done largely by one person at the City Council, previously they required multiple hand-offs between Land Charges, Building Control, Planning, Environmental Health and DCC who all completed parts. During the reorganisation, two of the three Land Charge staff requested, and the Council agreed, voluntary redundancy.

- 3.3** The volume of searches dealt with by Land Charges primarily reflects the buoyancy of the housing market. There was a 30% increase in the volume of searches from 1990 (38 a week) between 2012/13 and 2660 (51 a week in 2013/14). The volume of searches has since further increased and is now about 61 a week. The Land Charges trading account achieve a surplus of £28,000 in 2013/14, primarily due to the higher demand.
- 3.4** The new system of one FTE with support from others is not coping with current demand. One fte can only deal with about 35- 40 searches a week using current record systems. A backlog of searches has built up totalling 294 at 2 July, a delay on searches of about five weeks. This delay is affecting property sales and chains and is seriously impacting on the public, property professions and the reputation of the Council.
- 3.5** A further PSO was devoted to searches when the problem became apparent. Accuracy is vital for search enquiries, it takes a few weeks for the existing Land Charges PSO to train a colleague to a level where their combined output exceeds current demand, in the meantime the backlog continued to increase. The situation has been compounded by other heavy commitments on the PSOs in adapting to a new system and backlogs due to high levels of demand on registration of Building Control and Planning applications.
- 3.6** It is proposed to increase the establishment of PSOs from 5.5 to 6.5 fte to cope with the additional demands on the City Development system. Once the system has stabilised and a longer term assessment can be made, it may be possible to reduce down again towards 6 fte by agreeing to reductions in staff hours. A number of the existing staff have requested to work fewer hours.
- 3.7** It is understood that Teignbridge, an authority with about 10% more properties than Exeter has an establishment of 1.8 fte dealing with searches, this might suggest that an eventual resource of about 1.5-1.8 fte be an appropriate level pending significant progress on the seventeen actions. Peer review suggests that the Council is dealing with searches in the most effective way, the short term level of resources is just insufficient.
- 3.8** The following short term actions have been taken to address the backlog of searches
- 3.9** About 2.5 fte PSOs now devoted to searches to clear the backlog, including an element of reversion to old ways of working using hand offs for those not yet trained in the new processes.
- 3.10** Two temporary agency staff have been recruited to backfill other roles while PSOs are focused on the backlog and to enable the reintroduction of personal searches by appointment.
- 3.11** Unfortunately, there is no quick fix, it will take quite a few weeks to clear the backlog and return to the response time of five working days that applied before May that is also the level of service offered by neighbouring authorities.

**4. What are the resource implications including non financial resources.**

The cost of an additional PSO at Grade 4 SCP14 will be about £22,650 pa including 30% on costs. The majority of this will be absorbed from extra income within the Land Charges trading account due to high demand. The costs of agency staff will amount to up to £6,400 on the assumption that both stay a maximum period to 5 September when new systems should have bedded in and to cover for staff summer leave. This extra cost will be apportioned between the Building Control fee earning trading account and Planning based upon estimates of time. Planning fee income was £57,000 in surplus at 1<sup>st</sup> June. It should be noted that the redesign of City Development was expected to save about £200,000 pa on the 2013/14, the saving will now be smaller but still substantial.

The Land Charges PSO is Grade 5, other PSOs are Grade 4, there may be a modest additional cost of more staff time being on Grade 5 duties. Human Resources will also need to advise on recruitment issues relating to any transfers between working in Grade 4 and 5 roles.

**5. Section 151 Officer comments:**

Land Charges made a trading surplus of £28,000 in 2013/14, which would more than cover the cost of the new post. This did however, offset a trading loss of £28,000 in the previous financial year.

**6. What are the legal aspects?**

As part of the conveyancing process, solicitors or advisors acting in the proposed purchase of a property undertake searches of the Local Land Charges Register and ask related enquires. A local search is also a requirement of most lending institutions as part of the mortgage process. The local search is in two parts: The first part is called the LLC1 , a legal document which reveals entries that are registered in the Local Land Charges Register, such as planning obligations, financial charges, improvement grants and listed buildings. The Council has a statutory duty to maintain the Local Land Charges Register, which is updated daily to provide accurate responses to search requests. The second part is known as the CON29 Enquiries of a Local Authority. This is a standard form of questions (containing 64 components) agreed between the Law Society and Local Government Association. The form contains comprehensive enquires designed to reveal to intending purchasers information about the property to be purchased. The enquirer also has the opportunity to ask any additional questions that the solicitor or legal advisor considers appropriate.

**7. Monitoring Officer's comments:**

It is essential that the Land Charges team is appropriately resourced since a failure by the Council to properly record and subsequently declare all the relevant entries is likely to result in legal action (to include claims for compensation) being taken against the Council.

**8. How does the decision contribute to the Council's Corporate Plan?**

Redesign of City Development is an objective of the corporate plan, a reasonable response time to searches is important to a well run Council and housing and economic development objectives.

**9. What risks are there and how can they be reduced?**

An inadequate level of PSO resource causes delay to customers and leads to more staff stress. The system remains reliant on the fitness to work of a small number of staff.

**10. What is the impact of the decision on equality and diversity; health and wellbeing; safeguarding children, young people and vulnerable adults, community safety and the environment?**

None

**11. Are there any other options?**

The issue requires a judgement of the level of additional resources that are needed both to deal with the immediate backlog and for the longer term. The use of one extra establishment post that can reduce and two agency staff allows resources to be withdrawn when the situation has stabilised. It would be difficult for existing PSOs to train and supervise any more than two agency staff to address the immediate backlogs.

**Assistant Director City Development**

**Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1972 (as amended)**

**Background papers used in compiling this report:-**

None

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