

Information

for County Councillors

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From:	Lindsey Tawse, Democratic Services Team Leader
Date:	21 June 2018
To:	All County Councillors

Current Capacity Constraints in the Highways Development Management Team.

The Highway Development Management (HDM) Service is made up of the Planning Liaison, Estate Roads, Travel Planning and Road Records service areas.

The Planning Liaison team deals with all planning applications across the County, as a statutory consultee in the planning process. The service helps to ensure delivery of the County and District infrastructure plans, to support the economic growth of the County, helping them meet the needs of their customers.

In 2017 the Highway Authority was consulted on approximately 5000 planning applications and almost 4000 pre-application/general enquiries. Over the last five years, the average number of enquires to the team on an annual basis has remained at approximately 9000 however the complexity of these proposals has significantly increased over this period. Many of the small applications are dealt with under ‘standing advice’ where we have already issued guidance to the planning authorities about appropriate highway standards.

The ability of the service to respond to customers has rapidly deteriorated in recent months due to a reduction in capacity due to several instances of staff sickness, staff leaving and handing in their notice. Individual caseloads are currently excessive, and staff are routinely working more than contracted hours.

Due to the current staffing situation, planning responses for more complex applications are not being issued within the statutory 21-day period, leading to frustration and complaints.

Staff are organised such that they cover district areas to develop expertise and familiarity with case histories in those areas. It is a time-consuming process to develop the required knowledge and history of applications, and caseloads therefore take some time to hand over between staff. It is not straightforward for existing staff to step in and cover under-resourced areas even if there were

spare capacity in a particular area. All areas are currently experiencing demand which outstrips their capacity to respond in a timely manner; and similar capacity problems with agreeing estate roads agreements and responding to roads records enquiries are exacerbating the situation.

An acute capacity shortage has now occurred, and due to the personal circumstances of staff the constraints are most acute in the South Somerset area at the time of writing, but will also become more acute in Taunton Deane shortly as experienced staff work out their notice periods and will inevitably affect other areas in due course.

This is an exceptional situation which has been particularly acute over the last month due to a particularly low level of staff resource covering SSDC, but which will then continue as a wider longer term issue due to backlog of applications and further reduction of staff covering other areas who are due to leave.

A wide range of actions have taken place to manage this situation, summarised as follows:

- SSDC and other Planning Authorities have been briefed on the situation and asked to:
 - provide clear priorities where observations are required;
 - seek alternative highways advice using their own consultancy resources for less complex applications utilising SCC standing advice where appropriate and other professional advice available to them;
 - consider any mechanism possible to reduce demand on our services for at least the next month noting that we are likely to be unable to provide observations on many of the applications during that period and possibly beyond depending on the scale of the backlog.
- A standard letter is being issued to customers to explain that we are working through applications in order of priority but it may take longer than usual for us to respond, and urging them to not chase for responses as that will only slow the system down.
- Additional capacity has been brought in from our consultants WSP, with additional support to progress routine caseload under supervision now in place and an additional experienced person starting w/b 25 June to cover more complex activity and manage a WSP 'sub-team'.
- Other sources of temporary expertise are being explored through Agencies but there is a skill shortage in this area nationally so it is proving challenging.
- Permanent recruitment is now underway via an exemption to the current recruitment freeze. Posts have been advertised with a closing date of 25 June. The ability to offer flexible posts within a career development structure has been agreed.

The current situation will inevitably result in a need to take a lighter touch to consideration of planning applications whilst these measures are in place, and we are keeping the situation under close review. The aim is to stabilise the service over the next few weeks with temporary resources and build up the permanent staff base again. A resourcing paper has been agreed which will

enable the staff resource base to be increased in due course if suitable candidates become available.

The Planning Authorities have been extremely supportive during this challenging period and we are of course continuing to work with them to understand priorities and field the necessary resources where our input is crucial.

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