

SOUTHWARK COUNCIL
OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE FOR
MEETING ON THE
20TH MAY 2004

INDEPENDENT REPORT BASED UPON THE
BRIEF AGREED AT O&S COMMITTEE ON
THE 29TH APRIL 2004

PREPARED BY GRAHAM BECK

London Borough of Southwark Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting on the 20th May 2004

Subject of Report: Award of planning permission at 295-297 Camberwell New Road and 299 Camberwell New Road

Prepared by: Graham Beck, independent planning consultant.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report has been prepared in strict compliance with the brief set out in public by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee [O&SC] at its meeting on the 29th April 2004.
- 1.2 Comparisons of service and experience have been drawn from the London Borough of Camden and Portsmouth City Council together with experience of the expert advisor, the author of this report.
- 1.3 In essence, the report concludes that;
 - A comprehensive package of training can and should be made available to all Planning Committee Members as well as other Members of Council;
 - The planning application consultation processes need to be modified to adopt 'best practice';
 - A system of defining a framework for consultation should be determined and regularly monitored;
 - To facilitate the easy transition of live case files from one officer to another, the contents of all files should be comprehensive and up-to-date;

- Consultation procedures and mechanisms should adopt best practice with specific guidance given to the handling of confidential information;
- Irrespective of whether files are held and stored electronically or on paper, it is good practice to ensure the entire process and system is robust and regularly monitored;
- Quality Control embraces a raft of issues from clear responsibility and accountability of officers to service delivery and the production of a quality product. Checks and balances need to be in place for the whole Service to create an atmosphere, style and culture of excellence;
- Consideration needs to be given to prioritising limited resources and costs of managing change;
- At the time of finalising the report, the quality check on the selection of six planning applications had not been completed for which reason the results will be tabled at Committee on the 20th May 2004.

2. Background and Terms of Reference

- 2.1 At the last meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee a report was presented to Members by the Strategic Director of Regeneration in response to a report by the District Audit and Ombudsman in respect of planning permission granted at 295-297 Camberwell New Road and 299 Camberwell New Road.
- 2.2 At Committee, the process of appointing an independent expert was outlined and explained with the result that Graham Beck attended the last meeting and listened to the discussion.
- 2.3 The independent expert worked in local government for over twenty years with a number of different Councils, the last appointment held being Head of Planning and Development at Southampton City Council. Qualifications held include a BA in Town and Country Planning, an LLB, and an MBA. Graham Beck is a Chartered Town Planner and Member of the Royal Town Planning Institute as well as a Member of the Chartered Management Institute. He is also a

Justice of the Peace. For the last seven years, he has worked as an independent planning, development and management consultant providing a range of services to central government, local government and the private sector.

- 2.4 Following a discussion by Committee on the 29th April 2004, a brief was agreed for the independent planning expert to examine various aspects of the report and offer advice to the Committee. Rather than repeat the terms of the engagement, they are appended to this report at Appendix I.

3. Methodology

- 3.1 Notwithstanding the general role of expert to provide independent advice to Committee on planning issues and provide expertise on 'best practice' in planning issues, the tasks requested are helpfully quite specific. For this reason, combined with the strict timescale for the preparation of a report, the advice offered is based upon comparisons with two other local planning authorities as well as the extensive experience of the expert.
- 3.2 Committee agreed that in order to assess the recommendations of the Strategic Director of Regeneration, it would be prudent to compare Southwark Council with other 'best practice' authorities. It was also agreed to review such authorities from elsewhere in London together with other major urban unitary authorities. With the assistance of the Head of Overview and Scrutiny Committee, a search of Audit Commission Reports was undertaken as a result of which two Councils were identified; the London Borough of Camden and Portsmouth City Council. Both Authorities have been subject to recent Development Control reviews and are considered 'good to excellent'. It was originally intended to include two London Boroughs but firstly there are few London Authorities with an 'excellent' to 'good' rating, secondly it was considered that up-to-date reports would provide more useful data and thirdly, the timescale to complete the exercise was very short.
- 3.3 Based upon Members' discussion at the last meeting and the report under consideration, a range of questions was devised on each of the seven tasks given to the expert. The objective of the questions

provided a basis for discussion with Camden and Portsmouth to illicit the most helpful and constructive information that would assist Members in their deliberation. The questions are appended to this report at Appendix II.

- 3.4 The first telephone interview took place with the Head of Development Control at Camden, Mr. Robin Harper, on Friday the 7th May 2004. The second interview took place with Mr. Paul Newbold, Director of Planning at Portsmouth City later the same day. A third telephone call was made to Wandsworth Council but the Head of Development Control was unavailable for which reason no data is available.
- 3.5 In order to offer the best and most considered advice to Committee, the report is set out under each of the seven tasks drawing upon information from both Councils mentioned above, together with personal experience. Appropriate comments are made throughout the text.
- 3.6 Although outside the scope of the brief, a final section on resources highlights questions for the Council.

4. Key Issues

Member Training on Planning Issues

- 4.1 Member training programmes vary considerably from Authority to Authority and even those Councils recognised as being ‘best practice’ can be differentiated in the programmes offered to Members.
- 4.2 At Camden the Chair of Planning Committee attends the annual Royal Town Planning Institute organised ‘Summer School’ which is an intensive programme over several days dealing with the full range of planning related matters including changes to legislation, planning procedures and separate topics such as design, transport, retailing and housing. Any Member may attend these events.
- 4.3 It is compulsory for all Members who sit on Planning Committee at Camden to attend an introductory course on ‘Planning’ and failure to

attend will result in their not being eligible to determine planning applications. There are 16 Planning members on committee out of a total complement of 60 on Council.

- 4.4 Training for Members takes place throughout the year comprising talks and seminars from a range of officers from the Council, external trainers including barristers, planners and other experts. Members are encouraged to attend external courses as well.
- 4.5 Training is also available for Members who do not sit on Planning Committee but it is not compulsory. Monitoring of all training is undertaken by the Chief Officer in consultation with his senior colleagues and the Chair of Committee.
- 4.6 At Portsmouth, training for Members is available and encouragement is given to all Councillors to take part but it not compulsory, even for those who sit on Planning Committee.
- 4.7 Only 9 Councillors sit on Committee at Portsmouth out of 42 Members of Council. Apparently because there are only 9 Members, it is easy to monitor training needs and ensure that all those on Committee have sufficient training to make informed decisions. The comment was made that as 92% of all development control decisions are delegated to the Head of Development Control, a relatively small but important part of the decision making process is undertaken at Committee. This process itself allowed training to continue 'on the job'. For the sake of comparison, 93% of all development control decisions at Camden are made by the Head of Development Control.
- 4.8 In common with Camden, training is offered throughout the year comprising a combination of internal and external trainers and monitored by the Head of Department, normally in consultation with the Chair.
- 4.9 To summarise 'best practice' and to offer further advice, the Camden model is well considered, providing all Members with an opportunity to learn about the planning process and procedures. The compulsory nature of training for Committee Members is commended but some Councillors may find the training too onerous given their other commitments to family, the Council or community work. Unfortunately, the nature of the planning process today and the

decision making processes, which are quasi judicial, demand a considerable level of knowledge and understanding which requires constant training not just for Members but for planning officers as well.

- 4.10 Training should be monitored on a regular basis, at least two or three times a year. All new members should be given some form of training before attending Committee so that they are able to contribute to discussions with confidence, addressing all material planning considerations appropriately.
- 4.11 A programme of training for existing Members at Southwark Council, for those on Committee as well as other non-planning Members could be progressed quite quickly. To some extent, training should also address individual needs as some Councillors will benefit from different experiences and training programmes.

Consultation mechanisms and processes

- 4.12 It must be remembered that one of the key reasons why the Committee is considering this aspect of the Development Control system is because in the case of the Camberwell New Road applications, the process fell down.
- 4.13 Nevertheless, it is essential to adopt a policy for consultation, monitor the process regularly and employ checks and balances all the time.
- 4.14 A general policy of consultation at Camden is included within their Concordat 2001 approved Service Charter. The Head of Development Control is responsible and accountable. The fact they employ a highly efficient and regularly updated Geographic Information System, much reliance is placed upon the first stage consultation being map based. There is no strict geographical zone surrounding any one planning application site because each case warrants a different approach. However, initial letters are sent to immediate neighbours, a site notice or notices are posted by the Council and applications are advertised in a local newspaper. A list of

Community Groups, interest groups and amenity societies plus any other notified organisations are monitored regularly for up-to-date details so they can be consulted automatically. All information is computerised for which reason it is easy to notify all parties.

- 4.15 A Planning Service Agreement has been reached with the Government Office for London to replace the normal 'advertising regime' with a more targeted 'hard to reach groups' approach. A part time officer is employed solely to ensure 'hard to reach groups' are consulted in appropriate cases.
- 4.16 Most application sites are visited by the case officer (possible exception of advertisements) and a check is made to ensure the first consultation exercise was appropriate. If not, further letters are delivered and the consultation extended.
- 4.17 The Council acknowledges the receipt of every response from neighbours or groups and keeps them informed throughout the planning process. This enables them to re-consult on amended plans or further information if necessary.
- 4.18 Respondees are invited to attend Committee and are allowed to address Committee in accordance within a strict protocol, notified beforehand.
- 4.19 The case officer for each planning application is wholly responsible to ensure that proper procedures are followed and the consultation exercise is carried out accurately. A great deal of the process is maintained electronically and all records are kept on computer. Access to such information is available to the public.
- 4.20 Councillors are sent a weekly list of all planning applications so that they can arrange to read the files or obtain further information as necessary.
- 4.21 Portsmouth operates a similar system but because their computer system appears more basic, much of the consultation process is paper based.
- 4.22 The checks and balances are in place because each case officer, who is again wholly responsible and accountable to ensure procedure and

practice is followed properly, visits the site. If the first trawl of consultees is deemed to be inappropriate for any reason, further letters will be sent out, all records held on file. At least two officers together determine the extent of the first consultation.

- 4.23 The nature of the consultation letters is worthy of note as each letter encourages neighbours to bring the matter to the attention of anyone else who might be interested. It is made clear in correspondence that the process is not closed; in fact it is open to any third party to comment.
- 4.24 Both Camden and Portsmouth have adopted policies of consultation beyond the statutory minimum.
- 4.25 In the report presented to O&S Committee on the 29th April, paragraphs 4.4 to 4.9 outline the Council's consultation process. It concludes by stating the process remains appropriate but it will be reviewed. During the debate, the complainants made the observation that regardless of the consultation policy and process, its implementation fell down. In response, one Member called for Performance Management Targets, a framework in order to drive efficiency and effectiveness. The Chair remarked that quality assurances and checks should be considered.
- 4.26 Prima facie, on the strength of the processes outlined at Committee regarding the Southwark planning consultation process, it is not surprising that a system operates that complies with statutory requirements and in some respects goes beyond. Nevertheless, to avoid similar problems in the future, it would be prudent to adopt checking mechanisms like Camden and Portsmouth to reduce the possibility of overlooking consultees. It would also be useful to ensure that one officer is wholly responsible and accountable for the process in order that appropriate action can be taken should the process fail.
- 4.27 Given the comparisons with the two Local Planning authorities above, more detailed work could be undertaken internally by Southwark Officers in consultation with colleagues at Camden in particular.

Consultation areas

- 4.28 Portsmouth City adopts a simplistic but flexible zoning policy based upon the likely effect of any proposed development on the immediate neighbours. The entire process is delegated to the Director of Planning and implemented in accordance with a framework interpreted by a professional planning officer, in consultation with one other. The second stage process is to undertake a site visit and review the consultation process and re-consult if the planning officer believes some properties have been omitted. A third stage is to respond to any requests for additional consultations resulting from the first two stages or from Councillors or from community groups.
- 4.29 Camden adopts a very similar approach, the most important aspect being they nominate the case officer to oversee the procedure and take full responsibility. To enhance their own procedures, applicants are advised to submit accurate planning applications specifically identifying immediate neighbours. This information is used to supplement the first stage exercise.
- 4.30 As will be discussed later in this report, the system of recording each event on file, be it paper or electronic, is extremely important. At both Camden and Portsmouth, site notes and consultation notes are fully available on file.
- 4.31 At Southwark there is a process involved and the action identified in the last report to Committee at paragraph 4.13 subparagraphs a to c, clearly adopt the models practiced by the comparative authorities. It is essential to support the consultation process within an overall qualitative framework for the whole service and set up monitoring procedures. Timing has been considered by the Director and a period of two months has been mentioned already. This would seem eminently sensible although work on improving the current arrangements should not be delayed.

Staff Handover procedures

- 4.32 In view of the recent history at Southwark where several officers were involved in the application at Camberwell New Road, Members of O&S specifically requested to know how other authorities organise any handovers.
- 4.33 In both cases at Portsmouth and Camden, the only occasions where it is necessary to change the case officer is during periods of extended leave, such as long term illness, holidays, maternity leave or where an officer leaves the employment of the Council. In all cases, due to the comprehensive records of the planning process on file, it is considered a relatively straightforward matter to hand the file over. All meetings, important telephone conversations, site visit notes and consultation decisions are recorded.
- 4.34 Where cases *are* handed over, it is desirable for the original case officer to explain the process to the new incumbent but due to the comprehensive nature of material on file, it is not critical to hold the meeting. To some extent, it depends upon the nature of the application. Where applications are complex or contentious, it is highly likely that at least one other officer will have knowledge of the case; in such cases the Head of Development Control is likely to be well briefed as part of the on-going monitoring process.
- 4.35 The key issue during handover is to make it clear that any new planning officer adopting a case is totally responsible and accountable for the planning process.

Pre planning application procedures

- 4.36 Camden Council encourages pre-application discussions with developers particularly on major application proposals. This often includes extensive pre-application consultation with third parties such as the local neighbourhood, amenity and interest groups as well as some statutory external consultees. Portsmouth adopts a similar approach.

- 4.37 In both cases, the developer will carry out the consultation, sometimes involving exhibitions and public meetings with the Council's officers and Councillors being invited but not necessarily participating – simply to retain their neutrality.
- 4.38 Confidentiality of information is seldom an issue in such circumstances because a developer or land owner has purchased a site and wishes to pursue its development. In these cases, file notes of meetings are retained on file all of which are available for public inspection. When a formal planning application is received, the pre-application meeting notes and any other material forms part of the file documentation.
- 4.39 Issues of confidentiality can arise where developers or land owners wish to share ideas about developing land but have issues of financial or commercial confidentiality. Since the **Access to Information Act 1985**, many local planning authorities have used the exemptions of 'enforcement' and 'financial / commercially sensitive' information to create separate files and mark as 'Confidential' on the cover. Such files are not available to the public and the information is stored separately.
- 4.40 Any information regarding a current planning application eventually forms part of the 'Planning register' and must remain available for public viewing. There are different legal interpretations concerning access to planning file information. For example Portsmouth informs all consultees in their initial consultation letter that any correspondence received will be publicly available on the planning file. Other authorities do not allow third party correspondence to become available until five days prior to a Committee meeting date.
- 4.41 Within the spirit of the Act, it is advocated that the system should be as transparent as possible and all information available to the public. It is noted at paragraph 4.16 c of the Director's report, that sometimes "*documents may find themselves filed on public files simply for ease of administration.*" Whilst the system should enable easy access to information, it is equally important to protect confidential information in accordance with the legislation. Should commercially sensitive information become available and form the basis of a press release, the Council may experience a different set of problems.

- 4.42 It is noted that the Director has informed Members that a Register of Staff Interests is to be created. This would follow best practice and remove any doubt regarding potential conflicts of interest. The register must be actively managed and subject to regular monitoring however. Such an exercise would cost little and be undertaken quickly.

File Management

- 4.43 The two 'best practice' authorities enjoy the benefit of two very different filing systems, one highly automated, the other essentially paper based but rapidly moving towards full computerisation.
- 4.44 Regardless of the nature of the filing systems at Camden or Portsmouth, it is common practice that the processes are well understood, thorough records are maintained and personnel understand who is responsible and accountable.
- 4.45 The senior filing officer is totally responsible for overall filing whilst individual planning case officers are responsible during the planning process to ensure the files are regularly maintained.
- 4.46 At Camden, the filing process is automated on computer much of which is available on the web site. Details of the application, notes of site visits, meetings, photographs of each site, lists of all consultees, consultation responses and other correspondence is available on computer. All subsequent reports are also on line. Portsmouth adopts an equally robust system only it is mainly paper based although supplemented by a computerised system. The decision has been made to move wholly towards automation.
- 4.47 Both systems are geographically based and history files are available immediately to help inform the decision making process.
- 4.48 As a general rule, four copies of a planning application are submitted to planning authorities although experience suggests that with the growing number of consultees, some authorities request five or even

six copies. With electronic files, although there is a ‘master’ file, in the sense that the case officer only can alter or change information on screen, the information is generally available to Members, other officers around the Council, the developer and the public. With a paper based system, it is common practice to hold one ‘working’ file controlled by the case officer but material is available to the public in those authorities where a more liberal interpretation of the Planning Register prevails. Second copies of applications are normally available at Reception for inspection but these papers include the application forms and drawings only.

- 4.49 For the avoidance of doubt it is good practice to return a full set of drawings stamped ‘Approved’ or ‘Refused’ to the applicant at the conclusion of the process.
- 4.50 Any policy on viewing planning files should be soundly based upon the interpretation of the legislation but it is matter for the Council. Decisions in this regard can be taken relatively quickly.

Quality Control

- 4.51 During discussions with the Head of Development Control at Camden it became clear that the entire development control process is important and each stage requires careful consideration and monitoring. The same view is adopted at Portsmouth.
- 4.52 At the last meeting of O&S Committee several Members referred to the style, the culture, the structure, leadership and system approach in Development Control all of which affect morale, output and quality. Whilst it is helpful to review elements of the process it is crucial to comprehend the entire purpose of the Development Control system so that every officer clearly understands their role and function. Only then can they take pride in their work and act as ambassadors for the Service as well as the Council.
- 4.53 In terms of quality control, there are normally two main strands; quality of service delivery and quality of product. Dealing with the latter briefly, many local authorities engage locally appointed architects’ panels who are consulted on a regular basis to assess quality of development. Not all proposals are subject to such scrutiny

but the largest, prestigious or contentious applications are. At the most formal level, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment does become involved in some schemes.

- 4.54 With regard to service provision, at Camden and Portsmouth the Head of Division adopts a permanent monitoring role and takes full responsibility for the actions of colleagues. Team Leaders allocate cases to planning officers in the first instance ensuring the correct level of experience and resource is allocated to the job. Consultations are determined by at least two people and checked on site.
- 4.55 Planning Officers gauge planning applications against national and local planning policies and determine applications in accordance with policy and all other material planning considerations. In view of the very high level of delegation to officers the decision making process must be rigorous and robust. Notes are made on file explaining the reasons for decision where delegation is exercised. At Camden, delegation is authorised by Council in Standing Orders to the Head of Development Control whereas at Portsmouth, it is the Director of Planning.
- 4.56 Whether delegated or Committee decisions are made, the case officer makes a recommendation. The quality check is deemed to be the delegating officer or Committee. Where Committee is not involved, internal conferences may take place amongst the planning officers before the Head of Division makes the final decision. In many cases, the delegated officer can exercise discretion and request the Committee to consider the matter. Some Authorities retain the option for Members to specifically request an application to be considered by Committee although with pressure growing on all Councils to expedite applications and deliver quicker decisions; many local authorities have closed this opportunity.
- 4.57 In the case of delegated decisions, there is a strict framework within which the nominated officer must operate. This in itself is an important quality check. All decisions made by Officers are reported to Committee for information to enable Committee to ask questions and monitor the process.

- 4.58 In any event, all decision making is subject to scrutiny through the Ombudsman in the event of maladministration. Members on the O&S Committee will be familiar with the broader implications should proper procedures not be followed. Within the planning process itself of course, if any applicant is dissatisfied with the Council's decision, they can appeal to the Secretary of State for the Environment. This in itself is a quality check and some Council's monitor success rates at appeal measured against national statistics. At best it is a guide only.

5. Resources

Priorities and costs

- 5.1 Committee did not stipulate that the brief should include any advice on resources, priorities and costs but these are matters for consideration.
- 5.2 A sensible balance must be achieved between prioritising different aspects of the development control service in order to management change. Some changes proposed by the Director will cost little but any investment in computerisation and training will attract extra costs.
- 5.3 Quality personnel management and the adoption of good practices has an indirect cost but the benefits of providing an attractive work environment, pride in the job and respect combine to develop a certain style and management conducive to excellence. This in turn, can outweigh the investment of time as the service shares common values to deliver high quality in every aspect.

Appendix

Appendix I – Terms of Reference approved at O&S Committee on the 29th April 2004.

WORK TASKS: INDEPENDENT PLANNING EXPERT MR. GRAHAM BECK

Role of Independent Planning Expert:

- To provide Independent advice to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSC) on planning issues;
- To provide expertise on 'best practice' in planning issues, in particular if the proposals in the Southwark Planning department improvement plan (as presented by Mr. Paul Evans on 29th April OSC meeting) are an effective response to the recommendations in the Audit Commission report; and
- To complete specific tasks set by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- The Independent Planning Expert will not address issues of compensation nor disciplinary matters.

Background Information:

The objective for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee is to:

- Report back to Council Assembly on issues raised in the Audit Commission report and recommend a mechanism for assessing possible compensation.

The Scrutiny will not:

- Assess, or recommend, a figure of compensation;
- Repeat the work of the Audit Commission or Local Ombudsman;
- Examine issues of Member conduct, nor officer disciplinary matters.

Procedures to follow:

Mr. Beck is employed as an independent consultant, advising the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Work tasks are set by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in public meetings of this committee. In the first instance any contact with Council officers should be arranged through Head of Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Ms. Shelley Burke). It may be necessary for Mr. Beck to receive briefings from Mr. Paul Evans and/or Mr. John East.

Tasks:

All tasks due in report (Wednesday 12th May), for presentation Thursday 20th May.

- 1 Compare and contrast the Member Training on Planning provided by Southwark with that of other 'best practice' local, urban authorities.
- 2 Compare and contrast the planning consultation mechanisms and processes of Southwark with that of other 'best practice' local, urban authorities. The use of letters and methods of sampling to see if letters are reaching intended recipients should be considered.
- 3 Compare and contrast the Southwark process of determining consultation areas in planning applications with that of other 'best practice' local, urban authorities.
- 4 Compare and contrast staff handover procedures in Southwark with that of other 'best practice' local, urban authorities.
- 5 Compare and contrast Southwark pre planning application consultation procedures and mechanisms with of other 'best practice' local, urban authorities. Confidentiality standards should be considered.
- 6 Compare and contrast Southwark File Management with that of other 'best practice', local urban authorities. The use of paper filing systems and alternatives to paper filing systems should be considered
- 7 Compare and contrast Southwark 'quality control' procedures and practices with other 'best practice', local urban authorities. How planning cases are allocated and how case officers develop recommendations should be considered.
- 8 Select six 'live' planning application from Southwark with similar characteristics to the 'Imperial Gardens' planning application and assess if:
 - Consultation was 'best practice';
 - All planning information was forwarded to Members;
 - Quality Control mechanisms and processes were utilised;

Appendix II – Questions used as a basis for discussion with the London Borough of Camden and Portsmouth City Council.

Questions for London Borough of Camden and Portsmouth City of Southwark

1. Training practices for Members a) on planning committee and b) other Members not on Planning Committee?
How many Members sit on planning committee?
Frequency of training, depth of training?
Who undertakes training – internal/external or combination?
Is training compulsory or not?
2. DC consultation processes?
What general policy exists for public consultation on planning applications?
Are all other types of application consulted in the same way – LBC's; CAC's; LDC's; TPO's etc?
How is enforcement dealt with?
What method does the Council employ to comply with statutory requirements?
How is the system monitored?
How does the LPA communicate with residents/neighbours (residential or commercial) using post cards/letters/site notices/newspaper notices/community based organisations?
Does the Council acknowledge receipt?
Once contact is made, how are third parties kept informed of the process – amended plans; additional information; committee dates/attendance/presentation at Committees?
How often is the process monitored?
Who is responsible for the management of the application process?
Are weekly lists made available and to whom?
What is the role, if any, of Ward Members?
Does the LPA have a web site?
How does that work to consult?
Are Applicants responsible for consultation?
How is the whole process documented – paper and/or electronic?
3. How does the LPA determine the scope of consultation zones surrounding an application site?
Who determines consultations on a site basis?
Is there any discretion and how is that determined?
What quality assurance checks are in place?
4. Are there specific handover mechanisms in place when one case officer transfers an application to another case officer?
What happens during holidays or some other temporary/permanent absence of the case officer?

How are files kept – in paper and /or electronic form?

Are file notes of meetings, site visits and telephone conversations made and retained on file for all to view, including the public?

5. Does the LPA encourage/allow pre-application consultations with applicants?
How is the process managed?
Is the public involved or the process restricted to the Council?
What levels of confidentiality are adopted?
What criteria is used – Council policy, Standing Orders or legislation? Are file notes kept and are they copied onto planning application files for background or separately filed under ‘exempt information/confidential’?

6. How are file records of planning applications created, maintained, used, stored and monitored?
Are they paper and / or electronic?
Is the filing system geographically based, site based or applicant based? Who is responsible for the creation of the filing system?
Is this the same person who maintains and monitors the filing system? What practice is used to identify relevant historic files with current/live files?
How does the Planning register assist?
Who is responsible for ‘live’ files?
How many copies of the live file exist?
What information is available to the public in terms of access to information and the planning register?
How is confidential information stored particularly enforcement material and financial?

7. How is the Development Control process managed through Quality Control?
What checks and balances are in place to ensure the whole process complies with planning policies, council standards of service delivery, fairness to all concerned in the process including applicants and third parties?
Are quality standards in place and monitored?
Who allocates cases and in accordance with what criteria – is it discretionary?
What is the process for developing recommendations/decisions on planning applications?
What percentage of applications is considered under delegated powers? What checks are in place in the consideration of a) recommendations to Committee and b) decisions under delegated powers?

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