



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Strategic Policy and Resources Committee.
Subject:	Review of Departmental Resources
Date:	20 June 2008.
Reporting Officer:	Ciaran Quigley
Contact Officer:	Sean McCarthy

Purpose of Report

To seek approval from the Committee for the Business Improvement Section to assist the Legal Services Department in drafting an Implementation Plan to address the recommendations made in a report commissioned by the Director of Legal Services from Eversheds LLP in relation to a review of the Legal Services Department.

Relevant Background Information

At its meeting in May 2007 Committee gave approval to undertake a review of the resources needed by the Department. A report was commissioned from Eversheds LLP, a leading legal practice with particular expertise in local government across the U.K. An executive summary of that report is attached for reference although a full copy is available to Members on request.

Key Issues

The key message from the report was :-

“The lawyers provide excellent quality legal services to Directors, the Corporate Management Team and across the Council”.

The report also highlighted the need for the Department to:-

- re-structure the Department’s business support in order to provide more effective and focused administrative support to the professional side,
- assist the professional side in more effectively dealing with their managerial responsibilities,

- develop a Succession Plan for all staff, especially the Director and Principal Solicitors,
- further develop the Department's service standards and performance indicators, benchmarked against best practice authorities, in the context of performance management,
- introduce better systems for engaging with client requirements and expectations; and
- develop a more "one team" approach across all sections of the Department.

With the approval of Committee it is our aim with assistance from the Business Improvement Section to develop an Implementation Plan to deliver on the recommendations over the course of the next year.

The Eversheds report emphasised the need to build capacity within current professional staff, provide more management information at both an operational level and to client Departments and to be more proactive in demonstrating value for money to clients departments.

The report also highlighted the need for Legal Services to develop a one team approach to its operation and in relationships between staff. A properly structured exercise centred on team development needs to be developed with all members of the legal team participating in the programme.

Resource Implications

Financial

Financial implications will be outlined in the draft implementation plan although a budget not exceeding £5,000 is required for a staff development day.

Human Resources

Human Resource implications will be outlined in the draft implementation plan

Asset and Other Implications

n/a

Recommendations

Members are asked to give approval for the Business Improvement Section to assist in the development of an Implementation Plan which will address the recommendations listed in the Eversheds report.

Members are also asked to approve the organisation of a staff development day as part of this process.

Key to Abbreviations

None

Documents Attached

Executive summary of report on Legal Services from Eversheds LLP.

Strictly Private & Confidential

Belfast City Council:
Legal Services Review Report

Belfast City Council:

Legal Services Review Report

1. Executive Summary

1.1 Legal work within a local authority context is, by its nature, complex. The pressures on legal services providers within Local Authorities is increasing, not least because of new legislative requirements. Most client departments require a range of legal advice and assistance from a number of specialist lawyers, usually located within different teams in the Legal Department. Some lawyers work for more than one department, though there are a number of people who generally only work for one department, i.e. on Regulatory matters. Belfast Legal Services currently has around 2,000 live matters each year, many of which may be lengthy and last for more than one financial year. In order to manage the workflow, the department has a Business Support Manager and Case Management Systems which assist with the task.

1.2 Eversheds was invited to undertake a review of the legal function in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the legal department and to make recommendations covering a range of matters, including people management practice and measures to improve performance. Section 4 of the Report sets out our methodology and records that the Chief Executive, all Directors, all the Principal Solicitors and various members of legal and client staff were interviewed to obtain their views about current provision of Legal Services; the strengths and weaknesses of the in-house team; and to identify areas where performance levels were not acceptable or improvements could be made. The results of that consultation and the issues arising are set out in Sections 6 and 7 respectively. Overall, a number of key messages arise from the review, including:

- The lawyers provide excellent quality legal services to Directors, the Corporate Management Team and across the Council. They are perceived to be professional, committed and hard working and offer value for money (though it was difficult to test this assertion in practice due to the lack of management information). A key strength of the in-house team is their knowledge and understanding of the City Council and its legal requirements and how to deliver legal services effectively. Whilst there are some areas of criticism, these are largely around capacity and the availability of lawyers to undertake all the work which client departments would like to be done - clearly the most important work is prioritised and the work which involves the Directors personally. The Legal Department would also like to be able to be more pro-active, rather than reactive if there was more capacity, e.g. to be able to advise and train on legal developments and give more strategic advice.
- There are a number of people management and behavioural issues which include the lack of adherence to systems and procedures, the culture of managers prioritising legal work rather than other managerial tasks and a failure to develop more junior staff to be able to more effectively support clients

in the delivery of their functions. A robust performance management culture needs to be developed, with sanctions being carried through in the event of non-compliance.

- There is a need to introduce more effective secretarial / administrative and business support to release lawyer capacity and improve efficiency. This could be done by enabling support staff to arrange meetings, undertake copying, manage routine calls and ensure a swift turn around of typing and related support through a more team based secretarial service.
- There is a need to consider the introduction of a Succession Planning Framework, through proper staff development at all levels in order to fully build capacity; to take account of the RPA and its likely devolution of additional functions to the Council; and the review of the centre; as well as to develop staff to their full potential.
- More effective client liaison mechanisms need to be introduced to review service provision regularly, to anticipate future demands, to discuss legislative and other changes, to ensure that value for money can be demonstrated and how Legal can better support its clients. As relationships are enhanced with client departments on management issues, key performance indicators and relevant performance standards should be discussed and agreed, which cover response times and, for example, the length of time taken to deliver legal work, in order to develop a dialogue about the effectiveness and value for money delivered by Legal.
- Legal Services has an urgent need to generate more of a "one team" approach to its operations and in relationships between staff.

1.3 Although the above summarise our main conclusions, there are other issues which are mentioned in the Report which could be addressed.

1.4 We would like to take the opportunity to thank everybody for their co-operation in assisting us with the Review of Legal Services and would also make the point that no adverse conclusion should be drawn from the delay in finalising the Report, as this was mainly due to difficulties in coinciding diaries to discuss the initial draft.

2. **Summary of the key issues**

2.1 The Department provides excellent legal services which are valued by clients and has at its disposal good processes and systems.

2.2 There are people management and behavioural issues demonstrated through the lack of adherence to systems and procedures and the culture of the Department This may reflect a lack of managerial skills or a lack of role clarity or a combination of both which needs to be addressed. Until this happens structural change will have limited success in being effective. A robust performance management culture needs to be developed with sanctions such as disciplinary action for non-compliance.

- 2.3 There is a need to introduce more effective secretarial / administrative business support to release lawyer capacity and improve efficiency.
- 2.4 There is a need to introduce a succession planning framework, through proper staff development at all levels in order to fully build capacity; to take account of the RPA and the review of the centre and develop staff to their full potential.
- 2.5 More effective client liaison mechanisms need to be introduced to review service provisions regularly, to anticipate future demands, discuss legislative and other changes, to ensure value for money can be demonstrated and how legal can better support its clients.
- 2.6 Legal Services urgently needs to generate more of a one team approach to its operations and in relationships between staff.

Eversheds LLP
30 April 2008