

**6. BUILDING AND PLANNING ADVICE
FENDALTON LIBRARY & SERVICE CENTRE**

RR 10357

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Corporate Plan Output: Public Advice	

The purpose of this report is to update the Committee on the Environmental Services Unit's plans to eventually centralise its building and planning operations and to consider the level of building and planning advice which should be provided from the new Fendalton Library and Service Centre. The report was requested by the Community Services Committee, which resolved in May that "the Environment Committee be asked to review the level of counter services to be provided at service centres in respect to building and resource consent processes and that attention be given to the level of service to be provided at the new Fendalton Service Centre".

BACKGROUND

During 1997 and 1998 a study of future options was undertaken by the Unit with the assistance of KPMG consultants. This review highlighted the need to change the way we operate in order to provide a more effective service delivery and to simultaneously enhance our ability to compete with market forces.

The Environmental Services Unit has four Area Development Teams, one in the Civic Offices and one at each of the three 'A' Service Centres. These teams process PIMs (Project Information Memoranda), Building Consents, Resource Consents and LIMs (Land Information Memoranda), as well as providing public advice on building, planning and property/land related matters.

The review of our operations concluded that centralisation of these functions would be more cost-effective than the current structure and would result in faster processing times for consent applications. The chief advantages are that a centralised operation makes it easier to integrate these outputs, which in turn leads to less duplication and hand-offs. It also makes it much easier to handle fluctuating workloads, which is very difficult in a decentralised environment.

We have no control over the amount of work coming in, and at present we have to move staff and applications around the different work locations to cover peaks and troughs. This inevitably slows down processing times, and is not particularly efficient. Daily monitoring of workloads in a centralised environment together with the introduction of a Customer Centre will provide a more effective service delivery than at present.

CONTESTABILITY

Councillors will be aware that both the building consent and building inspection outputs are contestable, and that this work is able to be carried out by private certifiers as well as the Council. To date we have lost very little work to certifiers (about 3%), but that is expected to change with the emergence of a new company, Nationwide Building Certifiers Ltd, which recently opened an office in Christchurch as well as offices in other centres. It is interesting to note that Manukau has lost more than 30% of its building work to private certifiers. Auckland City is currently in the same position as Christchurch, but has budgeted for this to increase to 30%.

It is also worth noting that the Resource Management Amendment Bill proposes to make the processing of resource consents contestable.

Contestability raises some interesting issues. On the one hand, competition certainly encourages improvements to processes and a greater focus on customers' needs. On the other hand, however, it causes some difficulties for Councils. Private certifiers, for example, can operate nationally whereas Councils are restricted by statute to their respective areas. More significantly, certifiers can choose their customers but Councils cannot. About half of our work involves small projects for first-time users who are not professionals in the field. In the minor works category of building consents, we are failing to recover costs. Not surprisingly, competition is not an issue with these smaller jobs. They do require a significant input of resources, however, particularly in regard to public advice. This has left the Unit stretched for resources on the bigger projects where competition is an issue.

CUSTOMER CENTRE

Towards the end of October this year the Environmental Services Unit is opening a Customer Centre on the second floor of the Civic Offices to deal with telephone and walk-in building and planning inquiries. The opening coincides with the introduction of the new computer system, which will provide significant improvements to our information systems and how we track and record requests for service from customers. The Customer Centre, backed up by the new software and associated knowledge base, will enable us to provide public advice in a more managed way than has been possible in the past. This should have the flow-on effect of allowing other staff resources to be dedicated to processing consent applications without constant interruptions, and hence we are optimistic that this will produce faster consent processing times.

Other ESU functions will be gradually added to the Customer Centre once we have completed the pilot stage.

FENDALTON LIBRARY AND SERVICE CENTRE

Early in the design phase of the new Fendalton Library and Service Centre, elected members chose to exclude the Fendalton Area Development Team from the new building. This decision was made with the knowledge that the Environmental Services Unit planned to centralise its Area Development Teams when space became available in the Civic Offices, and on that basis it was considered imprudent to spend money on floor space in the new building that would not be required in the future.

The Fendalton Area Development Team and the extensive property files for this segment of the City are moving into the Civic Offices early in September. Fendalton staff will be included in the new Customer Centre, which will provide general building and planning advice city-wide, as well as specialised advice for the central city and the four wards previously administered from Fendalton.

It is anticipated that some Fendalton customers seeking specialist advice will go to the Sockburn Service Centre rather than Civic Offices. A Fendalton planner will be based at Sockburn for three months to cover this eventuality and to assess future needs.

Fendalton Service Centre/Library staff are currently receiving training from ESU staff in the provision of basic building and planning information, the receipt of applications and the uplift of completed consents. This will be backed up with a comprehensive range of information pamphlets and the electronic knowledge base, which includes the answers to frequently asked questions. Specialist inquiries can be logged and transferred electronically using the new Request for Service software.

The objective is to provide a level of building and planning advice for walk-in customers comparable to that currently provided by the 'B' Service Centres. Customers will still be able to lodge applications and uplift consents at all six Service Centres as well as the Civic Offices. The aim of the Council-wide suburban walk-in customer service is to satisfy walk-in customers at the first point of contact at least 80% of the time.

Thought is currently being given to how to advise the public of the forthcoming change. Our regular, professional customers are not a problem as we have their contact details available on a database. However, targeting first-time users and the general public is more difficult. An article in the next City Scene is one possibility under consideration. Another is an appointment system for the first two or three months after the Area Development Team's departure, whereby members of the public could make an appointment to see a building or planning officer in the temporary building at Fendalton. This would cover situations the service centre/library staff are unable to deal with and may lessen the impact of the Fendalton Team's withdrawal.

An appointment system is viewed as a sensible transitional arrangement, but is not considered to be viable on a long-term basis because of cost. Similarly, to leave staff at Fendalton on a permanent basis would defeat the purpose of centralising and of establishing a Customer Centre. The cost would be considerable because we would need additional staff to answer Fendalton inquiries at two locations. Furthermore, specialist inquiries normally require reference to the property files and these will be located at the Civic Offices where they are required for both processing and the Customer Centre.

SOCKBURN & LINWOOD SERVICE CENTRES

The Area Development Teams at Linwood and Sockburn cannot be brought into the Civic Offices until sufficient floor space becomes available. This is unlikely to occur within the next 12 – 18 months.

The same model is eventually proposed for Sockburn and Linwood as for Fendalton. That is, to provide the same level of building and planning advice as that currently provided by the 'B' Service Centres. Having said that, however, the Fendalton experience may well provide insight into different options.

CONCLUSION

Centralising the Area Development Teams is essential if we are to compete successfully in the market place. There is some flexibility in terms of the level of walk-in building and planning advice to be provided from the Fendalton Service Centre, although this is subject to cost and the value that could be added to customers.

To provide walk-in specialist advice at Fendalton, a Planner and a Building Consent Officer would be required, plus back up to cover lunch breaks, annual leave, sickness and the like. Two such employees (excluding back up) would cost about \$160,000 per annum, including overheads. The quality of their advice would always be subject to the need to refer to Fendalton's property files, which would be located in the Civic Offices and would not be available for immediate reference. There is also the problem of how to occupy two specialists when they have no walk-in customers to deal with. When this is weighed against the advantages of centralisation, in terms of both more efficient and faster processing times and a walk-in/phone-in customer centre in the Civic Offices, it is difficult to justify the cost of providing specialist building and planning advice for one portion of the city in two locations.

Recommendation:

1. That the Committee notes the intention to eventually centralise all four Area Development Teams at the Civic Offices once suitable space becomes available.
2. That the level of building and planning advice provided at the Fendalton Service Centre be no less than that currently provided at the 'B' Service Centres.
3. That an appointment service be offered for specialist building and planning advice at the Fendalton Service Centre for three months following the Area Development Team's shift to the Civic Offices.
4. That this report be referred to the Shirley/Papanui and Fendalton/Waimairi Community Boards for information.

Chairman's

Recommendation: For discussion.