

Engagement

SCC Property Services Department Update

A personal insight by S-PA Board Member, Gerald Duniec.

Tim Bottrill and I met Tammy Whitaker, Head of the Property Services department at Sheffield City Council, on 9 January, 2018. This was to discuss the department and its role in the city. Tammy invited Rob Murfin (the new Head of Planning) explaining that she and Rob work closely together and therefore she thought the meeting would be more productive.

The meeting was extremely convivial and went very well. The meeting lasted a couple of hours and could have gone on much longer had time permitted. Tim and I acknowledged that Tammy had taken over a department in transition, it having just returned to Sheffield City Council control after being run by Kier for several years. We stressed that we have no intention of being critical without being constructive as that will get us nowhere and could lead to a less than satisfactory relationship.

Tammy very much welcomed our approach and we now see the opportunity to forge a very close and productive working relationship that will benefit all. We saw this initial meetings as a “getting to know you exercise” and therefore not unexpectedly we didn’t get down to much detailed discussions. We are after all in this for the long haul and we wanted to make it clear that there is a genuine desire to create a much closer and warmer relationship. The meeting went so well that we all agreed that we needed more meetings to actually address issues of concern. Tim and I hope to arrange a series of meetings over the next few months and to draw in the wider membership of the S-PA.

We said we wanted to understand why it took so long to get any response from department officers and we said that deals were collapsing because of the apparent lack of commercial expediency. We wanted to know how we could positively support the department in improving the service it provides.

The reply from Tammy was quite striking. There is now only one senior surveyor in Property Services and about seven other surveyors who cover the entire city. A substantial number of surveyors have left and Tammy is finding it virtually impossible to find anyone interested in filling the posts. There is a heavy reliance on contract staff. She even asked if we knew of anyone interested in applying for a post.

Immediately, we can see that the quality of service provided by Property Services is substantially due to the lack of surveyors. Tammy made the point that she was in fact (contrary to what we expected to hear) being given the financial

resources to recruit. It comes down to not enough hours in the day for the so few members of staff to cope with the workload. To put this in context we understand that 30 years ago there were around 80 surveying members of staff excluding support and admin. When the department was outsourced to Kier, there were far fewer. Now there are eight.

Tammy acknowledges there are major problems and has been actively seeking new staff. Obviously the current poor performance has to be addressed. On behalf of our Association, Tim and I will be looking at ways of how we think the most pressing work can be dealt with to support this key Council department.

Whilst what we heard was sobering, we both came away believing that there is openness and willingness to create a far better relationship with S-PA than some of us may have experienced as individuals in the past. We will report again to members following our next meeting but in the meantime we welcome members to contact us with any issues, either general or specific that need to be addressed. Please email me at duniec@mac.com or Tim at tim@colloco.co should you wish to get involved.