

LEGAL SERVICES

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BUSINESS PLAN FOR LEGAL SERVICES 2006 - 2007

1. INTRODUCTION AND OUTLINE OF SERVICE

1.1 The Section's purpose is:

“To achieve professional and operational excellence through the efficient provision of legal services that are customer orientated, responsive, flexible and cost effective.”

1.2 The functions which **Legal Services** provide are as follows:-

- a) legal advice including the conduct of litigation, advocacy and conveyancing to all departments of the Council on all aspects of local government law
- b) legal and procedural advice to members at Committee including in respect of the Council's quasi-judicial functions e.g. taxi licensing
- c) advice on Data Protection and Freedom of Information
- d) informal legal advice to Town and Parish Councils
- e) the maintenance of corporate property records
- f) the Head of Legal & Democratic Services also acts as the Council's Monitoring Officer, a statutory role primarily concerned with ensuring the legality of decisions made as well as facilitating the probity and ethical framework within the Council (including the 37 Town and Parish Councils within the area).

1.3 The service operated by Legal Services is provided by the 'in-house' team of 6 solicitors (5 FTE), 1 Legal Executive and 1 Legal Assistant (0.6 FTE) supported by two secretaries. There is currently a vacancy for a 2 day a week solicitor following the retirement of a fee earner during the summer of 2005. A family tree can be found at Appendix 1 to this Plan.

From time to time there is a need for external legal advice to be sought from specialist solicitors or Counsel. In very recent times, due to the significant increase in the number of planning inquiries, the use of specialist Counsel has increased. This has been largely funded through the Planning Delivery Grant (PDG).

1.4 The table overleaf shows the baseline financial information for Legal Services for the last 3 years and gives a projection of the cost for 2006/07.

	2003/04 Actual	2004/05 Actual	2005/06 Budget	2006/07 Budget
Employees	260582	294858	313410	330430
Premises	12990	13340	13840	22840 *
Transport	1458	2031	930	960
Supplies & Services	33982	38212	29650	34320
Support Services	78970	83910	88460	75250
Capital Financing	3171	3171	4590	5640
External Spend on Counsel	30,000	50,000	50,000	45,000 **
Income (s.106 Agreements costs and other successful litigation costs (the latter subject to fluctuation depending on the nature of litigation arising during the year).	45,000	67,000	76,000	60,000 ***
Net cost	376,153	418,522	424,880	454,440

* This Charge for premises has gone up due to the introduction of a new charge for storage use at Ringwood as well as inflation on gas and electricity.

** The annual spend on the use of Counsel which varies from year to year. In recent years, the use of specialist Counsel for Planning Inquiry work has increased due to the major increase in the number of Planning Inquiries. It is expected that during 2006/07, the use of Counsel will be less due to the loss of some of the planning work to the NPA.

*** A reduction is shown here in respect of expected income due to the loss of some planning work (including s.106's) to the NPA.

- 1.5 Over the last 5 years, there has been a significant growth in legislation which has directly affected the Team, for example, with the introduction of the Human Rights Act and the Freedom of Information Act. In very recent times, this trend has continued with the introduction of a significant amount of new legislation for example, the Licensing Act 2003, the Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003, The Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2004 and the Housing Act 2004 to name a few. The cumulative impact of all this new legislation represents a real challenge for the Team. Paragraph 5.12 below goes into this in more detail.
- 1.6 Key stakeholders for the service are the 'client' departments to which the Team provides advice. Further information is given in section 4 of the Plan to demonstrate levels of client satisfaction.
- 1.7 The loss of an experienced solicitor (albeit a part time post) has had an impact on the Team. It is proving virtually impossible to fill the vacancy. Whilst the post remains vacant, this extra pressure on the rest of the Team continues. The situation is not sustainable in the long term and it is hoped that the other current part time post holder

will increase her hours to cope with this extra work that is currently falling on the Team due to the vacancy.

2. CONTRIBUTION TO THE COUNCIL'S IMPROVEMENT PLAN

- 2.1 The Team, mainly through the work of the Head of Legal & Democratic Services in conjunction with the Democratic Services Manager has contributed and is continuing to contribute to the activities set out in the Council's Improvement Plan. Having reviewed the '**effectiveness of democratic arrangements including developing the role of review panels by reviewing structure**' in 2004, efforts are now being concentrated in the area of Member Training (item 3 of Council's Improvement Plan). To date, a significant number of training and development opportunities have been arranged for members. In addition, the Head of Legal & Democratic Services is currently leading a sub-Group looking at revisions to Standing Orders as to Contracts and other procurement issues. This feeds into and supports item 17 of the Council's Improvement Plan relating to procurement.

3. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

- 3.1 The Team is supportive of the Council's objective to obtain Level 3 in the Equalities Standard (item 15 of Improvement Plan). It has considered what it can do to '**promote equal opportunity and diversity**.' It has carried out an impact needs/ requirements assessment as required under the Equality Standard. While the nature of some work of the Legal Services Section for example, prosecutions, injunctions and other statutory legal notices, may have an adverse impact on individuals per se (in that there will invariably be a requirement to take certain action or refrain from doing something), there is no evidence that specific ethnic groups are affected to any greater extent.

However, if during the conduct of a case, it becomes apparent that a potential recipient of legal action has a difficulty in understanding the content of legal documentation, the Team will take reasonable steps to communicate it in a way understandable to the recipient, as long as that can be achieved without prejudicing the Council's position. In conclusion, the Team will, where necessary, review its Legal documentation and formal notices to ensure that recipients of legal correspondence (and notices) are not disadvantaged by reason of their disability or race in understanding the requirements of the correspondence or notices. In doing this, it will consult with the Equalities Team as to the best way of achieving this. The Improvement Plan at Appendix 5 picks this up.

4. RISK MANAGEMENT

- 4.1 Under Lexcel (see Section 7), the Team has to prepare a Risk Strategy to ensure that risks in providing legal advice to the Council as a whole are minimised as far as possible. The Risk Strategy is

contained in the Team's Office Manual (see paragraph 7.3 over) and requires the Head of Legal & Democratic Services to put in place mechanisms to deal with operational risks (i.e. risks that arise out of carrying out the client's instructions). For example, each fee earner is assessed to carry out work at a particular level (depending on their experience) and each new 'instruction' is only allocated to a team member who has previously been assessed as being capable of carrying out that particular piece of work.

- 4.2 The Council also has a Corporate Risk Management Policy and during 2006, the Team will be reviewing its procedures to ensure it complies with it.

5. ANALYSIS OF MEDIUM TERM ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEGAL SERVICES

5.1 Strengths

- high proportion of qualified staff
- professional base with knowledge of local government work and the Council
- quality services resulting in Accreditation by Law Society (Lexcel)
- good morale amongst team members
- highly motivated team
- flexibility in working arrangements
- low cost service
- immediate access to legal advice
- emerging 'Partnership' sharing good practice and resources
- well defined work practices

5.2 Weaknesses

- lack of experience amongst staff to undertake work at a more corporate level
- ability to retain good staff long term
- no spare in-house capacity
- lack of career development opportunities
- flexibility in working arrangements can mean the Section is left a bit thin on the ground in terms of cover (but someone is always available)
- low cost service can mean too few resources
- difficulty in filling vacant post

5.3 Opportunities

- to continue to be principal provider of legal services to the Council
- to become more experienced in wider range of legal work
- to produce more income for the Council (if resources permit)
- to develop 'Partnership' further to realise benefits

5.4 Challenges

- ever increasing legislative framework thus resulting in spreading our knowledge too thinly

- too few resources to cope with ever increasing demands on Team
- significant and onerous new duties on Monitoring Officer
- Planning Delivery Grant – if runs out or diminishes, this could have a significant impact on the Team and the Council in terms of ensuring adequate resources are in place to cover the significant increase in the number of Planning Inquiries.
- loss of some planning work to the National Park Authority

5.5 Information on benchmarking exercises can be found at section 5 of the Business Plan.

5.6 Often resources are stretched with the consequence that team members have to assume heavy and sometimes unrealistic workloads in order to get the job done. The Head of Legal & Democratic Services is mindful of the negative effect this could have on morale and stress levels. This is constantly monitored and appropriate action taken to address such issues when they arise.

Such action includes the outsourcing of work to Counsel as well as re-prioritising the existing workload of the fee earner in consultation with the client.

5.7 The Team's ability to retain good staff in the long term is vital. It is this factor, which counts as one of the biggest threats to the Section. The majority of fee earners have worked their way up to the top of the grades within their respective Bands and therefore, in financial terms, they cannot work towards a higher salary (apart from the inflationary increases). It is important to look to other ways to retain the Team members, including for example, providing an interesting, stimulating and flexible environment to work within.

5.8 The Section Head, the Head of Legal & Democratic Services has joined forces with lawyer colleagues across Hampshire by signing up to a 'Partnership Agreement' amongst the 14 authorities whereby expertise in a particular field and good practice will be shared amongst partners with the offer of assistance to carry out legal work, when time and resources permit. So far, there has not been a great deal of scope to undertake much partnership working on this basis due to pressure with existing workloads.

5.9 In the short to medium term, it will be necessary for the Team to obtain an upgrade to its current Case Management System. There is an existing bid (£7,000) as part of the ICT expenditure plan proposals for this. It is important that the existing software moves with the times.

5.10 In last year's Business Plan, there was concern expressed over the uncertainty surrounding the implementation of the new Licensing Act. A bid of £15k for 2005/06 was successful but this was for one year only.

Nearly 1 year later, it can be reported that whilst the volume of work was very high; 58 hearings had to be arranged over 3 months (with 48 actually taking place), with a qualified solicitor at every hearing, the Team had to prioritise this work over other work. This could only be

short term before other areas of work started to suffer. The whole new Licensing regime continues to be a challenge for the Team. Whilst the initial tranche of applications have now been dealt with, there will be an ongoing significant requirement for Legal Services to get involved not only in subsequent applications for variations but with enforcement work (including prosecutions and appeals). In addition, there is likely to be a new Gambling Act in the near future and it will be important for the Team to assess the implications of it.

- 5.11 In addition, another area of concern relates to the role of the Monitoring Officer. Over the last 2 years, the statutory responsibilities of the Monitoring Officer have been significantly extended. Quite apart from the new responsibilities under the Council's Executive decision making structures, the Monitoring Officer has also been charged with the responsibility for facilitating the new probity and ethical framework in Parish and Town Councils. This includes the statutory obligation to hold a Register of Financial and Other Interests for over 350 Parish and Town Councillors, as well as advising and training such members to observe the new Model Code of Conduct.

Further Regulations have very recently been made requiring Monitoring Officers to undertake investigations into member complaints (including Town and Parish members) at a local level. This type of work is invariably time consuming and this fact alone could be a threat to the Legal Services Section if the result is that the Monitoring Officer has less time to devote to Legal Services. It may well be that a future bid to assist the Monitoring Officer to carry out her statutory functions may be necessary. As can be seen from the Action Plan, this needs to be kept under strict review and appropriate steps taken to react to the challenge and to minimise the impact on the rest of the Legal Team.

- 5.12 The Team has carefully considered the impact on it arising from the transfer of some of the Council's Planning work to the National Park Authority (NPA) in April 2006. It is estimated that work amounting to approximately £20k (based on the internal recharging regime) will be lost to the NPA. However, new work coming Legal Services' way will more than fill any void. This new work arises from the following:

- **The Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2004**
Legal Services will be giving advice to, and carrying out litigation for, principally, Commercial Services and Environmental Health on the new regime of fixed penalty notices, for a whole range of conduct (including repairing cars on highways, dropping litter, graffiti, dog misdemeanours and other noise pollution acts)
- **Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003**
There are new powers under this Act to go to Court to "Demote a Tenancy" for anti-social behaviour. There are appeal mechanisms which will also involve the Legal Services Team. In addition, the Team is currently heavily involved in making applications to the courts for Anti-Social Behaviour Orders, which is a relatively new power (for which no extra resources was ever applied for)

- **Freedom of Information and Data Protection**
Although Legal Services is involved in this work to a significant extent, (over the last year the Head of Legal and Democratic Services has spent nearly 100 hours on the legislation), no bid has been requested for extra resources.
- **The Reuse of Public Sector Information**
CMT have decided on a strategy for dealing with this new legislation which allows us to have a 'licensing' regime over the 'reuse' of Council information and has charged the Head of Legal and Democratic Services and Head of Audit to put together a scheme including an Appeal mechanism similar to Freedom of Information regime.
- **The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004**
The Team is currently getting to grips with the new Act which contains a whole new policy framework regime and other new powers.

In addition to the above new legislation, the Team is facing an increase of other work in the following areas:-

- More Planning Inquiries – The Team will be undertaking more Planning Inquiries with less being undertaken by Counsel (due to the uncertainty in the future of the Planning Delivery Grant)
- There has been a general increase in work for both the Leisure and Housing departments of the Council, the latter being as a result of some significant ongoing litigation which is expected to go into 2006/07
- The Head of Legal and Democratic Services is currently heading up two corporate working groups – (a Procurement Working Party looking at Standing Orders as to Contracts (and other procurement issues) and a Gypsy Working Group (which is reacting to the new obligations imposed on local authorities in respect of gypsies and travellers which could well have financial implications for the Council as a whole especially if it has to provide transit / permanent gypsy sites).
- The Team's conveyancers, will be heavily involved during 2006/07 in the implementation of the new Asset Management System, mainly with the transfer of the Council land ownership details (including its housing stock) a task which could take many, many months to complete.

6. CONSULTATION

- 6.1 The team values feedback and welcomes views on the standard of service provided to its 'client' departments. The most recent client satisfaction survey was carried out in July 2005. Views were canvassed from all officers of the Council that used the Service

ranging from Directors, Heads of Service, Middle Managers to more junior employees.

6.2 Fifty-nine questionnaires were sent out with thirty-seven being returned. The detailed results are set out at Appendix 2.

6.3 Overall Results

When clients were asked how they rated the service provided by Legal Services overall, the following results were received:

Very Good / Good	84%
Satisfactory	16%

6.4 An issue which has been raised is a perceived lack of specialised expertise in certain areas such as contaminated land and on Health & Safety work. Whilst this has been identified as an area which could be improved it is not proposed that significant extra resources or effort be spent on training Team members in these areas, due to the infrequency of requests for legal advice on such matters. It is considered to be a better use of the Team's time and resources to concentrate on getting through their 'core' work effectively and efficiently and on the occasions that specialist legal advice is required on health & safety and contaminated land matters to seek external legal advice.

6.5 It is anticipated that the Customer Satisfaction Survey process will be repeated on a bi-annual basis.

7. PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

7.1 Legal Services is not subject to any statutory performance indicators but as a legal practice accredited with the Law Society's quality mark, 'Lexcel', certain Practice Management Standards (see further below) have to be adhered to.

7.2 The Practice Management Standards referred to in paragraph 5.1 are summarised in Appendix 3 and are all designed to meet the following objectives:

- to improve client care
- to increase efficiency
- to reduce costs
- to effectively deploy resources
- to minimise mistakes
- to improve morale and motivation of staff

7.3 The Section works to an office manual which documents all the requirements, procedures and processes that are required to be followed under the Lexcel scheme.

7.4 Annual assessments are carried by specially trained independent assessors who report to the Law Society as to whether the Department has complied with the requirements of the Practice

Management Standards under Lexcel. The Team's next assessment is due in January 2006.

7.5 **Benchmarking**

For some years now Legal Services has participated in a Hampshire wide Benchmarking Club exercise. This has proved useful especially in the field of planning law, which is a significant element of work for all local authority legal departments. The table at Appendix 4 gives some comparative data on the planning work undertaken by legal departments in three local authorities in Hampshire for the year 2002/2003. Unfortunately, there was no interest from colleague authorities to 'redo' the benchmarking exercise in the last couple of years. Every effort will be made to persuade Hampshire wide colleagues to participate next year.

7.6 **Other Comparative Data**

The Association of Council Secretaries and Solicitors (ACSES) (of which the Head of Legal & Democratic Services is a member) in 2002 produced some performance information to enable comparisons to be made between local authority legal departments. This rather more limited information is contained in the table below and in the second column, the updated figures for the Legal Services Section for 2005/06 have been inserted, although it has to be accepted that the ACSeS figures have not been revised because the exercise was a 'one off' exercise carried out in 2002, but nevertheless, it gives an idea of where the Section currently sits as against the national average in 2002.

	ACSES 2002	NFDC (Legal Services) 2005/06
Average cost of legal services as a % of authority's total resource costs	2.22%	1.32% (including on costs)
External Legal Services as a % of total legal cost	18.6%	11.09%

8. **SERVICE ACTION PLAN**

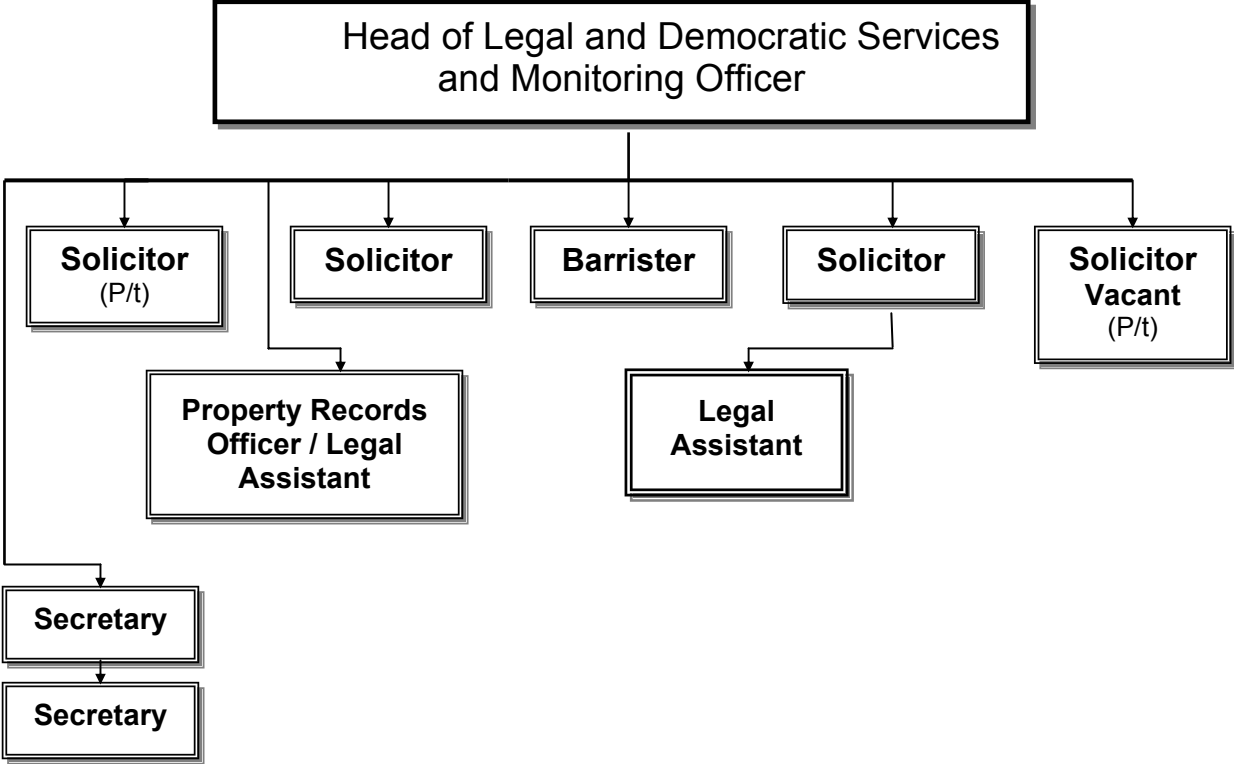
8.1 Appendix 5 contains the Section's Improvement Plan

9. **PROJECTION OF RESOURCES OVER THE NEXT FOUR YEARS**

9.1 There are a significant number of developments which could have a bearing on the Team's resources over the next 4 years. These mainly lie with the programme of new legislation that has been enacted recently. Whilst the loss of an element of Planning work to the NPA will help to relieve the pressure on the Team, the gap is immediately filled by a plethora of new legislation. It is a case of waiting to see the full effect of these

- 9.2 Secondly, as explained in more detail in paragraph 3.10 the role of the Monitoring Officer has been expanded significantly in recent years and has recently been further expanded by legislation. The Head of Legal & Democratic Services is also the Council's Monitoring Officer. Due to the increased demands on the Monitoring Officer (especially with an increase in more 'corporate' work), there is a real likelihood that less of her time will be spent strictly on Legal Services work, which of course will have implications for the Legal Services Section. There could therefore be a requirement for some additional resources in the new area of responsibility relating to the investigation of member complaints. The situation will be kept under strict review and reported to members at the earliest opportunity.
- 9.3 The Team has carefully considered issues surrounding 'workforce planning'. The continuing success of the Team depends on the current vacancy being filled. The current problems filling this post are proving challenging. Members of the Team have a wide range of skills and where it has been identified that there could be a particular skills shortage in for example, one area of the law as a result of a Team member leaving the Council, efforts are being made to share that particular expertise around other Team members. This is particularly true at the moment with the conveyancing skills of the post holder who has recently left being replicated by another full time post holder.

Legal Services



RESULTS FROM LEGAL SERVICES CLIENT SATISFACTION QUESTIONNAIRE

No. of questionnaires sent : 59
No. of questionnaires returned : 37
No. of questionnaires outstanding : 22

	Very Good/ Good	Satisfactory	Poor	No response
Completes work to the expected standard?	87%	13%		
Are approachable and willing to help?	87%	11%		2%
Provides positive solutions to problems and offers practical advice?	73%	25%		2%
Understands the context of the Client's work and needs?	82%	16%	2%	
Are well organised and available when needed?	76%	19%	5%	
Meets deadlines (and when deadlines are not met provides satisfactory explanations as to why this has not been possible)?	70%	25%	5%	
Inspires confidence when giving advice?	76%	24%		
Keeps Client fully informed of the progress of the case?	62%	22%	8%	8%
Liaises closely with the Client throughout the case to ensure the Council acts reasonably in all cases?	70%	19%	5%	6%
Represents good value for money?	65%	11%		24% (not budget holders so information not available)

Overall Results

When clients were asked how they rated the service provided by Legal Services overall, the following results were received:

Very Good / Good 84%
Satisfactory 16%

LEXCEL STANDARDS

Broadly the standards fall into six categories as follows:-

- **File Management and Procedures (*)**
This covers taking instructions, complaints handling, case planning and progress of matters, risk management, file review and client after care.
- **Miscellaneous Office Procedures**
This covers health and safety issues and the provision of legal reference material.
- **Managing People**
This covers the requirement to have up to date job descriptions, recruitment and performance appraisal policies and other staff training and supervision issues.
- **Finance and Accounting**
This covers the requirement to time record and the monitoring of budgets.
- **Meeting Client Needs**
This covers how services are provided to the client, future planning re cost-effectiveness, IT strategy and performance review issues.
- **Management Structure**
This covers responsibility of individuals and lines of accountability.

(*) By way of example, under the standard '**File Management and Procedures**', there are strict requirements that have to be adhered to in handling cases on behalf of clients. For example, all instructions coming into the Section have to be promptly acknowledged including details given as to the fee earner in charge of the matter and how the client goes about raising matters of concern, should there be any. In addition, this standard requires that clients be kept fully informed about the progress of their case and for fee earners to carry out frequent reviews of their cases/files.

This standard also imposes considerable operational stipulations on the team to ensure that not only files are well organised but the Section generally runs smoothly and effortlessly and the potential of any mistakes occurring are minimised through the implementation of an effective risk management process.

**PLANNING BENCHMARKING INFORMATION
2003 / 2004**

PLANNING FUNCTION	AUTHORITY 1	AUTHORITY 2	NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
1. Population of authority	114,810	110,000	172,399
2. Cost of Legal Services (total salaries for fee earners and admin staff excluding on-costs)	£335,250	£451,264	£338,000
3. No. of Enforcement Notices issued	2	20	20
4. Cost to client for Enforcement work	£12,000	£6,070	£29,000
5. No. of s.106 agreements completed	16	43	53
6. Cost to client for s.106 work	£5,000	£26,954	£21,000
7. No. of planning prosecutions	None	None	8
8. No. of Summonses issued	N/A	N/A	7
9. No. of successful prosecutions	N/A	N/A	6
10. Total value of in house planning work	£80,000	£149,764	£90,000
11. Value of planning work outsourced to Counsel etc.	£31,000	£85,624 (Current budget is £24,730 but due to major Inquires a greater amount has been spent)	£20 - 25 k

LEGAL SERVICES ACTION PLAN 2006/07

Issue	Action	By Whom	Timescale	Resource Implication	Link To Corporate Plan
1.	Prepare for the implementation of the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act and carry out training sessions for departments affected	Solicitors	2006	None expected	<p>Organisation of Excellence – 1.1 Develop our Employees; 1.3 – Improve our Performance</p> <p>Environmental well being – 5.1 Clean Streets and Public Spaces</p>
2.	Set up a new regime to comply with the Reuse of Public Sector Data in conjunction with Audit	HLDS	2006	None expected	<p>Organisation of Excellence - 1.3 – Improve our Performance</p> <p>Working with public and partners – 2.1 Involve the public</p>
3.	Identify in conjunction with Licensing Section what impact the new Gambling Bill will have on the Council	HLDS	2006/07	Uncertain	<p>Organisation of Excellence – 1.1 Develop our Employees and 1.3 – Improve our Performance</p>
4.	Finalise Capital Procurement Review and report back to Corporate Overview Panel	HLDS	2006	None expected	<p>Organisation of Excellence – 1.1 Develop our Employees and 1.3 – Improve our Performance</p>
5.	Take the lead on and prepare the Council for its new obligations under the Housing law and Planning law framework in respect of gypsies	HLDS	2006/07	Could well be financial implications for Council as a whole if new sites have to be provided	<p>Social well being – 4.5 – Social Inclusion and 4.6 Housing</p> <p>Organisation of Excellence – 1.5 Promote equal opportunity and diversity</p>

Issue	Action	By Whom	Timescale	Resource Implication	Link To Corporate Plan
6.	Keep under review the new investigative duties now imposed on Monitoring Officer and identify at earliest possible stage resource implications	HLDS	On-going	There could be resource implications – still too early to assess	Organisation of Excellence – 1.1 Develop our Employees and 1.3 – Improve our Performance
7.	Keep under review whether a party to legal proceedings requires assistance in interpretation of legal documentation and liaise with Equalities Section when necessary for advice/assistance	HLDS	On-going	Not likely to be significant	Social well being – 4.5 – Social Inclusion Organisation of Excellence – 1.5 Promote equal opportunity and diversity
8.	Review the impact on the Team arising from the implementation of the Council's new Asset Management System	HLDS	Ongoing	Uncertain	Organisation of Excellence – 1.1 Develop our Employees; 1.3 – Improve our Performance; 1.4 – Foster innovation in service delivery; and 1.7 – Make best use of new technology