

Quarterly report on Development Control Performance and Planning Delivery Grant 2006-7

Development Control and Environment, item 8

Committee:	Environment; Development Control	Agenda Item
Date:	6 and 7 June 2006	8
Title:	Quarterly Report on Development Control Performance and Planning Delivery Grant 2006-7	
Author:	John Mitchell, 01799 510450	Item for noting

Summary

This report is for consideration by both the Environment and Development Control Committees as it refers to the whole of the Planning Service and has implications for both Committees. It summarises the improvements that continue in the delivery of development control services since the end of 2003. Officers are pleased to advise that the Council is not a Standards Authority for 2006-7 and has been formally discharged from Scrutiny by the Department for Communities and Local Government (the successor to ODPM). The report also analyses recruitment and retention issues, the significant workload facing the service and recommends how the Planning Delivery Grant for the financial year 2006/7, which amounted to £534,274, should be spent.

Recommendations

1. That the improvements in service delivery be noted
2. That the position with regard to staffing, recruitment and workload be noted
3. That the Committee agree the areas for the use of Planning Delivery Grant in 2005/6 and delegate authority to apportion costs and spend the grant within the areas set out in the report, and as may be amended by the Committee, to the Executive Managers of Development Services and Finance and Asset Strategy

Background Papers

Final awards of Planning Delivery Grant 2006/7 from ODPM to be found at www.odpm.gov.uk/pub/892/PlanningDeliveryGrantFinalAllocations20062007_id1164892.xls

Impact

Communication/Consultation	None at this stage
Community Safety	None
Equalities	None

Quarterly report on Development Control Performance and Planning Delivery Grant 2006-7

Development Control and Environment, item 8

Finance	See report
Human Rights	None
Legal implications	None
Ward-specific impacts	All wards
Workforce/Workplace	See report

Situation

Development Control Performance

1 As part of the move towards better performance management Members agreed to receive quarterly reports on speed of decision in Development Control. The attached graphs show quarterly performance for each of the three Best Value targets for speed of decision over the last three years. In addition the charts show the trajectories for performance improvement that are necessary to meet the Best Value targets by 2006/7, and performance in relation to those trajectories. The BV targets are to determine: 60% of major applications in 13 weeks, 65% of minor applications in 8 weeks and 80% of all other applications in 8 weeks. Our performance for 2005-6 was, respectively 88%, 75% and 87%. The Council was a Standards Authority for 2005/6 because of poor performance in handling major applications in 2003/4, but we have not been designated a Standards Authority for 2006/7 because our performance has improved significantly.

2 The trajectories start from the last quarter of the financial year 2003-4, and the start point represents the average of performance up to that point, rather than the actual performance in that quarter. Members will recall that the Council was required share these trajectories with GoEast: the Council is no longer required to do so because of the sustained improvement in performance. It will be noted that performance exceeds the trajectories in all three categories, and continues to exceed the Best Value targets for all three categories of application. This follows the improvements in handling major applications by this Committee together with the changed delegation arrangements and improved performance management.

Recruitment and retention

3 Recruitment and retention remains a key issue. Recent advertising to recruit two planning officer posts was unsuccessful and staffing levels are being maintained by Agency staff. Along with all other local authorities it has proved very difficult to recruit experienced planning officers in the development control service. There are presently 6 staff studying for a planning qualification on day-release and while this is a sound investment for the future there is no capacity amongst qualified and experienced officers to manage further staff with similar training needs. Alternatives to conventional recruitment advertising are being explored. Members will recall from their meeting of 22nd February there is a shortfall of three planning officers in the

Quarterly report on Development Control Performance and Planning Delivery Grant 2006-7

Development Control and Environment, item 8

development control service identified by the then ODPM's consultants on the basis of a ratio of 1 officer per 150 cases annually, on top of the two vacancies referred to above. This shortfall is covered by external consultants and agency staff, paid for by Planning Delivery Grant and partly by the savings resulting from vacant posts. However the last tranche of PDG will be paid in 2007-8. An "exit strategy" from dependency on PDG will be presented as part of the budget-setting exercise for 2007-8, and Members should be aware that unless the balance is met there will inevitably be a significant reduction in the performance and staffing of the planning service. Capacity within the service is fragile. Given this background the continued improvement in performance is a credit to the commitment of all staff and to the quality of management of the service.

Service workload

4 The work programme currently facing the service is probably the most demanding in its history. The key areas are summarised below

- progression of the core strategy of the Local Development Framework through key stages
- commencement of work on general development control and site specific policies and associated master planning
- progression to adoption of Supplementary Planning Documents on replacement dwellings, energy efficiency and county-wide design guidance
- development and staffing of an economic and tourism development service
- responding to the Panel's report on the East of England Plan EIP and the Secretary of State's proposed changes to the plan
- undertaking conservation area character appraisals – a new BVPI
- the current planning application for expansion of Stansted Airport
- responding to consultations on the preparation of the application for a second runway, and preparing to process the application
- the current planning application for the Friends School
- other major planning applications, such as Prior's Green, Rochford Nurseries, Woodlands Park and Oakwood Park
- negotiations over pending proposals such as the development of land at Ashdon Road, Caton's Lane and the possibility of expansion of major retail stores in the district. All of these may lead to significant applications this year
- a high appeals workload, including a significant appeal at Oakwood Park
- a 6% increase in planning applications overall

Quarterly report on Development Control Performance and Planning Delivery Grant 2006-7

Development Control and Environment, item 8

5 This list of tasks emphasises the fragility of capacity within the planning service overall. Clearly any loss of staff or additional unforeseen workload, given that the DC service is essentially reactive, may have an impact on the deliverability of these projects. It is emphasised that this high level of work is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. While many of these tasks may appear to be short term projects, the progress of the East of England Plan to its adoption, the need to move forward preparation of the LDF in a timely manner, the resultant planning applications and the proposed second runway will continue to have significant implications for the workload of the service, which will remain under pressure in the short, medium and long terms.

Planning Delivery Grant 2006-7

6 Members will recall that in December the provisional awards for the development control element of Planning Delivery Grant were announced. This was based on a combination of factors, including meeting the BV109 targets and the extent of improvements in the nine months ending in June 2005. Uttlesford was awarded £360,261 as the development control element of the grant (the best in Essex). The remainder of the Grant was announced in March 2006 and the total for 2006/7 is **£534,274**, comprising £19,572 for e-planning, £55,942 for being in an area of high housing demand, £45,883 for being located in a growth area and £52,525 for being on target with the preparation of the LDF. This one of the highest awards in the country.

- 7 PDG is presently allocated towards
- New IT equipment, such as up to date PC's, new scanning and plan-printing equipment
 - New IT software to ensure e-planning
 - Contributions towards the preparation of Parish Plans and Village Design Statements
 - Consideration of assisting Parish Councils with IT issues
 - Enforcement trainee salary
 - Continued payment of market supplements for staff
 - Training for members and staff
 - An earmarked sum to assist with high hedges work, if required
 - Continued employment of agency staff and consultants on planning application, appeals and planning policy/conservation work
 - In house or consultancy provision of biodiversity and wildlife expertise
 - Retention of management consultants for infrequent "light touch" monitoring and review of performance systems
 - Miscellaneous small-scale expenditure such as new furniture and small scale pro-rata contributions to county-wide planning and environmental initiatives

8 It is considered that these areas of expenditure will remain to be covered in 2006-7. Given that the Grant will come to an end in 2008 it would be wise to ensure

Quarterly report on Development Control Performance and Planning Delivery Grant 2006-7

Development Control and Environment, item 8

that this year's grant is used as a firm foundation for the future development of the planning service. It is considered that a significant investment for the future will be the scanning of all the Departments essential paper and microfilmed records and files. This will ensure that they are all available electronically for all, will free up much needed space (the service is reliant on the offices at Great Dunmow for most of its archive storage, and will ensure that the service is robust for business continuity purposes.

9 The detailed costing of these is still being evaluated. Members are invited to agree the areas for expenditure and to suggest, if necessary, any further areas where the grant could be used. It is suggested that, provided expenditure is kept within the limits of the Grant, the detailed apportioning of costs should be delegated to staff.

Conclusion

10 Improvements in the development control service continue with performance remaining above the standard that the Government want all authorities to achieve by March 2007. The Council is not a standards authority for 2006/7 and is formally disengaged from Government scrutiny. Finally, the sustained improvements in service delivery have resulted in the Council being awarded a high Planning Delivery Grant in Essex, which it is proposed to spend as earmarked above. Concerns over staffing levels and recruitment and retention continue, and 2006/7 and beyond will be a very demanding year for all elements of the planning service. While Officers have sought to ensure that the service does not become dependent on PDG it is inevitable that its withdrawal in 2008 will cause a marked decline in service delivery unless an appropriate exit strategy is devised and implemented – this will have significant revenue implications. These matters will be considered in a future report to this Committee. In the meantime, Officers and Members are to be congratulated on excellent performance to date.

Risk Analysis

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigating actions
Unable to recruit experienced or fully qualified planning officers to fill vacant posts	High	High	Use of consultants and agency staff in short term. Explore new methods of recruitment
Planning Delivery Grant ends in 2008, leaving the DC service with a shortfall of 3 staff to meet best practice requirements,	High	High	Devise robust exit strategy in time for budget setting for 2007-8

**Quarterly report on Development Control Performance and Planning Delivery
Grant 2006-7**

Development Control and Environment, item 8

loss of retention measures for existing staff, loss of trainee enforcement officer post			
Very high workload for service in 2006/7 results in performance downturn	High	High	Officers have sought to manage workload, e.g. by taking airport application outside mainstream DC meetings