

**Committee:** Performance Select

**Agenda Item**

**Date:** 2 February 2010

**9**

**Title:** Performance of the Planning Service

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Item for information

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## Summary

- 1 This report is brought forward following the decision of PSC at its previous meeting should speed of decision on planning applications not improve during the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of the financial year. Although speed of decision remains above target for major planning applications it is below target for minor and other applications. The rate of decline is slowing significantly. The service is being substantially restructured to address these and other issues.

## Recommendations

That the actions of officers to improve performance are noted.

## Background Papers

## Impact

Communication/Consultation	None – for information
Community Safety	None
Equalities	No equalities or diversity implications of this position statement
Finance	The award of HPDG will add short term resource to the service. Failure to meet NI157 targets will reduce HPDG next year. A Conservative Government would abolish HPDG.
Legal implications/Human Rights	None
Sustainability	None
Ward-specific impacts	All
Workforce/Workplace	Set out in the report

**Situation**

- 2 Performance in development control was the subject of significant improvement following a Best Value review and inspection in 2003/4. By 2005 all three targets were being comfortably exceeded and that remained the position until the first quarter of 2009/10, thanks to a disciplined and strict regime of performance management. During all that time the service suffered from chronic shortage of staff and a high staff turnover because of the difficulties of recruiting and retaining qualified planning officers in a prosperous economy, and despite regular recruitment drives there were at any one time a number of vacant posts. Nonetheless, performance was grant-related and the planning service brought in over £1.3m in Planning Delivery Grant up to 2007. The service was restructured as part of the management review in 2006/7 – two planning control managers (north and south) competed for the post of Head of Division, with the unsuccessful candidate becoming responsible for major projects. The Executive Manager post was re-titled Director of Development and the role expanded beyond service management.
  
- 3 In 2007/8 the Planning Service was, like many other services within the Council, the subject of unplanned cuts in staffing because of the need to address a gap in Council budgeting. All vacant posts save one, and some occupied posts, were eliminated to save money: this included the economic development and tourism development functions, admin and planning officer posts in development control, all enforcement officer posts and the Council's architect. The surviving planning officer vacancy was utilised to retain the Energy Efficiency Surveyor in Building Control. In short the service overall lost some 12 posts. In late 2007 the Head of Development Control left, and the post was abolished with the function being subsumed into the then Director of Development's role. These changes were agreed and noted by F&A Committee in January – the report spelled out the probable consequences as being a reduction in performance. Later in 2008 the Director of Development was also given the role of Acting Chief Executive and the management capacity of the service was reduced further. The Major Projects Officer became responsible for DC performance and management, Lead Officer at DC Committee as well as major projects – a significant workload. The Head of Planning and Housing Policy took on the role of Acting Director of Development, but his substantive post was not backfilled for budgetary reasons, creating a further management capacity reduction. Planning is high on the national agenda and throughout this period many changes to the planning system have been introduced and continue to be proposed. These have to be assimilated and acted on by the Directorate.

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- 4 The Planning Service, unlike most other Councils, has retained a high level of workload. In 2009 and continuing into 2010 applications have been submitted for developments of a scale and complexity unusual in the District. At the time the Council agreed the cuts it was anticipated that the recession would result in a decline in significant, time consuming applications. That has not occurred. In fact, despite market conditions, an unusually high number of these large applications has been received. Significant officer time is being spent on fighting the five week Windfarm inquiry. The extensive workload around the LDF and reduced resources in the planning policy team has meant that there was limited flexibility within the service to divert resources to Development Control.
- 5 The outcome of a Business Improvement review of the Development Service was approved in 2008, to improve the capacity of the service given the impact of the reduction in staffing in 2007. The review has involved the investment of significant time by planning staff. Existing problems were further exacerbated by long term sickness of professional, senior and administrative staff, combined with the retirement of experienced staff. The service took on agency staff to help with the workload, but the quality was inadequate to meet the needs of the service and its customers. Budgetary constraints prevented a major investment in staffing. Performance management relaxed in the face of an overwhelming workload.
- 6 The Improvement Review is being implemented. Fundamentally it comprises smarter ways of working to reduce the number of processes involved in dealing with planning work. After an initial investment in training and other resources during implementation of new ways of working it is anticipated that efficiencies will be achieved.
- 7 Long term sickness issues remain with two staff being absent for over three months, other long term absentees having now returned as other issues have been resolved. Staffing also has been increased with permanent replacement appointments being made to key posts in Development Control together with short term and agency appointments following the award of Housing and Planning Delivery Grant.
- 8 The current position in Development Control is: 12 FTE (Full Time Equivalent) Planners, specialist officers and Technicians, 3 agency and fixed term staff, 8.53 FTE admin staff measured against an establishment of 12 full time staff, 0 agency and fixed term staff, 11 FTE admin staff. In addition the Directorate is currently employing two fixed term staff to perform the planning duties of the CSC prior to these duties being transferred in Autumn 2010. Work in hand comprises 291 applications which includes a small number of applications which have received resolutions for the granting of permission but have yet to be issued due to the negotiation of a S106 (legal) agreement.

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- 9 The decline in performance was forecast and accepted in 2007. Continuing budgetary constraints in combination with long term absences, retirements and continuing recruitment problems and a relentless workload, gave rise to a marked decline in performance. The Council's improving financial position, the award of HPDG and the restructuring of the service with a renewed focus on strong performance management, using re-introduction of a tried and tested methodology, will bring about lasting improvement.
- 10 The Government will be consulting on a new way of measuring DC performance that involves overall satisfaction rather than crude speed of decision so as to take in the quality of a decision, not just how quickly it is taken. This will also need to be embraced.

### Risk Analysis

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Likelihood</b>	<b>Impact</b>	<b>Mitigating actions</b>
Performance fails to improve	2 – resources are now in place	3 – loss of HPDG, customer complaints	Restructuring and performance management
The service restructures around NI157 performance targets that are abolished	1	1	Speed of decision is a component of quality

1 = Little or no risk or impact

2 = Some risk or impact – action may be necessary.

3 = Significant risk or impact – action required

4 = Near certainty of risk occurring, catastrophic effect or failure of project.