

Committee: Environment and Transport, Development Control and Licensing, Resources Committees
Date: 10th June, 16th June and 26th June 2003
Agenda Item No: 5(i)
Title: The Planning Delivery Grant and performance of the Planning Service
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Summary

- 1 At their meeting of 13th March 2003 Members were informed of the Planning Delivery Grant, which amounts to £246,261 for Uttlesford – the 34th highest allocation in the country. A copy of the report previously considered, which sets out the background, is attached. The report concluded: *Officers consider that the priorities that present themselves are:*
 - *The appointment of independent consultants to carry out the Best Value Review of Planning Services*
 - *Bringing forward the appointment of new staff following the approved restructuring of Planning Services*
 - *Funding the appointment of temporary staff to reduce “pressure points” in workload*
 - *Improvements in IT*
 - *Staff and Member training*
 - *Outsourcing handling of planning appeals and consideration of outsourcing certain categories of planning applications*
 - *Technical and administrative support for the Enforcement Service.* The Committee Resolved: that officers prepare a costed improvement and delivery plan for implementing the priorities in paragraph 17 of the report to take maximum advantage of the grant resources available
- 2 This report sets out the current position in planning services and how Officers consider the Grant should be spent so as to bring about short and long term improvements for the service. It also makes reference to the need for service improvements and recommends the creation of new posts which would have revenue implications. It has been considered and approved by both E&T and DC&L Committees.

Background

Current Performance

- 3 The situation set out in paras 7-10 of the 11th March report remain today, although the close of year figures on performance are as follows

Performance Indicator	Govt. Target	UDC Performance
% Major applications determined in 13 weeks	60%	32%
% Minor applications determined in 8 weeks	65%	39%
% All other applications determined in 8 weeks	80%	66%

- 4 It is apparent that during the last financial year some 1460 hours of paid overtime were worked in development control. This does not include Time Off In Lieu (TOIL) which is approximately half as much again. Although the effect of this is broadly neutral it does indicate that the equivalent of one full time post is being worked as overtime.

Best Value

- 5 Tentative and informal approaches have been made to a range of consultants and a range of between £50,000 and £75,000 have been put forward. It is emphasised that no formal tendering process has been commenced and these figures are very rough.
- 6 A comprehensive survey of all the customers of the service will need to be carried out as part of the Best Value review.

Bringing forward posts

- 7 The restructuring of the planning service as it effects Development Control involves the deletion of the posts of Development Control Manager, Principal Planning Officer and Chief Administrative Officer, and the creation of two Team Leaders with an additional 1.5 new planning officer posts in Development Control. These are about to be advertised. The principal planning officer and the chief administrative officer have already left the service and the Development Control Manager retires at the end of October. The 1.5 new planning officer posts in development control, which are about to be advertised. One of these is currently occupied by an agency member of staff. The workload in the section amounts to some 1800 planning applications per annum. There are approximately 16 staff permanently working on development control matters (including administrative support) each with an average of 112 applications per head. This is high in relation to the national average of 91. It is considered that the 0.5fte post should be enlarged to be a full time post, at a cost of approximately £15,000 including on costs. The scope for taking on additional planning officers also needs to be investigated.
- 8 It is becoming apparent that the amount of work required of the team leaders in the new structure has been underestimated. This now includes fee checking and validation of applications which is proving time consuming, combined with the checking of draft decision notices, both vital and time consuming tasks. There is also a need for a person to carry out day-to-day filing and sundry other issues, including assisting the Head of Service.

Overtime worked by admin staff over the last year was 1,460 hours, plus TOIL of half as much again. This, plus the additional duties, would justify a new admin post at scale 1-3 (or 4 depending on current claim for parity)

IT

- 9 Document Imaging was introduced in the Development Control Service on 1st April. This enables all planning applications and associated correspondence to be held electronically, and will enhance the planning website by enabling planning applications to be viewed on the internet. It will be a significant improvement to the service and its accessibility for the public, as well as benefiting Officers. Document Imaging requires all documents, whether plans or related correspondence, to be “scanned in”. It was initially considered that economies of scale after the move to Saffron Walden would obviate the need for duplicate functions to be carried out (such as the handling of incoming and outgoing mail), thus freeing up staff to scan in documents. This has not proved to be the case. The correspondence generated by the planning service is very high and the capacity was not available at Saffron Walden to handle the volumes of mail generated. Planning staff are required to assist in the Mail Room every day and effectively carry out all the functions previously carried out in Great Dunmow. Consequently only the very rudimentary functions of document imaging are carried out, which amounts to the scanning in of new applications but no additional correspondence. Although permanent staff have been trained in, and carry out, document imaging, temporary agency staff have had to be employed to cover for their normal duties at a cost equivalent to approximately £25,000 pa, and to cover for maternity leave. Moreover planning staff seldom have cause to refer to the document imaging system because it is not comprehensive. This is not a satisfactory situation.
- 10 Officers are working with Remploy to employ a person on a contract basis using PDG to carry out full time scanning duties so as to enable document imaging to be comprehensive and usable. This is likely to cost in the region of £20,000 with on-costs.
- 11 With document imaging comes a need to improve the monitors used by Officers to give better definition of plans etc, and to provide terminals for visiting members of the public. Flat screens will need to be purchased at a cost of approximately £269 per terminal, or approximately £10,100.

Staff and Member Training

- 12 The opportunity should be taken to use some of the PDG for training, for both officers and members. No programme has yet been finalised as appraisals are still occurring but approximately £10,000 could be set aside for this.

Enforcement

- 13 The enforcement service is provided by two staff, with administrative support coming from the administrative support within the area development control teams. The administrative support does not have a high priority in relation to

planning applications, where the need to process applications within the statutory 8 week period is paramount. It is considered that PDG could be used to employ a trainee enforcement officer on a contract basis who also has responsibility for the administrative functions of the service. The cost would be approximately £20,000 with on-costs.

Outsourcing and use of agency staff

- 14 The Service has outsourced planning appeals and inquiries to consultants for some years now. Part of the savings package to meet the £50,000 target was the abandonment of the budget for external consultants. PDG gives the opportunity to remedy this situation. The possibility of outsourcing some planning applications has also been investigated: at £80 per application 250 applications could be dealt with for £20,000. These would be straightforward householder applications. It compares favourably with the cost of a planning officer, which is a maximum of £31,435 with on costs, for an equivalent number of applications. It is stressed however that this comparison is not strictly applicable because a case officer's workload will include many more complex items than householder applications. The advantage would be that workload would be taken away from existing staff, enabling more time to be spent on more complex applications.
- 15 As well as outsourcing Officers will continue to use temporary staff, whether from agencies or on short contracts, where it is of benefit to the service. Agency and contract staff will continue to be employed while the document imaging situation is resolved.

- 16 Summary
a) Use of Planning Delivery Grant

Item	Expenditure	Improvement
Consultants for BV Review	£50,000	Better service for all customers arising from whole-service review and improvement plan, including planning policy and conservation
Staff for document imaging @ s1-3	£20,000	Improved access to the planning system for all
New screens	£10,000	Better use of document imaging by staff
New Enforcement staff @ s1-3	£20,000	Better service in response to complaints about slow action on enforcement matters. Improved speed of planning

		decisions with dedicated enforcement administrative function
Member and staff training	£10,000	Improved understanding of the planning system and better working practices and customer care
Investigation of outsourcing and use of agency/contract staff. Use of consultants for planning appeals and inquiries and for specialised assistance where no alternative budget is available. Possible interim use of grant to assist with funding the two posts below.	£80,000	Quick turnaround of basic planning applications. Better performance figures
Total	£190,000	

b) Items with Revenue implications

Item	Approx. Expenditure	Improvement
New administrative assistant at scale 1-3	£17,140	Removal of administrative functions from professional officers. Justified by amount of overtime worked by DC staff. Better overall service to customers.
Enhancement of one 0.5fte planning officer to 1 full time equivalent planning officer	£15,700	Better service to customers. Improved speed of determination of planning applications

Conclusion

- 17 The proposed apportionment of PDG, together with improvements which have revenue implications, would be of considerable long term benefit while at the same time attacking the present problems which affect the service. The Best Value Review and Improvement Plan would lay down a firm basis for future improvement and consolidation of the service, which additional members of staff, and research of alternative means of provision, would help with the problems of the service as they are today.

Recommendation

a) to approve one-off supplementary estimates for the following items to be funded from PDG in the current year:

Planning Management and Admin	- Consultants	- £50,000
	- Training	- £10,000
	- Staffing Costs	- £20,000
Enforcement	- Staffing Costs	- £20,000
Development Control	- Data Processing	- £10,000
	- External Support Services	- £80,000

b) to approve supplementary estimates for the two permanent additional posts from July 2003 to be funded from PDG in the current year:

Planning Management & Admin	- Staffing Costs	- £12,900
Development Control	- Staffing Costs	- £11,800

c) that the balance of PDG of £31,561 be transferred to an earmarked reserve for use subject to further decisions.

Background Papers: Report to E&T, DC&L and Resources Committees, March 2003,