

CABINET ITEM COVERING SHEET PROFORMA

AGENDA ITEM

REPORT TO CABINET

9 MARCH 2006

**REPORT OF CORPORATE
MANAGEMENT TEAM**

COUNCIL DECISION / KEY DECISION

Regeneration and Transport – Lead Cabinet Member – Councillor Cook

PLANNING PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT PLAN

1. Summary

This report presents a comprehensive performance improvement plan for the Planning Service for consideration and approval to improve the speed and efficiency of the planning system to enable the service to move forward and meet performance targets.

2. Recommendations

1. That the performance improvement plan be approved and the actions and measurements authorised.
2. Members note the financial implications arising from the performance improvement plan, particularly over the uncertainty of future PDG, and that this be considered within the 2006/07 budget medium term financial plan review.
3. That a further report is presented to cabinet when the emerging funding regime relating to PDG becomes clear.

3. Reasons for the Recommendations

The Government has set out an agenda for the delivery of a planning service appropriate for the 21st century. This was manifest in the new Planning Act (**Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004**) and also in the establishment of the **Planning Delivery Grant** regime, which has now been in operation for three years. In terms of the processing of applications, the government established new national targets, broken down by categories of development and Local Planning Authority's were rewarded for their progress towards meeting these targets. It is required that all LPA's reach these standards by March 2007.

Performance within Development Control has failed to meet performance targets for a well-documented range of reasons. Set against this background, the Environment and Regeneration Select Committee carried out a scrutiny review of the service in summer 2005, highlighting the need for Planning to develop a new performance improvement plan, to put a range of options in place to overcome the problems with performance and staffing.

4. Members Interests

Members (including co-opted members with voting rights) should consider whether they have a personal interest in the item as defined in the Council's code of conduct (paragraph 8) and, if so, declare the existence and nature of that interest in accordance with paragraph 9 of the code.

Where a Member regards him/herself as having a personal interest in the item, he/she must then consider whether that interest is one which a member of the public, with knowledge of the relevant facts, would reasonably regard as so significant that it is likely to prejudice the Member's judgment of the public interest (paragraph 10 of the code of conduct).

A Member with a prejudicial interest in any matter must withdraw from the room where the meeting is being held, whilst the matter is being considered; not exercise executive functions in relation to the matter and not seek improperly to influence the decision about the matter (paragraph 12 of the Code).

Further to the above, it should be noted that any Member attending a meeting of Cabinet, Select Committee etc.; whether or not they are a member of the Cabinet or Select Committee concerned, must declare any personal interest which they have in the business being considered at the meeting, and if their interest is prejudicial, they must also leave the meeting room during consideration of the relevant item.

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PLANNING PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT PLAN

SUMMARY

This report presents a comprehensive performance improvement plan for the Planning Service for consideration and approval to improve the speed and efficiency of the planning system to enable the service to move forward and meet performance targets.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the performance improvement plan be approved and the actions and measurements authorised, with associated financial input as required.
2. Members note the financial implications arising from the performance improvement plan, particularly over the uncertainty of future Planning Delivery Grant, and that this is considered within the 2006/07 budget medium term financial plan review.
3. That a further report is presented to cabinet when the emerging funding regime relating to PDG becomes clear.

DETAIL

1. The Government has set out an agenda for the delivery of a planning service appropriate for the 21st century. This was manifest in the new Planning Act (**Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004**) and also in the establishment of the **Planning Delivery Grant** regime, which has now been in operation for three years. In terms of the processing of applications, the government established new national targets, broken down by categories of development and Local Planning Authority's were rewarded for their progress towards meeting these targets. It is required that all LPA's reach these standards by March 2007.
2. Performance within Development Control has failed to meet performance targets for a well-documented range of reasons. Set against this background, the Environment and Regeneration Select Committee carried out a scrutiny review of the service in summer 2005, highlighting the need for Planning to develop a new performance improvement plan, to put a range of options in place to overcome the problems with performance and staffing.
3. In terms of the processing of applications, the government established new national targets, broken down by categories of development, known as BVPI 109a, b and c, covering major, minor and other applications. Local Planning Authorities (LPA) are rewarded for their progress towards meeting these targets in respect of funding through Planning Delivery

Grant (PDG). It is required that all LPA reach these standards by March 2007. However Stockton will only secure in the region of £100,000 in terms of PDG in 2006/2007, compared to over £530,000 in the current year, due to poor performance in determining applications in the period September 2004-June 2005. This leaves a funding shortfall.

4. In addition to setting national targets, the government also introduced minimum standards of performance. All local authorities are required to deliver services which met these minimum levels. Those authorities who demonstrated performance consistently below the minimum level were designated 'standards authorities' and had to improve their levels of performance or face sanctions. In the worst case, it was suggested that the service might need to be provided outside of the LPA directly on behalf of the ODPM, however to date no LPA has experienced intervention. Authorities who were designated as standards authorities have to put in place immediate improvement strategies and have regular contact with ODPM over the performance improvements over the course of the year. In 2004, Stockton was designated as a standards authority, having demonstrated consistently low levels of performance in 2002 and part of 2003. Performance did improve for a period, resulting in Stockton being taken out of special measures and made an amber authority, kept under review by the ODPM.
5. In response to the issues of poor performance, a number of direct and immediate responses were made to the delivery of the planning service. These responses covered administrative, political and resource areas of the service as follows; -
 - Creation and implementation of a performance improvement plan.
 - Appointment of additional professional staff
 - Additional technical staff supporting principle officers
 - Additional administrative staff to assist with the validation and issuing of decision notices.
 - A restructuring of the area teams to provide for greater management focus.
 - Establishment of an internal service improvement group. (SIG)
 - Improved management information system.
6. During 2004/05 consultancy firm Addison & Associates (A&A) undertook an evaluation of the 2004/05 planning standards authorities on behalf of the ODPM, and Stockton Borough Council (SBC) was amongst the Authorities assessed. Highlighted in particular in that report were the following issues:
 - The need for an updated improvement plan with a specific focus on dealing with major applications.
 - The need for progress reports to be submitted on a quarterly basis to GONE.
 - The projected caseload of around 150 per FTE planning officer is just about sustainable but only if staff turnover is reduced and does not remain at historic (high) levels.
 - There are no separate appeals staff on the establishment, which increases the day-to-day caseload for those dealing with ordinary applications.
 - 30% of applications received during 2003/4 were initially invalid
 - Based on national comparisons there are a high number of site visits made by the committee and a high rate of member decisions made against officer advice.
 - Sustaining high levels of delegation will be important to delivering continued good performance.

It further suggested that consideration should be given to improvements in the following areas: -

- Updating the original improvement plan to reflect current challenges, any delays in process, and explicit process improvements with a focus on major applications.
- Identifying key barriers to achieving national targets for major applications.

- Addressing the issues around the impact created on performance of staff turnover

7. However, despite this, performance from December 2004 started to fall again, due to a high number of staff vacancies that arose from people departing the authority, problems recruiting into these posts, staff illness and maternity leave, the inexperience of staff and the sheer volume of planning applications, enquiries and complaints still being received.
8. Against this background, the Environment and Regeneration Select Committee carried out a scrutiny review of the service between June to October 2005, and a number of recommendations were made. An ISO 9001 inspection also took place, along with an internal Systems Audit. A combination of all the above documents has formed the basis of the Performance Improvement Plan. (PIP)
9. The PIP is structured around seven main objectives: -
 1. Supporting and Improving Efficient Processing of Applications
 2. Providing a Quality Service
 3. Develop Resources and Involve Staff
 4. IT Development
 5. Improve Appeals Process
 6. Enhance Enforcement Process
 7. Improving Performance by Monitoring and Review

A series of actions to support the objectives is proposed, with measures and management information data to ensure that targets are being met and potential blockages or problems highlighted at an early stage. This will allow priorities to be re-assessed and resources adjusted accordingly. Each action has been risk assessed, with mitigation measures highlighted, and resource implications estimated.

10. These resources cannot be met out of the existing managed budget and require additional funding. Should this funding not be forthcoming, then the main actions to achieve the objectives will not be met, and the service will fail to improve and meet the targets. This will affect BVPI scores, potentially reduce the score of the Environment block within CPA and reduce the effectiveness in attaining PDG grant. Recruitment and retention issues would remain as at present.
11. If the actions within the PIP are achieved, then performance will improve, staffing problems be addressed, and the workload of individual officers brought into line with the recommended levels. This will raise morale and help prevent the high turnover of staff. Public satisfaction levels will correspondingly increase, and the service able to offer a first class service to the citizens of the area and all stakeholders.

Conclusion

The suggested package of measures would significantly update the delivery of planning services and are an important demonstration of the commitment to making improvements. The progress of the improvements overall will be the subject of detailed scrutiny and review, and it is recommended that the document be fully endorsed to provide a planning service fit for the 21st century.

FINANCIAL AND LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

Financial

Capital and revenue spend within the plan are not within the current resource allocation and will require funding through the medium term financial plan. Planning fees and potential PDG will also fund some of the measures, although this is dependent on increased performance in the first instance.

Funding sought through the Medium Term Financial Plan is £250,000 for 2006/2007. The shortfall in future years to cover the 3-year timescale of the PIP, are estimated as £778,780 in 2007/08 and £828,196 in 2008/09. This would be offset by any PDG allocation awarded and efficiencies from implementing service improvements.

Legal

Local Authority planning obligations contained in various statutory provisions

RISK ASSESSMENT

Planning Service contributes to the authority's overall CPA rating, with key indicators failing to achieve government targets. This risk is mitigated by the implementation of the PIP

COMMUNITY STRATEGY IMPLICATIONS

Planning is integral to Liveability and Economic regeneration. The proposal has no direct impact upon community safety.

CONSULTATION INCLUDING WARD/COUNCILLORS

Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Transport
Chairman of Environment and Regeneration Select Committee
Chairman and Vice Chairman of Planning Committee

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Background Papers: Environment and Regeneration Select Committee Scrutiny Review, Addison's report on behalf of the ODPM, Development Control Performance Improvement Report Reviewed April 2005, ISO Review 2005

Ward(s) and Ward Councillors: All Councillors

Property

N/A