

DELEGATED

AGENDA No.

REPORT TO PLANNING
COMMITTEE

DATE 31st May 2006

REPORT OF HEAD OF
PLANNING

PLANNING PERFORMANCE

Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to update members on the current performance of the planning section for the year 1st April 2004 to 31st March 2005 and to advise members of the current position.

Recommendation

That planning committee notes this report and the issues raised within, and further quarterly reports will be presented to Members to monitor performance, achieve targets and highlight any areas for further action within the current year.

Background

1. A key part of the domestic agenda of the last government was to modernise and reform the delivery of the planning service. This was manifest in the new Planning Act (**Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004**) and also in the establishment of the **Planning Delivery Grant** (PDG) regime, which is now well established.
2. Initially a sum of £350 million was set aside to help Local Planning Authorities (LPA) modernise their services over a three-year period. After an initial minimum allocation in year one, future years receipt of PDG was dependant upon individual LPA's making progress towards the government agenda. Subsequently the government extended the period of the grants availability for a further two years, with the last allocation being granted for the year 2007-2008. Stockton has been allocated £99,633 for the current year, with 25% of this to be spent on capital projects.
3. In terms of the processing of applications, the government established new national targets, broken down by categories of development and LPA's were rewarded for their progress towards meeting these targets. It is required that all LPA reach these standards by March 2007. Members will be aware that this refers to the BVPI 109 a, b and c, where 60% of all major applications must be determined within 13 weeks (109a), 65% of minor within 8 weeks (109b) and 80% of others within 8 weeks (109c).

4. In addition to setting national targets, the government also introduced minimum standards of performance. All local authorities were required to deliver services, which met these minimum levels. Those authorities who had demonstrated performance consistently below the minimum level were designated 'standards authorities' and were told that they needed 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, now Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). Authorities who were designated as standards authorities had to put in place immediate improvement strategies and would have a close dialogue with DCLG 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 DCLG.

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 in 2004 and 2005. 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.
 - Improved management information system.

6. From the end of 2002 until 2004 overall performance showed a steady rise and the national targets for 'minor and 'other' categories were met. Progress on 'major applications' was somewhat erratic over the period and overall is below the national target and intervention standard. However we receive fewer major applications than any other category and the final year-end outturn can be affected significantly by just a few applications being determined within the time period.

Current position

7. During 2004/2005, performance fell due to well-documented and reported reasons. This resulted in the Environment and Regeneration Select Committee carrying out a review of the service from June to October 2005, with the report published in November 2005. The main findings of the report are attached at Appendix 1. From this, a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) was drawn up. 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
8. A series of actions to support the objectives was 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. However, the measures proposed in the PIP will have most effect in the current year, although success in minor and others was being realised in the last two quarters of 2005.

BVPI 109 Performance indicators

9. The tables below illustrate the position over the last year i.e. 2004/2005.

2005/2006

	Q1 April/June			Q2 July/Sept		
	Determined within period		percent	Determined within period		percent
major	13	6	46.15%	15	6	40.00%
minor	97	60	61.86%	124	74	59.68%
other	383	273	71.28%	385	302	78.44%
overall	493	334	67.75%	524	380	72.52%

	Q3 Oct/Dec			Q4 Jan/Mar		
	Determined within period		percent	Determined within period		percent
	16	7	43.75%	16	10	62.50%
	125	93	74.40%	96	81	84.38%
	269	236	87.73%	237	216	91.14%
	410	329	80.24%	349	299	85.67%

Table 1

10. As can be seen from table 1, staff have worked tremendously hard to introduce the new measures and working procedures to achieve increased performance quarter on quarter, and my gratitude and thanks go to everybody involved in this process.
11. The BVPI 109 indicator is reported on the annual year end results, and from the figures in table 2, it can be seen that as at 31st March 2005, we achieved 48.38% for major applications, 69.68% for minor and 80.61% for others, attaining above performance in the latter two categories. Considering that there is still a staffing shortage with 6 vacant posts at present, (2 newly created posts and 4 current positions), this highlights the dedication and achievements of the Planning Section.

Cumulative April/September			Cumulative April/December			Cumulative April 05/March 06		
Determined within percent period			Determined within percent period			Determined within percent period		
28	12	42.86%	44	19	43.18%	60	29	48.33%
221	134	60.63%	346	227	65.61%	442	308	69.68%
768	575	74.87%	1037	811	78.21%	1274	1027	80.61%
1017	714	70.21%	1427	1043	73.09%	1776	1342	75.56%

Table 2

12. However, based on these statistics, DCLG have indicated that they are of the opinion that Stockton is unlikely to achieve the target for major applications by March 2007, the target set by the Government that all authorities must reach. This could potentially result in Stockton becoming a PSA again, which could reflect in the CPA scores and the ability of the Council to retain its 4* rating.
13. The performance period for the PSA and PDG differs from the 31st March year-end statistics for the BVPI 109, and runs from 1st July 2005 until 30th June 2006. Early indications are that performance is on track to meet the minor (109b) and other categories (109c) at **73%** and **85%** respectively. For majors, the current level is **54%** and it is this, which is likely to lead to the authority becoming a PSA.
14. In order to avoid this scenario, the LA must aim to determine 12 major applications before the end of June, taking into account the 3 applications already over the 13-week period that will also be determined in that time. It is therefore of the utmost importance that Members request any site visits that may be required well in advance of committee to allow this to be factored into the committee timetable to avoid applications being deferred and exceeding the 13 week target date, as happened with the Willow Bridge Works planning application for residential development. Equally important is contacting the case officers if there are any queries regarding the plans and information contained with any of the major applications, as clarification at an earlier stage can help dispel understanding and the potential for deferment.
15. Finally, it is important to recognise that although table 2 indicates that 1776 applications had been determined, this in fact only relates to those applications that qualify under BVPI rules, and does not include, for example, tree preservation orders, listed building applications or those applications that have had to be submitted as Permitted Development rights have been removed. If these are included, then 2,095 applications were determined in 2004/2005.

Conclusion

16. It is considered that many issues go to the core of the prospects for long-term service improvement. It is possible to map the improvements achieved to date

with the increase in staff resources and as a corollary, the recent down turn in performance can be mapped to a time when a significant number of days were lost through a combination of staff turnover, maternity leave, long term sickness and the relocation of the service to Gloucester House.

17. However despite these factors, performance in the last 2 quarters has increased to the point where the authority is exceeding the targets on minor and other applications, the challenging area to be targeted being the major applications. With the PIP and new methods of working, the improvement in the performance of major applications will be evident in the current year, and continue the success in the Planning section.

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Financial Implications; Increased resources for PIP measures, potential impact on future PDG

Environmental Implications; None directly.

Community Safety Implications; None directly.