

Report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee



SCRUTINY



Date of meeting: 31 January 2008

Subject: Area Plans Sub-Committees – 3-Week Cycle

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Committee Secretary: Adrian Hendry, ext.4246

Recommendation:

That a report be submitted to the Council recommending that with effect from 2008/9, provision be made in the Council calendar of meetings for a meeting of each Area Plans Sub Committee every three weeks.

**Note that consultation replies from Town and Parish Councils are attached.*

Background

1. Over the past 5 years the Government required local authorities to improve their performance in the speed of determining planning applications. They did this by setting targets, 'naming and shaming' those authorities that were 'failing' and by providing incentives in the form of additional grant to those authorities that were 'succeeding'.

2. The Government began separating the planning application performance into 3 categories and set a target for each:

Major applications (large commercial schemes and residential schemes over 10 units)60% in 13 weeks

Minor applications (smaller commercial and residential schemes)..... 65% in 8 weeks

Other applications (mostly householder applications for extensions, etc, changes of use, adverts and other minor applications) 80% in 8 weeks.

Five years ago (2002/03) this Council's performance was:

Major26%

Minor55%

Other78% all three below the Government's targets.

Last year (2006/07), the performance had improved to:

Major67%

Minor73%

Other90% all three exceeding the Government's targets.

3. However, bearing in mind the investment the Council has made in Planning in recent years and a desire to provide a first-class service to its residents, the Council's objective is to achieve top quartile performance for these three key indicators, and has thus adopted the following targets in the BVPP for 2007/08:

Major74.75%

Minor80.39%

Other91.61%

Current Performance

4. For the first 9 months of the current year (April-December 2007) the performance has been:

Major73.33%
Minor80.53%
Other89.21%

5. Of the 1,649 planning decisions taken during this period, 1,440 were within the target periods and 209 outside of their targets. These comprised 8 out of 30 Major applications, 59 out of 303 Minor applications and 142 out of 1316 Other applications.

6. Of the 209 outside target, 150 were applications determined by committee and 59 under delegated powers.

Customer Satisfaction

7. The latest Customer Satisfaction Survey was carried out deriving from decisions made between April and September 2006 asking applicants and agents a series of questions in accordance with a centrally designed form (so that comparisons could be made nationally). The results were that 82% of customers were very or fairly satisfied with the service they received from Epping Forest Development Control service, which was the highest in Essex and exceeded the national, top-quartile performance (80%).

Performance Improvement Plan

8. In September 2007 a revised performance improvement plan was adopted setting out a number of initiatives to be explored in order to further improve performance. The plan included:

- i) complete implementation of various e-government initiatives including introduction of 1APP the national planning application form – *in fact the Government has set back this initiative until April 2008. Other ICT initiatives are progressing and are leading to some efficiencies relating to professional officers time rather than statistical improvements;*
- ii) enhanced monitoring of application progress by senior staff;
- iii) fill a long-vacant establishment post that had been covered on a part-time, working-from-home basis – *position filled from 02/01/2008;*
- iv) secure application plans on the web site for public access – *this would enable some efficiency savings. This is now to be a priority within ICT;*
- v) eliminate the break in committee cycle over the election period each year; - *this has been secured from May 2008;*
- vi) seek 'tweaks' to officer delegation – *it is recognised that there is little appetite amongst members for enhancing officer delegation but there are one or two tweaks that may avoid a few simple matters taking up committee time;*
- vii) seek change from 4-week to 3-week cycle of Area Plans subcommittees; and
- viii) increase staff resources.

9. It is appropriate to add that none of these measures on their own are likely to lead to a significant change in performance, but each measure will assist in the push to improve

performance.

10. Clearly, since September only points (i) and (ii) have had any impact upon performance and it is relevant to note that during the last quarter only 11.5% of decisions were made outside target, whereas for the first two quarters of the year the figure was 13.2% and yet, because the figures are so volatile, the last quarter has seen the Major performance figure dip just under the target whereas the Minor figure now exceeds the target.

11. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee Task and Finish Panel looking into Value for Money in Planning is looking at both financial and staff resourcing in Planning and this report is seeking only consideration of the change from a 4-week cycle to a 3-week cycle.

Three or Four-Week Cycle

12. It can be appreciated that losing one week in the committee cycle, at its very simplest, would save one week in the time taken to determine applications decided at committee. An analysis of decisions during April to December 2007 reveals that 18 committee decisions slipped over target by less than one week such that all those would have been within their target times if the committees operated on a 3-week cycle. This would have resulted in current performance of:

Major76.66%
Minor82.17%
Other90.12%

13. If this occurred together with the avoidance of the break in committees over the election period, performance would have been:

Major76.66%
Minor83.16%
Other90.34%

14. It can be added that a small, but unknown, number of other applications might have met their target if the case officer was confident that a more regular meeting of the appropriate committee would have enabled the target to be met.

15. Generally speaking there would be no follow on effect on the calendar of meetings, in losing the current, fourth fallow week. The Civic Offices will still have the Council Chamber available every third week as Area Plans South would be held at Roding Valley School. This would mean that other meetings that use the Council Chamber on Wednesdays, such as the Local Councils Liaison meetings, would still have a venue

16. The suggestion has been made that the revised timetable over the election period be trialled before altering the committee cycle and the committee may feel this is a sufficient step. However, it must be appreciated that it is considered that not one of the improvement measures on their own will lead to a significant change in performance but rather together they will aid achievement of targets.

Local Councils

17. Local Councils need not be concerned that this change would affect their ability to make considered comments on applications. Local Councils are consulted on applications within 7 days of their receipt and are required to make comment within 3 weeks. The change in committee cycle is aimed at catching those applications that presently take 9 or 10 weeks to determine and deciding them within 8 weeks. This has no impact upon the first 3 weeks of consideration, the time during which local councils make their comments.

18. The practice of, exceptionally, completing a report on an application before the consultation period has finished will not change as a result of this proposal. Any comments

received after printing an agenda are read out in full at the committee, which gives them a higher profile than simply typing them in a report and is accepted practice satisfying, for example, the Ombudsman.

Costs

19. In terms of additional costs, these fall into three categories:

- (1) Rents - applies to Plans South
- (2) Staffing costs
- (3) Printing costs

(1) Rents

Plans South would increase from 12 to 17 meetings - each additional meeting would cost £104 in rent to the school - this is a variable cost not budgeted for.

(2) Staffing

It can be assumed for the purposes of each meeting that there would be three staff there as a minimum - one planner, one committee officer and one webcasting operator. Assuming that meetings generally finish before 10pm then an additional cost of £56.50 x 3 would be incurred. These costs come from planning services (for the planner) and RDS for the Committee Officer and the webcast operator – the RDS budget for this has been overspent to date this year but contained within salary budgets as a whole for RDS. Revised estimates have been made for this budget and these should carry through to next years budget.

(3) Printing costs

Each planning agenda cost between £100 and £150 - the printing budget was not increased for inflation this year (when we also reduced the number of planning meetings) and we are currently showing an underspend on this budget (partly because we are not having these meetings). Even taking into account the additional meetings it is not anticipated that members would be asked for even an inflationary increase in the budget again next year. The printing budget has decreased significantly over the last three-four years since the introduction of the Committee Management System from a peak of about £80k to under £50k currently.

20. Other factors have not been costed for, such as travel for members, lighting, heat etc for each of these meetings.

Constitution and Members Services Scrutiny Standing Panel

21. The Constitution and Members Service Scrutiny Panel considered this on 20 November 2007, when they recommended that the council agree a three-week cycle for Area Planning Sub-committees, with a start date of May 2008. But that prior to this the proposals should be put to all members and Local Councils to seek their views. This was subsequently done via the Local Council Liaison Meeting and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, both of whom requested extra time for consideration.

Local Councils Liaison Meeting

22. There was some disquiet amongst Local Council's at their meeting on 28 November that the proposed timescale did not give them time enough to respond.

Summary

23. Changing the committee cycle from 4 weeks to 3 weeks cannot be regarded as a panacea solving all ills and providing a step-change in performance. However, it is one of a series of measures that together with others will assist in securing an improvement in performance.

24. Planning Delivery Grant was dependant upon achieving the government targets. The basis upon which PDG is now to be calculated no longer includes development control performance (other than a penalty if government targets are not met). There is, then, no additional funding from government for hitting top-quartile targets but the Council desires to provide its residents with the best service possible and speed of decision-making is one simple measure by which comparison with others can be readily be made to indicate the quality of service delivery.