

# **Report to Planning Services Standing Panel**

**Date of meeting: 15 July 2008**

**Subject: Value for Money in Planning**

**Officer contact for further information: J Preston**

**Committee Secretary: A Hendry**

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## **Recommendations/Decisions Required:**

**That the Panel agree all the suggested conclusions set out within the report below.**

## **Report:**

The Panel has inherited work that commenced under a Task and Finish Panel; that Panel has met three times so far, and it determined that one of the clearest ways to demonstrate part of what it agreed to do was to update the 2001 Best Value Review that had been undertaken of Development Control.

Accordingly, attached to this agenda is a 2008 update of that Review, with changes shown in italics. The update has also sought to show a complete time series of relevant information/evidence. The Panel has also considered other evidence at its meetings.

It is now considered that the Panel is in a position to reach some conclusions about the Development Control position; these conclusions can then be fed into wider Value for Money and Use of Resources work/reviews being undertaken by the Council, and can better inform the next external assessment of EFDC.

The evidence shows that:

- There has been a general upwards increase in workload. (20.6% since 2001 listed in table in paragraph 2.14))
- Significant improvements in performance have been made, particularly in case handling within time limits. (Table in section 4)
- There has been the removal of a substantial "backlog." (Paragraph 6.16)
- Significant changes in the ICT arrangements have been made. (Paragraph 6.7)
- Improvements in how customers rank the services provided have been achieved. (BV111 figures in section 4 tables)
- The professional staff continue to have very considerable average case loads compared to the suggested Government figure of 150 cases. (Table in paragraph 6.14)
- Planning Delivery Grant and other "one off" expenditure have been used to invest in training, ICT changes and improvements, rather than temporarily bolstering normal budgets.(Reports to Cabinet, evidence heard by this Panel at its second meeting)
- The 2005 restructure invested an additional £88,000 per year, but the 2007 corporate restructure savings of £56,000 per year, coupled with other efficiency savings since then now offset that extra expenditure.(Reports to Cabinet and Gershon efficiency savings analysis)
- Appeals performance has been much more volatile in recent time. (Table in section 4, reports to Area Committees)
- Making comparisons with other Essex and Audit Commission comparator authorities has become more difficult, in part because a number of Authorities for which data existed in 2001 no longer provide CIPFA with information, and in part because there

are doubts about the accuracy/comparability of some of the information.

- None the less, that Planning compares favourably with other Councils in Essex, or those whom the Audit Commission generally compare us with (many of whom are based in a similar position relative to the M25 around London.)
- Examples of this include that in 2006/2007 although we received the lowest average planning fee for any Authority that has given data, and have quite low values for the total value of planning receipts, that we provide services over a wide area, to a high relative population, but that has a low population density.
- We show as having quite high staff numbers, but we deal with the second highest workload in Essex, and the fourth of the wider comparators. Yet we investigate very high numbers of breaches of Planning control, and respond to high numbers of appeals, whilst achieving high levels of section 106 contributions. This CIPFA data is shown in the table at page 27, and to simplify this information we have added the ranking information.
- In considering the Audit Commission data we have compiled a table of comparators to show our costs of dealing with planning applications on a per application basis, and despite the geographical factors mentioned above we rank middle of that table; see page 28.
- We achieve all of that whilst we have carried out very significant changes to our ICT, despite recruitment and retention difficulties, whilst retaining Investors in people, and having gone through many other changes. We also do that whilst being a low Council tax Authority.