



Epping Forest District Council



SCRUTINY

REPORT OF THE VALUE FOR MONEY IN PLANNING TASK AND FINISH PANEL

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1. Chairman's Foreword

Foreword by Councillor Mrs Lesley Wagland – Chairman of Panel



In my view the Task and Finish Panel provided good benchmarking work for future assessment and improvement.

2. Panel Composition

The Task and Finish Panel 2007/08 initially comprised of the following Members:

Councillors Mrs L Wagland (Chairman), R Bassett, M Colling, R Frankel, D Jacobs, GMohindra, R. Morgan, Mrs P. Richardson, B Rolfe and H Ulkun.

The Panel, and its successor met on six occasions throughout the Review Period. Invitees Malcolm Baker, Dan Evans and Vicky Lyndon also attended the meeting that concerned IT. The final meetings invited comments and guests from a number of consultants, local council and amenity groups – a vox pop form was sent out with the invitation so anyone who couldn't attend could send comments.

Attending the planning consultants meeting were: Charlie Biss, Pamela Merritt, Keith Everitt, Jackie Pepper and David Sadler.

Attending the meeting with local councils and amenity groups were representatives from: The Hills Amenity Society, Roydon Town Council, Essex Wildlife Trust (Epping Forest branch), Theydon Bois Action Group, Abbess, Beauchamp & Berners Roding Parish Council, Friends of Epping Forest, Chigwell Parish Council, Loughton Town Council, The Epping Society, North Weald Parish Council.

The Task & Finish Panel was combined into the 2008/9 Planning Services Standing Scrutiny Panel that comprises the following Members:

Councillors Mrs L Wagland (Chairman), K Chana (Vice-Chairman), T Boyce, M Colling, Mrs A Cooper, R Frankel, J Hart, Mrs C Pond, B Pryor, P Spencer, H Ulkun and Mrs Anne Grigg.

3. Introduction & Overview

The Task & Finish Panel had originally been set up to consider in detail the provision of Value for Money within the Development Control (Planning Services) function, focusing specifically on:

- (a) The success of the 'hit squad' established to focus on a backlog of planning applications;
- (b) How and to what extent performance in relation to the determination of planning applications has improved as a result of the 'hit squad' and other additional resources such as the new integrated computer system, the restructure of Planning Services and the application of Planning Delivery Grant; and
- (c) How unit cost and other benchmarking information in relation to the Development Control function can be obtained to increase the effectiveness of the Value for Money Analysis for 2006/07 and future years.

The Panel extended these points into its Terms of Reference.

4. Terms of Reference

To consider in detail the provision of Value for Money within the following Planning services focusing specifically on:

- Development Control (including Appeals)
- Forward Planning
- Building Control
- Enforcement
- Administration and Customer Support
- Economic Development
- Environment Team

To gather evidence & information related to these functions through receipt of:

- performance monitoring documents,
- Best Value Review of Planning Services (updated version)
- benchmarking exercises,
- consultation with Planning Committee Members, customers and IT Suppliers.

To identify problems, possible solutions, barriers to success;

To review the measures introduced since 2004 to improve performance within

- Development Control namely the success of
- the 'Hit Squad',
- the Service restructure,
- the new IT system
- the application of the Planning Delivery Grant.

To consider whether the reporting arrangements for all of the above matters and those for Section 106s, and appeals are sufficient and recommendation accordingly.

To evaluate all relevant facts in relation to the topics under review in an objective way and to produce recommendations for future action accordingly;

To establish whether there are any resource implications arising out of the topics under review and advise Cabinet for inclusion in the Budget Process 2008/09;

To report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at appropriate intervals, and to submit a final report.

5. Methodology

Sources of information

The Task & Finish Panel were provided with a number of contextual documents, having regard to the specific points set out in section 3 above; those included a 2001 Best Value review of Development Control function, reports to the Council concerning the 2004 restructure of Planning Services, reports to the Council concerning Planning Delivery Grant, new ICT and the setting up of preliminary conclusions in respect of the "hit squad".

Having considered the material the panel determined that the best way to proceed was to provide an update of the 2001 document, albeit not focussing on only Development Control aspects but also so as to provide a complete time series of data where possible, up to 2008-9. The panel has also been assisted at virtually every meeting with the provision of detailed information on finance including on occasion the provision of information presented in ways that councillors are more used to seeing when dealing with financial and budgetary reports.

The information within the updated document was further updated as new information became available, both from the Audit Commission and from Chartered Institute Public Finance and Accountancy.

At individual meetings of the panel, there was a focus on hearing about different points set out in section 3 above and in particular, one meeting concentrated on ICT, another concentrated on hearing from planning agents and a third concentrated on local councils and amenity groups.

6. Context

The context for the panel's work reflected on a number of concerns, some of which emanated from the Government, whilst some emanated from the Council itself.

Some planning performance had been poor. The Council's performance concerning particular aspects of planning had drawn attention to the slow speed at which decisions on planning applications were made; that there had been a backlog of cases; that the ICT system in use had its limits; and that an increasing number of performance measures were expected by Government (for example, Best Value Performance Indicators 106, 109 and 204).

Councillors themselves were concerned about this performance, having heard from applicants or seen what other Councils were achieving. That poorer performance also risked damaging the Council's image and reputation and Councillors desired the performance to be up with the best.

The Finance and Performance Standing Scrutiny Panel undertook, via a sub-group, a Value for Money exercise, which determined that there should be a particular focus on planning out of which the request to Overview and Scrutiny to undertake a task and finish review emanated. The poorer performance at one point had led to the Council's Planning function being declared a Standards Authority and the level of performance meant that the Council was not receiving high levels of Planning Delivery Grant.

The Audit Commission was concerned about the poorer performance, and how that contrasted to other Councils, including those Councils whose performance was improving. The Audit Commission was also requiring Councils to consider and explain in more detail how they were using resources and whether they were achieving value for money. Those considerations involved Councils displaying that they have a thorough understanding of their costs, the relationship of costs to performance and the ability to compare with other Councils.

In essence, the work of the Task and Finish Panel was to reflect on whether many changes and investments that had been made within planning had improved performance or not, to consider how we now compared with other Councils and whether in the widest sense we were using the resources effectively and providing value for money and were demonstrating that we knew considerable information about the total cost structure, and how that was changing.

7. Summary of Recommendations

That the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet acknowledge that Planning Services' Development Control functions are providing value for money in comparison with others.

During the Panel's discussions a number of recommendations were made, as follows:

- 1) That, the format of the 2008 review be kept and subsequent years' information added annually to keep the time series complete.
- 2) That, the overview with agents and Local Councils and Amenity Bodies should be a permanent annual arrangement.
- 3) That, customers should be contacted generally to seek feedback on the service received so as to give a fuller picture than the 3-yearly BV111 sampling exercise.
- 4) That, the ICT improvements are the subject of ongoing further modules, and that Member training/ presentation be provided at suitable intervals.
- 5) That, arrangements are made for new staff to be introduced to Councillors (perhaps by attendance at District Development Control Committee).
- 6) That, this completes some of the work of the of the Panel, which will now turn to other aspects of its Terms of Reference
- 7) That, information concerning staffing levels is provided regularly to the Panel at future meetings.

8. Report

As explained in section 5 above, having considered an acceptable way to proceed, evidence was gathered about performance and costs (particularly from Audit Commission and CIPFA sources). The 2001 review was updated with a complete time series, and the key information was sourced.

It was particularly noticed that fewer Councils were giving information for inclusion in the CIPFA returns.

The Panel focussed on different aspects at three of its meetings; one concentrating on ICT, one on the views of agents who regularly used this Council's planning service, but who were also familiar with the service they received from other Councils. Lastly, there was an opportunity to hear from Local Councils and Amenity bodies about their different experiences of the service provided.

As a result of all this the Panel deliberated on what conclusions and recommendations could be drawn.

The Panel were aware that their work was important to wider work on Value for Money. The conclusions reached are as follows:

- 1) There had been a general upward increase in workload. (This was up by 20% between 2000/01 and 2007/08).
- 2) The unit cost per application ranked eighth out of 16 when compared to the Audit Commission list of comparable authorities
- 3) Significant improvements in performance had been made, particularly in case handling within time limits
- 4) The BV109 figures had changed from 2003/04 (when the Council was a Standards Authority) as follows; (second figure is for 2007/08) 109a 48% to 79%, 109b 57% to 78% and 109c, 78% to 89%. They are now near the top quartile.
- 5) An investment of some £100,000 had removed a substantial "backlog."
- 6) Significant changes in the ICT arrangements had been made. These arrangements were still under development and were to be further monitored by the panel.
- 7) Improvements in how customers ranked the services provided had been achieved, albeit based on a small sample size.
- 8) Planning agents ranked the personal contact and service that they received, from staff, exceptionally highly.
- 9) Amenity bodies and Parish and Town Councils had raised issues that suggested to the panel that more customer and satisfaction assessment should be undertaken.
- 10) The professional staff continued to have very considerable average case loads compared to the suggested Government figure of 150 cases per staff member.
- 11) Planning Delivery Grant and other "one off" expenditure had been used to invest in training, ICT changes and improvements, rather than temporarily bolstering normal establishment budgets. Reports to the Cabinet and evidence heard by this Panel at its second meeting.
- 12) The 2004/05 restructure invested an additional £88,000 per year, but the 2007 corporate restructure savings of £50,000 per year, coupled with other efficiency savings since then, now offset that extra expenditure. (Reports to the Cabinet and Gershon efficiency savings analysis).
- 13) Appeals performance had been much more volatile in recent time.
- 14) Making comparisons with other Essex and Audit Commission comparator authorities had become more difficult, in part because a number of authorities for which data existed in 2001 no longer provided CIPFA with information. Also in part, because there were doubts about the accuracy/comparability of some of the information. Examples of this included that in 2006/07 when we received the lowest average planning fee for any authority that had given data. We have quite low values for the total value of planning receipts. We provide services over a wide area, to a high relative population, but that had a low population density.

- 15) None the less, on the information that the Panel have considered, costs and performance compared favourably with other councils in Essex, or those whom the Audit Commission generally compared us with, many of whom are based in a similar position relative to the M25 around London.
- 16) The Council had quite high staff numbers, but dealt with the second highest workload in Essex, and the fourth of the wider comparators. The Council have investigated very high numbers of breaches of planning control, and responded to high numbers of appeals, yet have achieved high levels of section 106 contributions.
- 17) In considering the Audit Commission data we had compiled a table of comparators to show our costs of dealing with planning applications on a per application basis, and we ranked middle of that table.
- 18) We have achieved all of the above whilst we had carried out very significant changes to our ICT, despite recruitment and retention difficulties, and having gone through many other changes. We also did that whilst being a low Council Tax authority.

The Council has undertaken a corporate piece of work on a Value for Money analysis 2007-08, and which has noted the following:

Comparator Group	Highest Cost/Value	Lowest Cost/Value	EFDC Cost/Value & Ranking
Nearest Neighbours (April 2007)	27.89 Tun Wells DC	6.18 Broxbourne DC	18.53 7/16
ONS Local Authority Cluster	23.45 Sevenoaks DC	13.89 Hertsmere DC	18.53 4/5
CDRP Family Group	27.89 Tun Wells DC	11.09 Brentwood DC	18.53 8/15

The main expenditure covered by this table is Planning Policy and Building & Development Control

The cost of delivering planning services in EFDC is again increased by the rural and suburban nature of the District, and the need for enforcement action to be taken in order to protect the Green Belt, as well as the special character of the area, including its historical architecture and trees. There is a large gypsy and traveller population, which often has its own needs and demands which are often resource-intensive. That said, the costs in the table indicate that the District's performance is average in two comparator groups whilst being low in one.

Audit Commission data shows that spend per head on planning has fallen from £20.94 in 2006/7 to £18.53 in 2007/08. In that time performance in Planning has also improved in terms of meeting target times for decisions.

The figures of spend per head are somewhat misleading, given the higher number of applications received in Epping Forest compared to other authorities (above average in all three groups). Using the information provided by the Audit Commission, it would appear that the spend on Planning per head is three times higher in Epping Forest than in Broxbourne. However, the figure for Broxbourne does not look reliable, since the next lowest spend per head is £11.09, and 13 of the 16 nearest local authorities have costs that are more than double Broxbourne's spend.

EFDC's Director of Planning and Economic Development has spoken to Broxbourne BC to establish how it was able to consider certain elements of their lower costs. Broxbourne's Policy Section shows a significant income. However, this is not actual income "earned" since the only income

stream in the policy budget is the sale of hard-copy documents (a few hundred pounds per year). In this case the income is the contribution of Planning Delivery Grant, to meet expenditure commitments in Broxbourne BC's Policy Section. Broxbourne's transport costs are low, as they are a smaller and more densely developed Borough than Epping Forest.

9. Conclusion

- On the information that the Panel have considered, costs and performance compared favourably with other councils in Essex, or those whom the Audit Commission generally compared us with, many of whom are based in a similar position relative to the M25 around London.
- Planning agents ranked the personal contact and service that they received, from staff, exceptionally highly.
- Amenity bodies and Parish and Town Councils had raised issues that suggested to the panel that more customer and satisfaction assessment should be undertaken.
- There had been a general upward increase in workload. (This was up by 20% between 2000/01 and 2007/08).
- The professional staff continued to have very considerable average case loads compared to the suggested Government figure of 150 cases per staff member.
- There have been significant changes to ICT arrangements.

The Terms of Reference for the Standing Panel make it clear that the panel will now turn in its work programme to deal with a number of other matters, but without losing sight of Value for Money issues or performance issues.

The Panel is also conscious that staff changes continue to take place, and that key staff absences have added to these pressures.

10. Acknowledgements

The Panel acknowledges the assistance of the individuals listed in section 2 above.

11. Appendices

The following documents are attached to this document:

- The 2008 update of the 2001 Best Value Review
- Financial information
- Copy of presentation given to Panel re ICT
- Copy of presentation given by BMG re BV111