

**EPHING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL  
NOTES OF A MEETING OF PLANNING SERVICES SCRUTINY STANDING PANEL  
HELD ON TUESDAY, 9 SEPTEMBER 2008  
IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CIVIC OFFICES, HIGH STREET, EPPING  
AT 7.30 - 9.15 PM**

<b>Members Present:</b>	Mrs L Wagland (Chairman), K Chana (Vice-Chairman), A Boyce, M Colling, Mrs A Cooper, R Frankel, Mrs C Pond, P Spencer and H Ulkun
<b>Other members present:</b>	J Knapman
<b>Apologies for Absence:</b>	W Pryor and Mrs A Grigg (Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economic Development)
<b>Officers Present</b>	J Preston (Director of Planning and Economic Development), R Sharp (Principal Accountant), S G Hill (Senior Democratic Services Officer) and M Jenkins (Democratic Services Assistant)

**15. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)**

There were no substitute members pursuant to the Council's Code of Conduct.

**16. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest made pursuant to the Council's Code of Conduct.

**17. NOTES FROM LAST MEETING**

The notes of the last meeting of the Panel held on 15 July 2008, had only been published on the 9 September 2008 and so were tabled at the meeting.

**RESOLVED:**

That the notes of the last meeting of the Panel held on 15 July 2008, be agreed.

**18. REPORT - VALUE FOR MONEY IN PLANNING**

The Panel agreed the bullet points of the Value for Money in Planning Report. They were as follows:-

- There had been a general upward increase in workload. (This was up by 20% between 2000/01 and 2007/08).
- The unit cost per application ranked eighth out of 16 when compared to the Audit Commission list of comparable authorities
- Significant improvements in performance had been made, particularly in case handling within time limits
- 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.

- An investment of some £100,000 had removed a substantial “backlog.”
- Significant changes in the ICT arrangements had been made. These arrangements were still under development and were to be further monitored by the panel.
- Improvements in how customers ranked the services provided had been achieved, albeit based on a small sample size.
- 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.
- The professional staff continued to have very considerable average case loads compared to the suggested Government figure of 150 cases per staff member.
- 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).
- 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).
- Appeals performance had been much more volatile in recent time.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

- 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.
- 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 Panel were advised by officers that some work was required to bring the results of the review into the format for Task and Finish final reports required by the main OS Committee.

**ACTION:**

Task and Finish report to be forwarded to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

**19. TERMS OF REFERENCE**

The Panel discussed their Terms of Reference. The following sections were agreed or amended in turn.

**1. East of England Plan**

Mr J Preston advised that the East of England Plan was covered, in part, by the Local Development Framework. The Panel requested a report on the most recent developments in the East of England Plan process. The Panel was informed that there was a forthcoming consultation on gypsy and traveller sites within the district. The District Council's response to the Secretary of State would be approved in due course.

**ACTION:**

- (a) That a progress report to be put before future meetings of the Panel regarding the most recent developments in the East of England Plan process.

**2. New Local Development Framework**

The Chairman advised the Panel that the framework had to be evidence based, it would examine housing, industrial capacity and employment. The framework will emerge from the evidence collated.

**ACTION:**

- That regular progress reports on the Local Development Framework to be made to future meetings of the Panel.

**3. Metropolitan Green Belt**

It was felt that some extension applications need not go before planning committees, however the Panel were advised that the adopted policy could not presently be amended. In some cases applicants had special circumstances which members and planning officers could give consent to.

#### 4. Value for Money

The Panel's Terms of Reference requested them to consider in detail the provision of Value for Money within the following Planning Services, focusing specifically on:

- (a) Development Control (including Appeals) – completed.
- (b) Forward Planning – the Panel felt that the items numbered 1 – 3 adequately covered this. The Chairman commented that Forward Planning was complicated, more time would be needed to assess the Local Development Framework, it's working was unclear. A progress report was requested for future meetings.
- (c) Building Control – A report from Mr J Preston was requested.
- (d) Enforcement – This item would require a performance review, the Panel requested a "snapshot" of enforcement cases and Hit Squad activity. Mr J Preston said that Mr S Solon, Principal Planning Officer, could be invited to future panel meetings to give an indication of their workloads and cases.
- (e) Administration and Customer Support - The Panel wished to receive a presentation regarding ICT support.
- (f) Economic Development – Timescale and review to be agreed
- (g) Environment Team – Timescale and review to be agreed

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 review a selection of controversial planning decisions to see if lessons can be learnt from their consideration – Has yet to be started

5. To consider whether the reporting arrangements for all of the above matters and those for the Section 106s (including how they are negotiated, agreed and implemented strategically to secure community benefit), and appeals are sufficient (including how new legislation impacts on these) and to recommend accordingly. To establish whether there are any resource implications arising out of the topics under review and advise the Cabinet for inclusion in the Budget Process 2008/09. To report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at appropriate intervals and to submit an interim report on Development Control in the June 2008 cycle, and a final report on all matters by March 2009 – Report not yet presented.

Councillor H Ulkan enquired about Housing Associations applying for a grant. This could effect development costs in the district. Councillor H Ulkan advised that more

Housing Associations were moving into the area. Mr J Preston said that the Housing Services Director, Mr A Hall, had spreadsheets with relevant statistics for the district.

6. To report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the Council and the Cabinet with recommendations on matters allocated to the Panel as appropriate.

**ACTION:**

- (a) Mr J Preston to obtain from Mr A Hall, Director of Housing Services, a spreadsheet for members on affordable housing in the district; and
- (b) Mr S Solon, Principal Planning Officer, to be invited to future meeting of the Panel to update members on Hit Squad activities; and
- (c) The Panel to receive a presentation on ICT support; and
- (d) Officers to update the Panel's work programme.

**20. STAFFING SITUATION WITHIN PLANNING SERVICES**

Councillor J Knapman expressed concern regarding the allocation of work to staff in planning. It was unclear under the Value for Money report as to current workloads. It was suggested that there should be a standing item on each future agenda on the Panel, indicating the current staffing situation and workload allocation.

The Director of Planning Services was requested by the Panel to outline the current staffing situation in Planning Services. Since Mr B Land's (Assistant Director of Planning Services), illness, the two most experienced Principal Planning Officers, Mr N Richardson and Mr S Solon, had covered much of Mr B Land's work. There were four senior posts currently available, interviews had been conducted for the Conservation Officer's post the week before, some internal applicants had applied.

Mr P Sutton's post (Assistant Director of Planning Services), had been vacant for some time, the Panel was advised that the vacancy had been put out to advertisement, the closing date for the vacancy was 6 October and interviews were scheduled for 14 October 2008. There was concern that the procedure for recruiting was too slow, there had been on-going work load pressures and difficulties of recruiting over summer period.

Members felt that the panel could examine the distribution of work within Planning Services, the work loads could be logged with a time duration showing the amount of time spent on actual tasks. The Director of Planning Services, Mr J Preston, recognized the comments made and agreed that Planning Services needed to move more swiftly in the future in this regard. The Panel would like to have an up to date list of current staff establishment and use of consultants within Planning Services.

**21. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

There was no other business at the meeting.

**22. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS**

The Panel noted the dates of future meetings:

18 November 2008  
6 January 2009  
12 February 2009; and  
13 March 2009