

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C/017/2005-06.

Date of meeting: 11 July 2005.



**Epping Forest
District Council**

**Portfolios: Finance and Performance Management.
Planning and Economic Development.**

Subject: Planning Delivery Grant 2005/2006 - Development Control Performance.

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Recommendations:

- (1) That a supplementary estimate to allow the introduction of a squad to tackle a backlog of planning applications at a cost of up to £100,000 as a DDF item be recommended for approval by the Council;**
- (2) That Planning Delivery Grant 2005/2006 be used as follows:**
 - (a) Development Control (£66,000);**
 - (b) Forward Planning (£20,000);**
 - (c) ICT investment (£20,000); and**
 - (d) Training for Councillors and staff (£10,000);**
- (3) That The Head of Planning and Economic Development be required to continue to keep an itemized account of where these funds are actually used; and**
- (4) That, notwithstanding the normal rules for virements of budgets, variations of plus or minus 10 per cent of any of the items in 2(a) to 2(d) can be made by him.**

Development Control Performance:

1. This Council's Development Control Performance compares unfavourably with that of other Councils, despite many efforts to improve it in the past.
2. That performance is measured by Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI) 109 parts a, b and c, which calculate the speed at which we determine different types of planning application, principally within an eight week period. At the end of May, for example 135 of 412 live applications had not had a decision in eight weeks; this is some 35% of cases. Whilst some major applications (particularly those requiring legal agreements) will be likely to take over eight weeks, we should be able to perform as other Councils do.
3. Steps have been undertaken to improve or sustain performance in the past, and a major upgrade of the ICT systems in Planning is well underway, and other steps have been taken or are in contemplation.
4. Those cases not determined in eight weeks could be described as a "backlog" and that scale of backlog in May has not changed much for some time.

5. This report proposes the use of a short-term squad to remove this backlog; such squads have been used in this Council on occasion in the past. The squad would sit with other professional staff, and would concentrate on taking new cases through the development control process. Existing staff can concentrate more on clearing work they have already commenced dealing with.
6. To clear such a backlog entirely would need the ability to process the 135 outstanding cases plus the same percentage of new cases that arrive, and assumes the existing complement of staff stays the same. Common sense and experience suggests that removing the backlog would improve moral, and lessen the need for calls checking on progress.
7. The proposal is to employ a team of four people, starting in September (when space should be available, and when the new computer system has gone live) and to keep them for up to six months. That is the equivalent of two person years of effort. The costs of that will be up to £100,000. The intention is to move the Best Value Performance indicators 109 a, b and c into the upper quartile.

Planning Delivery Grant 2005/2006:

8. Members were advised in February 2003 that the Government had introduced a three-year Planning Delivery Grant (PDG) system. In the first year Epping Forest District Council were awarded £199,600 reflecting in particular; improved development turn round performance, and the location of the District in a growth area. Further, and more substantial grant was promised for two further years. We were awarded £380,000 for 2004/2005.
9. In 2004 it was indicated that the system would be extended to last for six years, rather than three, and that the grant would be awarded on the basis of assessment against more categories or criteria in future. We have only been awarded £116,892.70 for 2005/2006, but we may be given a further allocation later in the year for plan making. This is made up of;

<u>Criterion</u>	<u>Amount</u>
• Housing High Demand	£85,800.00
• Housing Low Demand	0.00
• Enterprise Areas	0.00
• E Planning	0.00
• Regional Planning Bodies/Greater London	0.00
• County Matters DC	0.00
• Development Control Targets Sub -	£429.75
• Development Control	£30,101.82
• Appeals Abatement	0.00
• Cap Recycling adjustment	£561.13

10. This is a most disappointing reduction, and stems largely from the failure to further improve our Development Control performance in the last year.
11. As before the grant is not ring fenced, but it is conditional upon accurate returns in respect of Best Value Performance Indicator 109 (concerning speed of determining the different categories of planning application) Authorities are said to be free to spend allocations in any manner they see fit, however, the Minister has previously indicated that although it is not ring fenced, they have been allocated on the basis that they will drive up performance in the delivery of planning functions, both in respect of development control and plan making. Areas in which authorities might consider concentrating their additional resources include: the preparation of regional planning guidance and the future regional spatial strategies; completing current reviews of

existing development plans and preparing for the new system of local development frameworks; the better resourcing of IT systems; assistance from consultants; outsourcing of certain planning services; increasing staffing levels; training for staff and councillors; supporting mediation services; encouraging a more diverse planning workforce; bursaries for employees to gain planning qualifications and more use of technical staff.

12. Previous year's grant has been used in ways that entirely reflect that advice; in particular spending on Information Communication Technology, and preparations therefore. However, performance last year has not been assisted by that effort; our new computer system is due to go live this summer, and to add more functions over time.
13. Full Council in February 2003 decided that PDG be credited to the Finance and Performance Management Portfolio, such that Cabinet would determine the use of the funds. This enables Cabinet to consider how the additional funds are used for Planning, but taking into account decisions already made to increase the resources EFDC was putting into Planning.
14. In 2004/2005 Cabinet applied PDG to four main areas, namely ICT (£113,000) Forward Planning (£60,000) Development Control (£63,000) and Enforcement (£70,000) The agreed sums have been, or are being applied as per that decision; a more detailed explanation of the specific expenditure is available if required.

Proposals for PDG 2005/20056:

15. The prime suggested use of the grant this year is to follow the fundamental course which was started two years ago; but focusing on development control performance so as to actually secure yet more grant next year, to strengthen the impacts of what has been done already.

Development Control:

16. The proposals here reflect on the change of approach suggested in recommendation 1 and envisage any actions needed to support what is set out in the first section of this report to seek to remove a backlog of work, whilst allowing establishment staff to refocus and keep performance high. Those steps could include deploying extra administrative staff, extending the contracts of staff on related projects such as the implementation team or the data cleanse team, boosting the appeals consultancy budget (in case our efforts to clear the backlog and meet the eight and thirteen week deadlines produce any more appeals than normal) or on scanning of documents. £66,000 proposed.

Forward Planning:

17. Two years ago this team started to take on work at levels that have not been seen before, and which will continue to grow. PDG has been used to good effect on Consultants, and a similar need continues or bolstering existing staff resources (e.g. overtime, other staff costs or short term appointments). £20,000 proposed.

ICT:

18. There is a need to continue making improvements in this area, so as to make more information available in electronic format. Given the scale of the investment that we have been making the award of nothing, because we were not further down the path of improvement compared to others, is regrettable. £20,000 is the most we can afford, and is hence what is proposed.

Training:

19. Non-corporate training in Planning Services presently has a budget that equates to £150 per head per year. Although some courses are low cost, fully paid courses will use that budget in little more than one event. Officers have provided some member training in the past e.g. Induction, Planning protocol or seminars with Local Councils.
20. When considered against what Investors in People, or Continuing Professional Development for staff would expect that figure is very low, and, for Members, the need to be seen by the public as concentrating on relevant considerations is more important in an age of human rights, equalities and freedom of information. £10,000 proposed.

Statement in support of recommended action:

21. Each of the proposals made, and in the amounts suggested would make real impacts upon Planning Services, and a great many of them would be noticeable to customers and staff alike.

Options for action:

22. The options range from using PDG3 for the proposed areas set out above, to different amounts using the same essential menu, either of which could be expected to help gain further grant when PDG4 is calculated. The last option is to use some of the funds for other purposes, but to risk a lower amount of PDG4.

Consultation undertaken:

23. No external consultation undertaken.

Resource implications:

Budget provision: PDG is announced after the Council Budget has been set, thus these funds are an addition to the Council budget.

Personnel: From existing resources.

Land: Nil.

Community Plan/BVPP reference: Help progress Implementing Electronic Government strategy, in particular new ICT system. Progress further performance improvements or address weaknesses.

Relevant Statutory Powers: None.

Background papers: Letter from Minister of State for Housing and Planning issued on 9 March 2004 about PDG2 and 23/03/05 announcement and related tables.

Environmental/Human Rights Act/Crime and Disorder Act Implications: None.

Key Decision Reference (if required): N/A.