

REPORT OF THE DEPUTY DIRECTOR (PLANNING AND COMMUNITY STRATEGY)  
TO THE EXECUTIVE  
2 JUNE 2006

**Major and Minor Planning Applications Improvement Plan**

1.0 **Introduction and Report Summary**

1.1 This report considers the implications of the Council being included on the list of Planning Standards Authorities for processing Major and Minor planning applications. Historical and current performance for processing all planning applications are considered, and an Improvement Plan is proposed in relation to Major and Minor applications.

1.2 The Contact Officer for this report is Mike Gilbert, Development Control Manager, telephone (01235) 547681.

2.0 **Recommendation**

2.1 *It is recommended that the proposed Improvement Plan and trajectory, as appended to this report, be agreed.*

3.0 **Relationship with the Council's Vision, Strategies and Policies**

3.1 This report is in accordance with Objective A of the Council's Vision.

4.0 **Background**

4.1 The Government is committed to improving the planning system, including the speed at which local authorities process planning applications. Performance indicators are used to monitor and compare the performance of all local authorities, and to drive the programme of continuous improvement.

4.2 BVPI 109 sets out the Government's targets for the time taken by local authorities to determine planning applications. Applications are divided into the following 3 categories:

Major - developments of 10 or more dwellings or 1,000 sq metres or more of commercial floorspace.

Minor - developments of less than 10 dwellings or less than 1,000 sq metres of commercial floorspace.

Other - changes of use, domestic extensions, advertisements, listed buildings consent and conservation area consent applications.

4.3 The Government's targets for the speed of determining applications are as follows:

Major applications – 60% to be determined within 13 weeks.

Minor applications – 65% to be determined within 8 weeks.

Other applications – 80% to be determined within 8 weeks.

Those local authorities which fall short of these targets are included on a list of Planning Standards Authorities published annually by the Government, which is seen as an incentive to improve performance. All local authorities are expected to achieve all of the targets by March

2007 and, thereafter, the targets will remain in force and performance will continue to be monitored by the Government.

- 4.4 At Appendix 1 are a list and graphs showing the Council's quarterly performance in determining Major, Minor and Other applications between March 2002 and December 2005. Performance has been extremely volatile for Major applications, which is due to the sensitivity of the figures arising from the relatively low number of applications involved (ie an average of only 36 applications per annum or 9 per quarter). A steady decline in performance relating to Major applications occurred between June 2004 and June 2005, which was due to the departure and/or long-term sickness absence of key members of staff. Performance for Minor applications has been more stable, although there was a noticeable dip between January and December 2004 which, again, coincided with the departure and/or long-term sickness absence of key members of staff. Although the target for Minor applications was only occasionally met between March 2002 and June 2005, the last two quarters have seen a marked improvement, with the target easily being met. The performance for Other applications generally has been very good, with the target being met in 12 of the last 15 quarters and easily being met in the last 3 quarters.
- 4.5 In December 2005, the Government announced that the Vale has been named as a potential Planning Standards Authority for the 2006/07 financial year for Major and Minor planning applications. This is due to the Council's performance for processing Major and Minor applications during the year ending June 2005 being below the Government's performance thresholds and it was considered unlikely that the thresholds would be achieved by 30 June 2006.
- 4.6 As a result, the Government has recommended that an Improvement Plan be drawn up and a trajectory of anticipated progress towards meeting the targets be prepared to ensure the performance targets are met by March 2007. This report, therefore, has been prepared to advise Members of the proposed Improvement Plan and trajectory.

## 5.0 **Current Position**

- 5.1 The list and graphs at Appendix 1 show that there has been a marked improvement in the performance of processing Minor applications since June 2005. This is largely due to the revised Scheme of Delegation, which came into effect in July 2005. Whilst the current high level of performance for processing both Minor and Other applications needs to be maintained, it is clear that the greatest effort needs to concentrate on achieving a consistently higher level of performance for processing Major applications (i.e. BVPI 109a).
- 5.2 The following actions have been carried out since June 2005 which will help to improve the performance of processing Major applications:
1. The revised Scheme of Delegation was introduced in July 2005 and has resulted in some Major applications being decided under delegated authority, which is speedier than having to be considered by the Development Control Committee.
  2. Since July 2005 planning applications have been capable of being submitted electronically.
  3. Since 1 December 2005 Major applications are prioritised on receipt to ensure they are processed more speedily.
  4. The Planning Support team has been reorganised. The recent introduction of multi-skilling means that each member of the team is responsible for carrying out all of the tasks relating to the registration of applications and carrying out consultations. This is a significant change from the previous linear process and has the major benefit of removing blockages in the process (and resulting delays) arising from the temporary absence of a member of staff. It needs to be noted, however, that following the

reorganisation and recent staff departures, the Planning Support team is not yet fully up to strength.

5.3 Some of the necessary processes and resources, therefore, are already in place to ensure improved performance in the processing of both Major and Minor applications. Nevertheless, it is clear that more needs to and can be done. To help achieve this, the advice of the Planning Advisory Service (a Government agency with a remit to support local planning authorities in improving their performance) has been sought, case studies of other local authorities have been considered, and a questionnaire has been sent to a number of top quartile performing local authorities. The resulting advice, information and ideas have been carefully considered, which has led to the preparation of the proposed Improvement Plan.

## 6.0 **Improvement Plan**

6.1 The proposed Improvement Plan for processing both Major and Minor applications is at Appendix 2. A number of actions will be taken over the next few months which will help with the speed of processing all planning applications. In particular, it is proposed to improve the current procedures for monitoring the progress of applications. With particular reference to Major applications, it is proposed to set out a “process map”, which will specify who does each part of the process and how much time they have to do it. This will lead to the preparation of an internal protocol which will include a timeframe for carrying out the various stages of processing the applications, a submission date agreed beforehand with the applicants, and a target Committee date for deciding the applications in the event they need to be considered by Committee.

6.2 The principal risk to achieving and maintaining any improvement in performance is considered to be the potential loss of staff. Performance has dipped noticeably in the past when key members of staff have left and the process of recruiting a replacement has taken longer than expected. The Best Value Review of the Development Control Service carried out in 2001, for example, found a clear correlation between the number of Case Officers and performance. As a result, the Improvement Plan includes an action to help ensure the maintenance of staff resources. It is recommended that use is made of Planning Delivery Grant money to set up a fund to draw on when key members of staff leave. The fund will enable a consultant to be employed temporarily, but on a full-time basis, until a permanent replacement is recruited, thereby helping to maintain a full complement of staff.

6.3 A further consideration is the potential loss of the 2 Planning Technicians, who provide essential support within the 2 area teams and handle a number of the more straightforward planning applications. The creation of these 2 posts has been an essential reason for the recent improved performance in processing planning applications, as their support within the teams has helped the 8 principal Case Officers to prioritise their caseload of applications. The 2 posts, however, are funded through the Planning Delivery Grant (PDG) on a temporary basis. As the PDG is expected to end in 2008, there is uncertainty about the future funding of the posts which, in turn, creates uncertainty about future performance.

6.4 The only other resource implications of the Improvement Plan are the proposed introduction of voicemail and the possible outsourcing of some Legal work relating to the preparation of Section 106 Obligations.

6.5 A trajectory of the anticipated progress towards meeting the Government’s target for processing Major applications is at Appendix 3. A trajectory for Minor applications has not been prepared, as the target is now being met and it is a purpose of the Improvement Plan to help ensure the current level of performance is maintained.

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**Major, Minor and Other Planning Applications Performance  
2002/03-2005/06**

<b>2002/03</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>Minor</b>	<b>Other</b>
Apr-Jun	33% (5/15)	59% (63/106)	87% (370/426)
Jul-Sep	63% (5/8)	59% (61/104)	90% (335/372)
Oct-Dec	50% (4/8)	65% (47/72)	83% (230/277)
Jan-Mar	75% (6/8)	63% (70/111)	86% (282/329)
<b>2003/04</b>			
Apr-Jun	83% (5/6)	57% (55/96)	87% (317/363)
Jul-Sep	50% (6/12)	68% (68/100)	83% (275/330)
Oct-Dec	83% (5/6)	61% (42/69)	85% (248/291)
Jan-Mar	18% (2/11)	50% (66/132)	82% (234/286)
<b>2004/05</b>			
Apr-Jun	60% (6/10)	45% (50/111)	77% (273/354)
Jul-Sep	55% (5/9)	49% (58/119)	71% (255/358)
Oct-Dec	44% (4/9)	51% (57/111)	77% (231/300)
Jan-Mar	43% (3/7)	61% (48/79)	82% (237/289)
<b>2005/06</b>			
Apr-Jun	29% (2/7)	59% (55/92)	85% (268/314)
Jul-Sep	33% (3/9)	70% (66/94)	86% (292/338)
Oct-Dec	60% (6/10)	75% (80/106)	88% (240/272)