

REPORT OF THE DEPUTY DIRECTOR (PLANNING & COMMUNITY STRATEGY)  
TO THE EXECUTIVE  
7 July 2006

**Planning Delivery Grant – Position Statement & Proposals for Deployment of Remaining Grant**

**1.0 Introduction and Report Summary**

1.1 On 5 May the Executive was advised of the details of the 2006/7 Planning Delivery Grant (PDG) awarded to the Council, by the then Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) as announced on 30 March. A further report was promised to bring forward spending proposals following discussion with the Executive's Planning Portfolio Holder. These discussions have now taken place and this report provides a brief overview of the current PDG position and puts forward proposals which would commit the remaining uncommitted grant. Delegated authority is sought for the Deputy Director (Planning & Community Strategy) in consultation with the Planning Portfolio Holder, to take forward and implement the proposals.

1.2 The Contact Officer for this report is Rodger Hood (Deputy Director, Planning & Community Strategy) (01235 540340).

**2.0 Recommendations**

2.1 *The Executive is recommended to:*

- (i) *consider and endorse the proposals for planning delivery grant spending as set out in this report:*
- (ii) *delegate authority to the Deputy Director (Planning & Community Strategy) in consultation with the Planning Portfolio holder to take forward and implement the proposals ensuring that spending remains within the available budget.*

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

3.1 This report is consistent with the Council's vision and, in particular, supports the aim of providing and supporting high quality services which are effective, efficient and responsive to the needs of people within the Vale.

**4.0 Background**

4.1 The Planning Delivery Grant (PDG) system has been in place since 2003/4. PDG funding, although not ring fenced, is allocated on the basis that it should be used to drive up performance in the planning service. It is seen by Government as "an important additional resource to enable and incentivise the delivery of improved planning services". It is a performance reward payment, increasingly focussed on the achievement of development control and plan making targets, in particular the annual BVPI targets for, planning application processing, electronic delivery of the service, and meeting Local Development Framework milestones.

4.2 The Council has received the following PDG awards since 2003/4

2003/04	£128,821
2004/05	£388,447
2005/06	£73,260

The majority of grant awarded has been used to support and improve the planning service, in line

with the Government's PDG objectives. Grant has been (or is being) used to fund a range of performance related proposals including,

- The employment of 2 planning technicians in the Development Control teams.
- Employment of a second enforcement monitoring officer (temporary post).
- Replacement PC's for all planning officers.
- Electronic capture and storage of planning application files.
- Market premia payments for key planning personnel.
- Introduction of voicemail for development control officers.
- Employment of agency staff to provide cover in the planning applications technical support team.
- Commencement of the Council's programme of Conservation Area appraisals.
- Reintroduction of the Council's Design Award Scheme.

4.3 As reported to the Executive in May, the ODPM announced the 2006/7 PDG awards to Planning Authorities on 30<sup>th</sup> March. In total £135m was made available to support planning services nationally, and the Vale Council's award was as follows:

£ 67,248 for development control performance  
£ 14,652 for on line planning capabilities  
£124,093 for housing considerations  
£ 52,525 for plan making performance  
£ 252 upward adjustment  
£258,770 Award total

To encourage "investment" in longer term improvements to planning services the Government is tying a minimum of 25% of the 2006/7 grant award to capital expenditure. In the Vale's case this amounts to just over £64k.

4.4 A balance of £63k remains uncommitted from earlier PDG awards and proposals which were to have been brought forward to commit this sum have been reconsidered in the light of the additional and more substantial funding now available following the 2006/7 award. In total £322,470 of PDG funding is available for improvement related projects, of which a minimum of £64,692 is required to be spent on capital.

#### 5.0 **Proposals for future use of Planning Delivery Grant**

5.1 Discussions have been held with the Development Control Manager and Section Heads within the Planning Service to identify the most effective and practical options for deployment of the remaining PDG, again with the primary aim of making investment which will help to maintain or improve service performance and thereby increase the Council's chances of earning future grant award. (In December 2005 Government announced that PDG funding would be guaranteed for one more year, with £120m to be distributed in 2007/8. The Department of Communities and Local Government are examining a number of options for future resources for planning as part of a Comprehensive Spending Review in 2007, and are researching the effects of PDG on local authority performance). The proposals set out below have been discussed with and endorsed in principle by, the Executive's Planning Portfolio Holder. In some instances, costings will need to be firmed up, but before this more detailed work is undertaken it was thought prudent to secure Executive approval in principle before taking the proposals forward. Executive Members will note the strong emphasis on proposals which will help to maintain staffing levels in the Service as this is seen as the single most critical factor in maintaining and improving planning performance, given that the Service is now fully e-enabled and opportunities for further technical improvements are now more limited.

5.2 Revenue Spending proposals:

- *Establishment of a staffing contingency fund to ensure that the Service's staffing levels can be*

*maintained and the impacts of staff turnover and absences on performance are minimised:*

At its meeting on 2<sup>nd</sup> June the Executive acknowledged that maintenance of full staffing levels in the Planning Service and, in particular in the Development Control Service Area, is fundamental to good performance. The Deputy Director was requested to bring forward proposals to help achieve this as part of the report on future use of PDG. Executive Members will be aware that in 2006/7 the Council's Managed Vacancy system is no longer operating and, in its place, Deputy and Assistant Directors have been asked to manage their staffing levels within a budget which equates to 95% of the previous year's salary budget. The Planning Service will not be able to sustain or improve performance unless full staffing levels can be maintained throughout the year. The Executive will also recall that the Vale has been designated as a Standards Authority in 2006/7 and will be required to meet Government targets for handling Major and Minor applications by March 2007.

It is suggested that £100k of PDG be set aside in a contingency fund which can be drawn on as needed, to bring in private sector support (consultants) or agency staff to provide full cover for planning officers or key technical support staff in both the Development Control and Development Policy Service Areas. The fund would be used to provide additional resources to cover periods where performance is threatened by staff turnover and/or loss of key personnel through long term sickness. If demand on the fund in 2006/7 is limited the balance would be rolled forward to future years and could be "topped up" from any future PDG award if its use proves to be effective.

Cost= £100,000

- *Enforcement Monitoring Officer – Extension of contract for a further 2 years:*

In 2004 the Executive agreed to use PDG to provide additional support to the Planning Enforcement Team by the appointment of a second enforcement monitoring officer. The post was created and filled on the basis of a 3 year fixed term contract entirely funded by PDG. The contract is due to end in 2008.

Enforcement is a critical part of the planning process and the Council's ability to enforce against breaches of planning control has been the subject of concern on a number of occasions over recent years. The enforcement workload has also grown, particularly as a result of the introduction of the high hedges legislation. To enable the service's performance to be maintained at its current level for longer it is suggested that the monitoring officer contract be extended for a further 2 years.

Cost = £55,000

- *Market Premia Payments to planning officer posts:*

At its meeting on 22 June the Personnel, Regulatory & Appeals Committee resolved to continue market premia payments to certain planning officer posts to ensure salaries remain competitive and potential staff retention and recruitment difficulties are eased. Previous market premia payments were met from PDG and it is suggested that the new payments (which are effective from 1 July) are similarly PDG funded.

Cost = £34,000

- *Production of a new Vale Design Guide*

The Council has in place a number of advisory design guides which are used to support the development control process and promote good design in new developments across the District. These include the "New Residential Areas Design Guide", "Shop Fronts & Advertisements", "House Conversions to Flats", and "The House Extensions Design Guide".

Resource limitations and the need to prioritise work to adopt the Local Plan 2011, has meant that of these, only the House Extensions Design Guide has been reviewed, updated and progressed as Supplementary Planning Guidance to accompany the new local plan.

In March 2006 Council resolved to retain the remaining guides as development control advice once the local plan is adopted, acknowledging that they would carry less weight (as they no longer retain the status of supplementary planning guidance) and would need to be replaced in due course as supplementary planning documents under the new Local Development Framework system.

Planning Policy Statement 1: Delivering Sustainable Development (PPS1) published in 2005 stresses the need for Local Authorities to promote high quality, inclusive design in the layout of new developments and individual buildings and urges Councils to reject design which fails to take opportunities available for improving the character and quality of an area. PPS1 suggests that it is entirely “proper to seek to promote or reinforce local distinctiveness particularly where this is supported by clear plan policies or supplementary planning documents on design.”

Having regard to the existing budget for preparation of the Council’s new Local Development Framework, it is unlikely that priority could be given to the preparation of updated design guidance as a supplementary planning document. It is therefore suggested that a brief be drawn up and tenders invited from suitable consultants, for the production of a new comprehensive Vale Design Guide for the Vale, updating and consolidating into a single document relevant existing Vale guidance.

Initial cost estimate = £25-30,000

- *Funding of a tree preservation order review*

The arboricultural officer has recently completed a cursory survey of the Council’s 300 plus tree preservation orders (TPOs) and found a number of serious issues that need to be addressed. The circumstances relating to many of the older orders appear to have changed dramatically. Areas around the trees have been developed, some of the trees themselves may have gone or, due to the passage of time, they no longer warrant protection. Some of the maps attached to the original orders no longer bear comparison with a modern map making tree identification difficult, and errors have also been found in the drafting of a number of the earlier orders, all of which will make TPO enforcement increasingly difficult and, in some cases impossible.

The arboricultural officer is of the view that a full re-survey of TPOs is necessary, however, given the existing pressures on his time he is unable to address the problem. To complete the survey it is proposed that a temporary member of staff (or consultant) be appointed.

Cost = £8K

### 5.3 Capital spending proposals:

- *Electronic capture of planning applications records currently held as microfiche*

At present, all planning application file records before the year 2000 are held as microfiche. This amounts to approximately 100,000 individual microfiche documents. The system for retrieving and viewing the microfiche is inefficient and slow, and where paper copies of plans held on microfiche are requested by customers or needed by staff, these need to be sent to an external company for printing, which is both costly and time consuming. The digital capture of the microfiche will overcome these problems and ensure that all planning application records are held electronically and can be accessed by planning officers, technical support staff, LSP staff and customers in the LSP, at their desks. This will improve service efficiency and better

meet the needs of customers. An initial indicative cost for the project has been sought from a major supplier but clearly alternative quotes will be required.

Initial cost estimate = To be advised, but likely to be of the order of £50-60K

- *Purchase of new digital cameras (5 no) for Committee presentation and site visit recording purposes*

The development control, enforcement and conservation teams currently record site details for Committee presentation and application processing purposes, using digital cameras purchased some 3 years ago. The cameras are in daily shared use, which can cause availability problems, particularly when repairs are needed. Some staff are using their own personal cameras to overcome the problem. Purchase of additional cameras would resolve these difficulties and provide a safeguard against availability problems caused by faults and repairs, which are increasingly likely given the age of the existing cameras and the level of usage.

Cost = £1,750

- *Purchase of new database for managing the Local Development Framework consultation process:*

Having approved the Council's Local Development Scheme and its Statement of Community Involvement the Executive will be aware of the complex, multi-document nature of the Local Development Framework system and will be familiar with the extensive consultation required throughout the new plan making process. An essential tool for managing the process is an effective data base which can retain consultee records (including details of their response to various consultation documents) and can generate the forms and letters the Council is required to produce at each stage of the process. The database is invaluable in sorting and categorising responses by, for example, policy reference, geographical location and respondent type, saving considerable officer time and ensuring accurate records are kept and updated, that consultees are not overlooked, and that the necessary information for reports can be generated quickly. There are a number of products on the market and development policy staff are currently investigating alternatives, including the latest CAP's Solutions product. Full staff training in use of the database will be part of the purchase price.

Initial cost estimate = £11K

- *Purchase of a system to provide an electronic link between the Local Plan 2011 proposals map and local plan policies, using a postcode or street search facility.*

As part of the BVPI 205 "Quality of Service Checklist" for Planning, Councils are assessed on whether they "provide the capability for an electronic planning service". Authorities score points according to the level they achieve against a "Pendleton Report Survey" which assesses them against 21 different criteria. Following completion of the Planning-on-the-Web project, this Council now scores well against the Pendleton criteria system, however, an area where it has still to improve is in providing the facility to link the Local Plan proposals map to the relevant policies and designations in the Local Plan written statement. To meet the Pendleton test users must be able to access a list of relevant Local Plan policies and designations for an individual site by clicking on that area on the electronically held version of the Proposals Map or by locating it via an address or postcode search i.e. the process must be interactive.

There are alternative systems on the market to achieve this, however, to minimise the purchase cost it is recommended that we use the system produced by Lovell Johns, the Company responsible for the production of the Local Plan proposals map, as they hold the original artwork and documentation in electronic format. (An alternative supplier would need

to acquire access to, or recreate this material at significant additional cost). The cost of the system can vary depending on the degree of functionality required. The estimate below would allow purchase of a system which would enable the Council to comply with the basic Pendleton requirements.

Initial cost estimate = £10,000

- *Transfer of English Heritage Listed building data into the Planning Service's "Uniform" system*

The Council's statutory list of buildings of special architectural or historic interest (2,500 entries) is currently held in paper format. This includes building descriptions and map locations. English Heritage have reproduced this information in electronic form which could be transferred directly into the Council's Planning application "Uniform" system. This would enable officers and technical support staff to interrogate the information at their desks, improving service efficiency and allowing customer inquiries to be dealt with more speedily. The transfer would require acquisition of the necessary licence key, staff training and a one-off data transfer.

Cost = £2,850

- *Update the Ordnance Survey map base held in the Service's "Uniform" system*

The mapping element of the Council's planning application administration system (Uniform) is based on Ordnance Survey (OS) data, which is subject to periodic update. Consultation/neighbour notification and planning application plotting are dependant on accurate and up to date mapping records. The OS record in Uniform has not been updated for 2 years and since the departure of the Council's Data Project Manager there is no in-house expertise to carry out the update. CAPS Solution, the Uniform system supplier, have been contacted and can offer this service, together with software and staff training which would enable future up dates to be completed in house.

Cost = £4,280

## **6.0 Summary**

- 6.1 The above proposals, if approved, would commit around &317K of the available PDG funding, with some £90K being spent on capital projects. As indicated, costings for a number of the projects will need to be firmed up once delegated authority to proceed has been given. The establishment of the staffing contingency fund (£100K) and the under spend against the total available PDG (£5K) will provide a degree of flexibility within the overall budget to adjust spending with the necessary Executive or Portfolio holder approval.

RODGER HOOD  
Deputy Director (Planning & community Strategy)

TIM SADLER  
Strategic Director

Background Papers: