

Report to: Executive
Date: 3 July 2007
Report of: Executive Member for Regeneration
Subject: Development Control Performance
Ward: All

Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To report on recent Development Control performance in the Planning Service and progress in delivering performance improvement strategies.

Consultation

- 2.1 Management Team, the Director of Regeneration and Development and staff in the Planning Unit have been consulted on the contents of this report.

Background

- 3.1 Development Control performance in determining planning applications is measured by BVPI 109 and the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) has established criteria for poor performance based on these standards. Councils that fail to achieve the minimum standards are at risk of designation as a 'Best Value Planning Authority', requiring performance improvement measures to be put in place.
- 3.2 Easington's performance in processing 'major' and 'other' applications (BVPI 109 a & c) was measured over a twelve month period to 30 June 2006, and was below the relevant DCLG performance thresholds. As a result, the service along with 56 other local planning authorities, was formally designated as a Best Value planning authority on 1 April, for the 2007/08 financial year, under the Best Value provisions of the Local Government Act 1999.

BVPI performance and improvement strategies

- 4.1 The planning service has been subject to significant structural change over the last 18 months, guided by improvement strategies designed to both improve and modernise the service, sustain strong BVPI performance and good customer care. Change has focused on the introduction of a new IT system and measures to streamline the way in which planning applications are processed. Service improvements have been guided by an independent Business Process Review commissioned to maximise the benefits of the new technology.
- 4.2 Recent improvements include the availability of on-line planning information and from January 2007, this now includes copies of all planning consultations which are publicly available in electronic case files. At the same time, Customer Service Centre staff have been trained across a range of planning related inquiries and procedures have been put in place for improved call handling.
- 4.3 Unfortunately, teething problems were experienced following the introduction of the new IT system and these problems coincided with the Best Value assessment period. The timing of the assessment was not known until October 2006, long after the IT system was introduced and some months after the teething problems had been resolved. Once the IT system was stabilised in June 2006, performance quickly recovered and progress has been regularly reported to Service Delivery Scrutiny.
- 4.4 Strong performance over the last 9 months of the financial year has made it possible for all BVPI 109 targets to be achieved for the 2006/7 reporting period. High performance during this period has, in effect, counter-balanced poor performance at

ITEM NO.

the beginning of the year. Indeed, BVPI 109c performance over the last six months has been in the top quartile range and improvement across all applications is being managed so as to achieve top quartile performance in all three BVPI's. Current performance is show below in relation to national targets and top quartile performance.

BVPI 109	National Target	2006/7 Performance	Top Quartile Performance (2005/06)
a) Major Applications	60%	64%	74.75%
b) Minor Applications	65%	69%	80.39%
c) Other Applications	80%	81%	91.61%

4.4 To maintain and broaden the process of service improvement, a Performance Improvement Team was established in November 2006. As well as providing a focus for service improvement, the Team has engaged with staff across the Planning Service as well as key staff in related areas such as Customer Services.

4.5 Parallel initiatives have also been pursued. The Regeneration Portfolio Holder and Head of Service participated in the Planning Advisory Service - Accelerated Learning Consortium to share experience with other authorities. Members of the Development Control and Regulatory Panel also met in February 2007 to begin a review of the working arrangements between the Planning Service and the Panel.

Planning Advisory Service support

5.1 An offer of support from the Planning Advisory Service accompanied the designation as a Best Value Planning Authority. Don Rankin, a former Chief Planning Officer visited the office in April, interviewing senior staff and members involved in the planning process. He has analysed the service using 'The Planning Service Benchmark' which is a detailed diagnostic tool and similar to the Audit Commissions 'Key Lines of Enquiry' (KLOE).

5.2 The Planning Service Benchmark confirms the progress that has been made by the Planning Service but recognises that the programme of improvements are still incomplete. It notes the performance improvements achieved to date but concludes that the improvements are not sufficiently embedded in revised procedures to guarantee continuous high performance. It also recommends improved liaison and reporting between the planning service, senior management and members.

5.3 These conclusions and recommendations reflect discussions reached within the service and as part of the Performance Improvement Team and are welcomed. They help to provide a framework for the continuing work of the Performance Improvement Team and a focus for developing service improvement strategies.

5.4 The report offers specific support to the Council in the following areas, listed in order of priority:-

1. To assist with the updating of the Improvement Strategy to include a wider range of service objectives
2. To advice members on how to improve their involvement at an early stage in major applications
3. To assist with performance and project management of major applications including advice on setting up a development team approach

ITEM NO.

4. To arrange training for senior case officers on project management skills for handling major applications
5. To assist with the review of the current procedure manual and advise on updating, replacement or creation

The report also recommends that the service should consider undertaking :-

6. Training and mentoring for members on the modernised planning system
7. Review and identify improvements in the style and content of committee and delegated reports.

Conclusion

- 6.1 Whist it is unfortunate that the teething problems associated with the new IT system coincided with an assessment of performance, neither the assessment nor the teething problems could have been foreseen in advance. In the twelve month period since the problems were resolved, the service has reported good performance and outturn figures confirm the BVPI performance for 2006/07 achieved all national targets. As a result, stretch targets have been adopted which seek to achieve top quartile performance.
- 6.2 Support from the Planning Advisory Service will help to widen the programme of improvement to include areas of the service that it has not yet been possible to address and the Planning Improvement Team will continue to provide a focus for service improvement. A revised improvement plan will now be prepared for consideration by the Executive to maintain the focus on service improvement. It is also proposed that both performance and progress is regularly reported to the Development Control and Regulatory Panel and that the Regeneration Portfolio Holder regularly reviews progress in developing and delivering the improvement plan.

Implications

- 7.1 Policy Implications
It is not considered that there are any implications resulting from this report.
- 7.2 Legal Implications
It is not considered that there are any implications resulting from this report.
- 7.3 Financial Implications
It is not considered that there are any implications resulting from this report.
- 7.4 Risk Implications
A risk assessment has been undertaken and the resulted have been considered in compiling this report.
- 7.5 Communications
Communication is a key element of the improvement strategy. Improved communication with the Development Control and Regulatory Panel and the Executive is proposed, including regular liaison with the Regeneration Potfolio Holder and the Chairman the DC and Regulatory Panel.
- 7.6 Corporate Plan and Priorities
Performance improvement is a key corporate objective and this report proposes a revised improvement strategy.

7.7 Equality and Diversity

It is not considered that there are any implications resulting from this report.

E-Government

7.8 The improvement strategy seeks to maintain the significant improvements to E-government performance achieved to date and to address the subsequent and historic impact on performance.

Recommendations

8.1 It is therefore recommended that :-

- The designation of the Planning Service as a Best Value planning authority is noted.
- The significant improvement in the performance of the Development Control service over the last 12 months is noted.
- A revised improvement plan is prepared for consideration by the Executive in the Autumn.
- The Regeneration Portfolio Holder monitors performance improvement and reports on the progress of the Planning Performance Improvement Team.

Background documents referred to :

Letter from the Department of Communities and Local Government dated 7 March 2007