

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Development and Conservation Control Committee 7th December 2005
AUTHOR/S: Deputy Development Services Director

Major Applications

Purpose

1. This item is to advise Members that, following last year's letter from the O.D.P.M. setting SCDC a new target for the percentage of major applications determined within 13 weeks, a further letter has been received and the actions that will be required to achieve this target.

Effect on Corporate Objectives

2.	Quality, Accessible Services	The Government equates speed of determination with quality of service.
	Village Life	Major developments can provide a range of benefits to village life including improved infra-structure, affordable housing, community facilities and employment
	Sustainability	Major Developments frequently contribute to sustainability by, for example, funding cycle ways and travel to work plans
	Partnership	Major developments frequently require agreements involving Parish Councils and other bodies in providing community resources, including buildings and workers.

Background

3. The Council has always balanced quality and speed of service in relation to major applications. Accordingly the agreed local target was set at 40%, notwithstanding that Government had introduced a specific target three years ago and this was set as 60% within 13 weeks. Last year the ODPM set SCDC and 76 other authorities a Best Value performance target of 57% within 13 weeks for major applications in 2005/06. Effectively Authorities that determined less than 40% in the year ending June 2004 were targeted (SCDC's figure for this period was 30%). In response to this letter Members in January supported a recovery plan designed to meet this target. This year's standards letter has now been received and it reaffirms SCDC, along with 69 other authorities, as a standards authority in respect of major applications and it sets a further target for 2006/7 of 60% within 13 weeks.
4. Members should note that Government expects all authorities to achieve the three performance targets by March 2007.
5. The purpose of this report is to update members on the progress that's been made towards meeting the targets.

Considerations

6. The Council's performance has significantly improved over the year, despite the Area teams not being fully staffed. In effect the teams have missed an Area Planning Officer for the year and two experienced planning assistants for most of it. This has resulted

in an average caseload of 180 cases per officer. Government funded research recommends 150 as the optimum caseload. Authority has now been given to try and recruit replacements for the vacant posts, although the delays in the process will mean that they are unlikely to be of any meaningful assistance until the year 2006/07 when the average caseload should return to 150. However, it is unlikely, given the market place for planners, that we will be able to recruit qualified planners for the planning assistant posts, and this will place an increased burden on the more experienced members of the team (i.e. through mentoring and training), and in the short term make less time available for dealing with major applications.

7. In focussing the teams on clearing applications, other aspects of their work have had to be slowed down. In particular this has meant that the response time on informal enquiries has increased. The knock-on effect has been increased customer dissatisfaction and time consuming complaints to senior staff within the department.
8. In addition, it has delayed the possibility of encouraging the use of Lawful Development Certificates, and hence an additional income stream to the Authority.
9. The table below illustrates the current position (i.e. end of October) for the current calendar and financial year.

10.		Major	Minor	Other
	Gov. target	60% in 13	65% in 8	80% in 8
	Calendar year	49%	64%	84%
	Numbers of apps.	75	506	1302
	Financial year	54%	67%	88%
	Number of apps.	63	377	983

11. In respect of the 43 major applications received this calendar year, 22 have been determined, and 73% of these have been dealt with within 13 weeks. Looking at the financial year, 36 have been received and 17 determined and 94% of these have been dealt with within 13 weeks. Given our close monitoring of those yet to be determined major applications, I am confident that for these applications we will exceed the target set for us by Government. However, the backlog of yet to be determined major applications from earlier years will continue to bring down the percentage within 13 weeks. It is too early to be confident therefore that the target will be met.

Additional Improvements

12. Earlier in the year, Go-east reviewed our recovery plan, and in addition, both internal and external audit reviewed our systems for determining major applications. No significant additional actions emerged from these review. More recently Cllr Orme and David Rush attended a regional seminar that targeted best practice for performance improvement in Development Control. Again, while little extra emerged, the need to review SCDC's terms of delegation has been highlighted. To this end a report on general changes to the terms of delegation will be prepared for Members' consideration in the New Year.

Current position on recovery plan

13.	Action	Ownership	Target date	Actual date	Comments
	Review admin processes, and reorganise to frontload admin	Rachael Fox	Review to be completed by summer and implemented by Autumn	Review completed in December, completion in New Year	Capping led to staff resources being redeployed to find budget cuts and to enable partial migration of some Planning functions to the Contact Centre
	Guidance to developers	Gareth Jones	Spring	Spring	Relatively muted protest at the new regime
	Set up agents users panel	Gareth Jones	<i>Letter seeking interest summer Panel set up Autumn</i> First meeting Winter	Interest sought, panel established, first meeting scheduled for December	Strong interest from agents to be involved
	Agree with Legal pro-forma agreements & use of undertakings & where Grampian conditions can be used	Chris Taylor (now Colin Tucker)/ Gareth Jones	<i>Pro-formas to be available in Spring and new approach adopted</i>	New approach agreed in summer. Outsource agreements in short term till staff resources allow work to be done in-house	Staff turnover and need to redeploy resources to find capping budget cuts
	New application forms	David Rush/Majors Champion Officer	<i>Draft available in Summer, in use by Autumn</i>	Draft has been the subject of discussion with staff. Work proceeding on Guidance Notes. Now scheduled for early in the New Year.	Delay in appointing Majors Champion + other priorities have delayed
	Major Champions Post	Gareth Jones	<i>JD, advert & interviews in Spring. Start in summer</i>	Post filled in September	Delayed due to need to redeploy resources to find capping budget cuts

Financial Implications

14. While the Government provides Planning Delivery Grant, there will be a significant increase in revenue to the Council. Last year, for example, this was a figure in the region of £508,000. However, there have been clear indications from Government that it will increasingly weight the grant away from the other targets towards majors. Also, in the longer term, Government has said that it is committed towards revising the fees for planning applications and implied that those authorities that don't meet the target will not be able to set realistic fees that cover the costs of determining major applications.

Legal Implications

15. In addition to the income point, Government could take other sanctions against those authorities that don't meet the targets set for them, and this will not be clear till the Order is made.

Staffing Implications

16. The Authority relies on the Planning Delivery Grant to fully fund its staffing costs and to progress our IT plan. Any significant reduction will reduce our ability to meet our other targets and to meet our IT requirements for E-Government and to migrate parts of the service to the Contact Centre.

Risk Management Implications

17. If we do not meet this target we will lose resource and make it difficult to meet all our targets. Increasing pressure on officers could lead to a leakage of experienced staff when it is increasingly difficult to recruit suitable professionals with relevant skills and experience. Further, in concentrating on majors we run the risk of performance slipping for the majority of our applications and turning around informals, and hence not meeting our population's reasonable needs and expectations.
18. Delays in preparing for and changing our systems of work essential for e-planning will limit migration of planning functions to the Contact Centre and is likely to reduce our PDG based on our Pendleton points score.

Consultations

19. The Chairman of the D and CCC Committee has been fully briefed, and he is supportive of the need for a different approach towards major applications while maintaining our performance for the majority of our applications.

Conclusions/Summary

20. The Council's target of 40% within 13 weeks for major applications is no longer viable.
21. The Council will lose out financially if the target is not met. Staff and IT resource will be lost and this would lead to an overall decline in performance

Recommendation

22. That resources be concentrated on achieving the recovery plan.

Background Papers: the following background papers were used in the preparation of this report:
Proposed Planning Best Value Performance Standards for 2005/06 & 07 Consultations
An overview of the Evaluation of Planning Standards Authorities 2004/05
Evaluation of Planning Delivery Grant 2004/05
Planning Advisory Service; Good practice notes for processing major planning applications & developing a development control improvement strategy

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