

## SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

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**REPORT TO:** Development and Conservation Control Committee      5<sup>th</sup> January 2005  
**AUTHOR/S:** Deputy Development Services Director

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### Major Applications: Target for Determination

#### Purpose

1. This item is to advise Members of a consultation letter that was received from the O.D.P.M. setting SCDC a new target for the percentage of major applications dealt within 13 weeks, and the actions that will be required to achieve the 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 new 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 facilities.

#### Background

3. The Council has always balanced quality and speed of service in relation to major applications. In doing so, Members recognised that the significant majority of applications determined fell within the "others" class (see the table below). Accordingly the agreed local 2003/04 target was set at 40%, notwithstanding that the Government had introduced a specific target two years ago of 60% within 13 weeks. The actual SCDC figure for this period was 30%. Interestingly, those of our network group (the Premier Division) that met the major's target, have struggled to meet the "others" target.
4. The ODPM is now proposing to set further planning Best Value performance targets in 2005/06 under section 4 of the Local Government Act for the 77 Authorities that determined less than 40% in the year ending 2004. The SCDC 2005/06 target has been set at 57%.

#### Considerations

5. The Council's performance has improved over the year (as we have been able finally to achieve something like fully staffed teams.) This has been shown in relation to the last Planning delivery Grant year September 2004 - October 2004 as follows:

	Major	Minor	Other
Gov target % in weeks	60% in 13 weeks	65% in 8 weeks	80% in 8 weeks
% Achieved	34%	55%	81%
Numbers of applications	62	594	1659

6. The upward trend has carried on through the year such that the current cumulative percentage figure is 39%, and I am confident that, so long as we can maintain staffing levels that we would be able to reach our current target that we have set for majors of 40%. However, our experience over the years informs us that there is no way that we can increase the percentage to the 57% target without there being a significant change in our approach.

### **Options**

7. The Council was given the opportunity to comment on this target, and a response was sent by the deadline of 17<sup>th</sup> December 2004. There are a number of special factors that make our target less easy to achieve than it is for other Authorities and they include the following:
  - External audit confirmed that some SCDC major applications are just too large to go through the entire process within the 13 weeks. Indeed, Government acknowledges this, since those applications that require an environmental impact statement (EIS) have a different statutory time period of 16 weeks from the date of the EIS's submission rather than the normal 8 or 13 weeks. As a growth area and the heart of nationally important research based industries, SCDC has a disproportionate percentage of "major" majors and those that require an EIS. e.g.'s new settlements, major urban expansions, Camborne enhanced, science parks
  - The nature of these applications is such that we also have a disproportionately high number of applications that are called in for determination by the Secretary of State e.g.'s Welcome Trust, 307 Huntingdon Road
  - It is the nature of the area that we attract applications that are out of the norm e.g.'s the rowing course, national cricket centre, wind farm, travellers applications, reception centre
  - SCDC has a particularly erudite population that takes a full and active part in the planning process.
8. However, while it has been said that all responses will be considered before laying the relevant Order before Parliament, it is not expected that our response will change our 2005/06 target of 57 %. If we do not meet this target it is inevitable that we will lose out financially (addressed further below).
9. For some time been in discussion with our network group, the Premier Division, and many of them have reported that they have been able to meet the set target.
10. Accordingly an action plan has been developed using the best practise gleaned from our colleagues to help us meet this 57 % target. The main points of this are as follows:
  - Front loading the registration process to ensure that all the essential information is required when the application is submitted
  - Clear guidance to developers as to what they are expected to provide
  - A clear statement that all major applications submitted that are valid and not acceptable will be refused
  - Continue with our practise of offering pre-negotiations to iron out problems

- A requirement of the applicant to involve the public prior to the application's submission
  - More use of standard agreements and completion of agreements prior to an application's submission
  - Rigorous time deadlines for the completion of agreements that follow on from an application's submission, and refusal of those that don't
  - Major Applications that are currently on the table will have to be withdrawn or determined before the accounting period commences. This will, in itself, require a significant staff input.
11. In addition to these actions we will be preparing a revised scheme of delegation for members to help achieve our target for major and minor applications.

### **Financial Implications**

12. While the Government provides Planning Delivery Grant, there will be a significant loss of revenue to the Council. Last year, for example, the Council received £216,00 and had we met the majors target we could have received an additional sum in the region of £50,000. However, there have been clear indications from Government that they will increasingly weight the grant away from the other targets towards majors. Also, in the longer term, Government has said that they are committed towards revising the fees for planning applications and implied that those that don't meet the target will not be able to set realistic fees that cover the costs of determining major applications.

### **Legal Implications**

13. 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**

14. 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 out IT requirements for e-government by 2005

### **Risk Management Implications**

15. If we do not meet the 2005/06 target of 57% we will loose resource and make it difficult to meet all our targets. Increasing pressure on all our staff 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 hence not meeting our population's reasonable needs and expectations.
16. Members may be faced by pressure from applicants to delay determination while they make good faults in their proposals to avoid a refusal. While this has been accepted in the past, it is no longer a viable option.

### **Consultations**

17. The Chairman of the DCCC committee and the Planning Portfolio have been fully briefed, and they are supportive of the need for a different approach towards major applications while maintaining our performance for the majority of our applications.

### **Conclusions/Summary**

18. The Council's target of 40% within 13 weeks for major applications is no longer viable.
19. 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**

20. That in the New Year, we advise agents as to the new approach (paragraph 10 refers) that we will be adopting towards major applications.

**Background Papers:** the following background papers were used in the preparation of this report:

Proposed Planning Best Value Performance Standards for 2005/06 Consultation

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