

LONDON BOROUGH OF HARROW

Meeting:	Development Control Committee Cabinet
Date:	7 th September 2004 9 th September 2004
Subject:	ODPM Evaluation of Planning Performance
Key Decision:	No
Responsible Chief Officer:	Chief Planning Officer
Relevant Portfolio Holder:	Planning, Development, Housing and Best Value
Status:	Part 1
Ward:	All
Enclosures:	Appendix - Letter from Keith Hill 1 st July and attached report

1. Summary

- 1.1 This report informs members of the outcome of the investigation on the behalf of the ODPM into the Council's performance as Local Planning Authority, and proposed actions arising as a result.

2. Recommendations

2.1 For Cabinet/Development Control Committee:

To note the report, to confirm the Council's commitment to improvement and to endorse the proposed actions.

Reason: to inform Members of the ODPM concerns and action being taken to address them.

3. Consultation with Ward Councillors

- 3.1 Not applicable

4. Policy Context (including relevant previous decisions)

- 4.1 Members will recall that the Planning & Development Improvement Plan was reported to Cabinet and Development Control (DC) Committee on the 20th and 21st April respectively. The objectives of the Improvement Plan are to achieve upper quartile performance levels within the service, to meet and exceed Government BVPIs and in so doing ensure service users can depend upon a quality service.
- 4.2 The Improvement Plan was presented to consultants working on behalf of ODPM who were inspecting 'Standards' Authorities, ie, those Authorities who had failed to meet ODPM standards in planning performance for 2002/03. A copy of the Consultants report and accompanying letter from Keith Hill is attached.
- 4.3 The Government's objective is to ensure that all Local Planning Authorities meet the BVPI 109 (speed of decision-making) targets by 2006/07. To this end they are employing a 'carrot and stick' approach, with the close scrutiny of poor performers and the reward of Planning Delivery Grant for service improvement and hitting targets.

5. Relevance to Corporate Priorities

- 5.1 The report addresses the Council's priorities of enhancing the environment and developing a prosperous and sustainable economy.

6. Background Information & Options Considered

- 6.1 The letter from Keith Hill leaves the Council in no doubt that the Government is taking a very firm line with Local Planning Authorities. He is asking for the Council to clearly set out its anticipated progress 'in terms of a trajectory of proposed improvement', which will be lodged with the Government Office and monitored by them on a quarterly basis. He specifically requests that the 'trajectory' is endorsed by the Chief Executive. A decision as to whether Government engagement will continue will be made at the end of 2004/05. The letter makes the Government position very clear – those authorities which do not meet their improvement targets will be subjected to increasing government engagement and/or intervention. The position is highlighted in the Minister's letter:

"...I believe there are ongoing serious concerns that your authority has not yet met the best value development control performance standards set for 2003/04. Whilst it is clear that the authority has taken steps to improve its performance, and I accept that in some cases your authority has made significant progress since this assessment took place, it appears that further measures may still be necessary to improve performance."

- 6.2 The Consultant's evaluation, as set out in Appendix I, was based on an analysis of statistical information supplied, interviews with politicians, officers and service users and examination of case files. While there are some areas where the figures are in question (enforcement caseload and rate of appeal success) the evaluation is generally considered fair.
- 6.3 The most relevant paragraphs in considering future action are 'Sustainability of Improvement' (pg.6), 'Delivery Capability' (pg.7) and 'Conclusions' (pg.7/8). Members will note that while the primary area of concern is the performance in respect of 'minor' applications, many issues in need of improvement are highlighted.

6.4 **Delegation Arrangements**

In assessing performance in respect of 'minor' applications the ODPM consultants concluded that meeting Government BVPI targets is 'only likely to be possible if the increased delegation and targeted performance monitoring that has been identified in the Service Plan is assiduously followed'. A report on a proposed new scheme of delegation is on the agenda for consideration at the Development Control Committee on 7th September. If agreed, the percentage of delegations should increase from approximately 87% to 94%, and a significant proportion of the additional delegated cases will be 'minor' applications. This would enable 'minor' applications to be monitored using the same processes as currently apply to 'other' applications and which have proved successful in improving performance over the past two years.

6.4 **Member Training**

Arrangements are in hand for a rigorous programme of member training starting in October 2004. A separate report is on the agenda covering this item. The need for member training had been recognised prior to the ODPM report, which confirmed the requirement to assist members in better understanding and performing their roles in decision-making.

7. **Review of Planning & Development Improvement Plan 2004/05 – 2006/07**

7.1 The ODPM report sees three key obstacles to meeting targets:-

- Lack of adequate and experienced staff with necessary resources to retain them.
- The need for an improvement plan that identifies more detailed action than in the current Improvement Plan and looks ahead to 2006/07, with targets for all agreed actions and a reasonable expectation that resources will be available.
- The need for a clear and cohesive approach from elected members that sees meeting performance standards as a high priority.

7.2 It lists 16 separate areas for improvement (pg.8). Many of those, such as IT Improvements and increased delegation are being progressed, and on some issues a difference of opinion/interpretation remains. This specifically applies to the appeals performance where most recent figures show Harrow performing above the national average.

7.3 The Planning & Development Improvement Plan will now be updated, firstly to reflect actions taken since it was agreed in April, and secondly to take account of the recommendations in the ODPM report. The Updated Plan will be reported to Development Control/Cabinet/Best Value Panel and Environment Scrutiny in the Autumn cycle.

8. **Finance Observations**

8.1 For the current year the Service Improvement Plan is being funded from a combination of Planning Delivery Grant 2004/05 and surplus fee income over budget target. Both these sources are variable and to an extent unpredictable. Provision for any changes in the Improvement Plan in current and future years as a result of its review will be subject to PDG/fee income and will be reviewed as part of the medium term budget strategy.

9. **Legal Observations**

9.1 Included in the report.

10. **Conclusion**

- 10.1 In spite of significant and acknowledged improvements in performance against BVPIs, the Government has serious concerns in respect of the Council's ability to reach national targets. While the 2004/05 – 2006/07 Improvement Plan set out actions to meet these targets, the Government has identified the need for further improvements and has introduced a quarterly monitoring system, to be administered by the Government Office, which will review the Council's performance. The Chief Executive is being asked to endorse the Council's commitment to improvement in line with an agreed programme.

There is no mistaking the Government's intentions and Members should appreciate the importance of this issue – for future CPA, for Planning Delivery Grant and to avoid any threat of Government intervention.

11. **Background papers**

None

12. **Author**

- 11.1 Graham Jones, Chief Planning Officer
0208 424 1466