

**REPORT FOR: PERFORMANCE AND
FINANCE SCRUTINY
SUB-COMMITTEE**

Date of Meeting:	24 July 2012
Subject:	Development Management Performance - Householder Applications
Responsible Officer:	Stephen Kelly – Divisional Director - Planning
Scrutiny Lead Member area:	Councillors Stephen Wright and Sue Anderson, Lead Members for Environment and Enterprise
Exempt:	No
Enclosures:	Planning Process stages chart

Section 1 – Summary and Recommendations

This report explains the basis for the under performance of the Planning Service against the published 6 week target determination period for householder planning applications and outlines the actions being undertaken by the service to respond to the performance issues raised.

Recommendations:

That the actions proposed be noted.

Section 2 – Report

Introduction

Harrow Planning Service is a high performing service. Rated 5th and 7th (out of 26 London Boroughs) for our performance on minor and “other” applications (including householders) respectively by London Councils (April 11 – March 12) Harrow’s planning service has also reduced its staff costs by £354,000 over the last 18 months and significantly increased “earned” income through discretionary charges to enable strategic development in the borough.

The Planning Service has a suite of performance indicators against which performance, through the Improvement Board, is reported quarterly. For 2011/12, the service introduced a new indicator, relating to the percentage of planning decisions on householder applications made during the first 6 weeks (out of 8) of a planning application. This was in response to the introduction of charges for pre-application advice for householder development and related changes to the planning process which served to prevent amendment of applications following their submission.

For the four quarters of 2010/11, the service fell considerably short of this target decision date, albeit that it met performance targets for determination against the statutory determination date (see table 1 below).

Table1: Householder statutory/non statutory performance

Period 2011/12	% householder applications determined in 6 weeks (target 60%)	% householder applications determined in 8 weeks
April – June (Q1)	1%	87%
July – September (Q2)	4%	83%
October – December (Q3)	2%	83%
January – March (Q4)	3%	87%

Background

Performance and finance committee have requested that they receive a report setting out reasons for any under performance, including information about what are the average time for a decision, whether any statutory deadlines were affected and any cost implications.

The Planning application process

The planning application process is comprised of a sequence of processes which start with “pre-application” and conclude with implementation of a planning permission. The key stages of the “formal” part of this process, against which government has historically set a timetable of 8 weeks from “start to finish” is set out in the appended slide (appendix 1).

This process largely comprises back office technical administration (stages 1, 2 and 5) and the officer’s professional assessment of the proposals. Within the administration process, a range of external and legal checks are

undertaken, associated with both regulatory compliance (and an assessment of the degree to which the proposals meet locally determined standards for the quality of the submission), and the capture of data via scanning and indexing as part of the creation of an electronic record of the application, against which both consultation and assessment then takes place. The planning officer contribution, (stages 3 and 4) involves a site visit, assessment of the merits of a proposal against development plan policy and site specific material considerations, and the preparation of a professional officer report either for committee, or for consideration and “approval” by a senior officer in accordance with the adopted scheme of delegation.

The appended slide sets out the proposed targets which underpinned the 6 week target set. These target times reflected officers assessment at that time of the appropriate apportionment of time for processing and assessment, in part determined from industry “norms” surrounding the administration of planning applications, and a belief that the assessment process could be improved through targeted interventions aimed at reducing officer inputs on each application and assuming “normal” systems, officer workloads and staffing.

The purpose of the 6 week target was to provide a demonstrable improvement for residents, in the time taken for a decision in response to a process change that removed the option to amend applications post submission. This was seen to provide an element of added value, in exchange for the loss of flexibility within the process.

Actual performance

The planning service has met its target statutory determination times (see table below). The table also highlights the trend in householder application numbers over the last 3 years. The government no longer provides any incentive to LPA’s to make decisions in accordance with statutory timetables (through Planning Delivery Grant) and there is no financial benefit in making decisions ahead of the 8 week target date. Whilst decisions made after 8 weeks can be appealed (on ground of non determination) this is rare. In the last 3 years, the Councils have not received an award of costs at an appeal into its failure to reach a decision within 8 weeks.

Notwithstanding the above, it is clear that the Planning service has not been able to make progress against the 6 week target. The average number of days for determination of a householder application during the four quarters has been steady.

Assessment of performance measured

Officers were aware that the 6 week target represented a stretch goal for the service during 2011/12. A number of significant operational and capability issues have nevertheless emerged during the year which serve to explain in part the reasons for the services failure to meet this challenging target.

Processing

The Planning service was included within the Customer Contact, Assess and Decide project (CCAD) in 2011/12. This project served to transfer the

processing function (and 4 staff) into Access Harrow. The transition took place between March and July 2011 and required significant resources in addition to the change champions (both officer and administration) to be devoted to the “lifting and shifting” of technical/administrative staff, as well as system mapping and development. Phase 1 of this project was completed in July 2011.

The transfer of this resource, and loss of key technical staff, together with the requirements for up-skilling of the processing team has meant that the target 7 day turnaround date at the front end of the process has not been able to be achieved. Given that the “clock” starts upon date of receipt of a valid application (not upon its checking as valid) this has meant that time has been lost at the front end of the process before consultation is carried out and planning officers receive an application for consideration. Challenges associated with the technical content of the applications and their consistent capture and indexing as part of the corporate scanning service (within Business Support) has also contributed to these challenges.

Officer Assessment

Case officer’s prompt assessment of the applications has been compromised by their engagement in the validation process, as well as by a range of operational challenges associated with the workloads, process efficiencies and turnover of planning officer resources. This has meant that case officers are carrying high workloads, which has limited their ability to manage their caseload effectively and support the up-skilling of officers in Access Harrow. Further structural changes within the service (and the reduction in manager resource over recent years) has also impacted upon managers capacity to make quick adjustments to processes to increase efficiency and effectiveness.

The planning service has also seen an increase in staff turnover, notably amongst agency staff, and Harrow has found some difficulty in recruiting replacement agency staff (who can leave at 5 days notice) promptly to ensure continuity of case management. Not only is the recruitment, induction and training process time consuming for existing staff and managers, but Harrow has seen competition for high quality experienced staff intensify in recent months – with five staff members leaving to take up more lucrative opportunities elsewhere.

Decisions issued

The service has been effective in working to increase delegation and turnaround planning decisions at the end of the process promptly. This improvement (which accords with the target of 2 days) has not however been sufficient to offset the consequential effects of earlier challenges.

Response to under performance

The Planning Service MTFS proposes the further reduction of planning officer resources over the next 2 years as follows:

Table 2: Planning Service MTF5 commitment

Proposals for 2012/13	Proposals for 2013/14
Delete Head of DM and BC and replace with single post	Delete 2 X planning officer posts
Delete Head of Enforcement post	Delete 1 X Planning policy officer
Delete Heritage Projects officer post	£200K from LDF team (this will require reduction/deletion of conservation, landscape and ecology resources)
Delete conservation officer post	

Against a background of reducing resources and future budget reductions, it is now considered unlikely that the target 6 week decision date will be capable of being achieved in the short term. For 2012/13, the target has therefore been deleted. Nevertheless, in order to address the issues that underpin the performance of the service, and to meet the challenges associated with a 16% reduction in professional officer resources the following measures are underway in 2012 to respond to the challenges facing the service as a result of the need to optimise efficiency in the medium and long term to meet funding challenges.

LEAN

The development management service and Access Harrow have engaged with the Councils LEAN champion to undertake an end to end review of the process in order to drive out inefficiencies within the existing systems, and to provide a focus for targeted interventions that remove existing barriers to improved performance.

Application policy review

The efficacy of charging for pre-application advice to householders in being reviewed, following a year of charges, to establish the overall effectiveness of the process. In particular, the impact of the policy not to amend applications once submitted, which is partly associated with the introduction of charges appears to be having an impact upon overall approval rates for householder applications. Given the impact that this has on rework (resubmission) of applications and the need to run the process again as a free go, there is considered to be some evidence of a significant, and potentially avoidable cost, being incurred.

Officer workloads

Planning officer workloads are towards the upper end of recommended workload levels of between 150 -200 cases per officer per year, particularly amongst those officers dealing with householder applications. The high turnover of agency staff (because of the competition for skills with other London Councils) is also affecting the workloads of permanent staff – who find themselves taking on work from departing staff at short notice. The service has secured approval to recruit permanent staff (to replace agency cover) and anticipates this taking place shortly. The planning service has also ordered a pool car, to be made available to officers who currently use public transport, in order to bring down the time spent travelling to and from sites to undertake site visits. A review of the duty planner service, and the web site – in an attempt to provide more targeted, self service, information to reduce avoidable contact, is also underway.

IT/Software

The introduction of the mayors CIL has created additional administrative burdens upon professional and technical staff that cannot currently be addressed by the Councils software provider. Harrow also proposes to introduce a CIL from next year. The Councils IT contract with Northgate is due to expire in September and further work with the Councils IT partner, and integrated with LEAN above is anticipated to provide opportunities for both enhanced IT capability (through a new contract) which will assist in reducing the amount of time spent by officers in the assessment, determination and decision issue phases of the process.

Consultation

The challenges facing the Planning Service affect both direct users of the services (applicants, developers) and those who seek to engage with officers as consultees or where they are seeking information on planning activities (including members and amenity associations). Over 2012/13, officers are therefore beginning to carry out a series of targeted exercises to discuss the challenges facing the service over the medium term (in line with the savings identified already, and expected to have to be identified in the future) in order to determine users priorities. These priorities will then be used to inform an “optimised” service offer commensurate with the financial resource available.

Financial Implications

The failure to meet the local performance indicator relating to household applications has no direct financial consequences for the Council. The review of the planning service outlined above will have wider financial implications that will be considered through the commissioning process in the autumn.

Performance Issues

In this section of the report you should consider the following:

The performance indicator relating to householder applications reflects the corporate priorities for united and involved communities. Some of the households affected by the wider performance may be awaiting the carrying out of building works associated with adaptation of their homes to meet specific identified needs. The additional 2 weeks associated with the missed local indicator is not considered to amount to a significant adverse impact upon the delivery against this corporate priority.

Environmental Impact

There is no direct consequential environmental impact arising from the report. Planning applications are assessed on their specific individual merits in the context of a regulatory regime that places environmental considerations at the heart of a definition of “sustainable development.”

Risk Management Implications

Risk included on Directorate risk register? No

Separate risk register in place? No

The failure to meet the local indicator target is not considered to present any significant additional risks. The indicator has helped to drive discussion in the service around the barriers to performance and failure to meet the target has exposed the Council to reputational risks which may have adverse consequences for Building Control services, who are in competition for work following the grant of planning permission.

Equalities implications

Was an Equality Impact Assessment carried out? No (delete as appropriate)

The Planning Service indicator is not related to a protected category – it is a universal indicator covering all householder applications. The Planning service is currently in discussion with the Corporate Equalities team surrounding the capture of equalities data in order to better monitor outcomes from the planning application process.

Corporate Priorities

This report addresses householder planning application performance. This indicator relates to corporate priorities concerning:

- United and involved communities: A Council that listens and leads.
- Supporting and protecting people who are most in need.

The performance of the indicator has potential adverse consequences in respect of those households who submit applicants, and those residents of the borough who live adjacent to an application site. The overall impact of the indicator, given that the service continues to meet statutory performance targets on these priorities is considered to be limited.

Section 3 - Statutory Officer Clearance

None required

Section 4 - Contact Details and Background Papers

Contact: Stephen Kelly Divisional Director – Planning 020 8736 6149

Background Papers: None