

PLANNING DELIVERY GRANT 2003/04

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report provides details of the Planning Delivery Grant following an announcement by Tony McNulty, MP, on behalf of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and outlines the key areas where the grant can best be targeted in Rochford to enhance the Planning Service.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 In July 2002, the Deputy Prime Minister announced that the Government was making an additional £350m available to Local Authorities as a 'Planning Delivery Grant' over the period 2003-2006.
- 2.2 The grant is intended to be a performance reward grant, with the payment for 2003/04 being related to Best Value Development Control targets in the period June 2001 to June 2002.
- 2.3 This first year of the scheme has distributed £50 million out of the £350 million total. All Local Authorities have received a minimum payment of £75,000 with additional payments being related to a series of factors, including overall performance.
- 2.4 In years two and three of the scheme, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) will continue to link grant awards to improved planning performance, so as to incentivise Authorities to reach and even exceed the Development Control handling targets and produce local development documents in a timely manner. The level of future grant allocations will depend on the measures chosen by ODPM and the performance of authorities against those measures. It is expected that an early announcement will be made about the criteria for the grant in 2004/05
- 2.5 The ODPM has suggested that the additional resources available might be used to :
- complete reviews of Local Plans and prepare for the new Local Development Documents;
 - further develop IT systems;
 - obtain assistance from Consultants;
 - outsource certain Planning Services;
 - increase Staffing levels;
 - provide more training for Staff and Councillors;
 - support mediation services;
 - encourage a more diverse workforce; and

- provide bursaries to train Staff.

2.6 Given the high level of performance achieved by Rochford in the period June 2001 to June 2002, the Council has been awarded a grant of £156,036 which is considerably above the minimum award level of £75,000.

3 OPTIONS

- 3.1 There are many areas of the Planning Service that might benefit from additional funds. However, the key to making best use of the grant must be to help develop the capacity of the service to continue to deliver a high level of performance to the benefit of the customers, and to secure additional funding streams in 2004/05 and 2005/06.
- 3.2 With this in mind, it is considered that the grant should be used to develop the service in the following broad categories:

A. Public Access to Information

A key element of the Council's IS/ICT Strategy is to enable the public to obtain information about planning applications through the Internet. The provision of this funding will allow the Council to move ahead more rapidly to achieve this objective. The Council's planning software supplier is developing a system that will enable residents, consultees, Parish Councils and Members to obtain information about the progress of planning applications through a simple Internet connection.

In addition to providing information, the new system will also allow on-line submission of comments and representations, or even allow questions to be asked about planning proposals.

The overall improvement to the authority's interface with the public will be significant and should ensure that staff and Members spend less time answering simple questions about the timing and progress of planning applications.

This investment would primarily be a one-off cost, estimated to be in the region of £30,000, though there would be an additional annual software charge of approximately £2,000 per annum.

B. Planning Portal

The Planning Portal is an E-government initiative that provides Planning Authorities with tools to enable the introduction of on-line planning applications and interactive development plans.

New facilities are being developed to fully automate the linkages between the Portal and the Council's planning software. This will mean that staff can spend more time dealing with the customer interface and less time inputting basic information into the computer system. It is anticipated that the automated download of planning applications from the Planning Portal will therefore have important customer benefits.

This initiative would again be primarily a one-off cost of about £6,000, but there would be an annual licence fee of £400.

C. Historic Planning Information

One of the key problems faced by the authority is providing information about old planning applications, particularly as this is more often than not required to enable a conclusion to be reached about a new planning proposal. The existence of a comprehensive electronic history of planning applications would have very significant benefits for customers, officers and Members, particularly having regard to the public access described above. Currently electronic records go back to 1983.

Much staff time is devoted to researching the planning history of sites. If the history back to 1948 was input to the computer system, there would be a significant saving in time and a better level of customer service. A three year project to input planning history is considered to be worthwhile.

The volume of information that needs to be entered is significant and there is no doubt that this would be a project over the three-year life of the performance grant. It is proposed at this stage that approximately £50,000 be allocated to this initiative from the delivery grant.

D. Training

The Planning Delivery Grant offers an opportunity to develop a bespoke training programme for both Members and Officers on planning and planning related issues.

For Staff, training will include the offer of a bursary to undertake additional training in a planning related subject, or to obtain a management qualification. In appropriate cases, staff might be offered the opportunity to enroll on a course to train as a planner. For Members, there would be the opportunity to run sessions that delve more deeply into planning and planning related matters.

The aim would be to create a programme that would have recurring elements and one-off training sessions and it is proposed that approximately £10,000 be allocated for this purpose.

E. Equipment

Additional equipment will be required to enable the full implementation of public access to planning information. Machines for public use will need to be available in Receptions. Given the broader issues surrounding discussions on office accommodation, Members are at this stage asked only to indicate support for the provision of equipment for public access. The location of the equipment will be dependent on discussions elsewhere.

The imminent publication of the Local Plan raises issues about the management of information and there is no doubt that flexible access to information will be very important. It is proposed that additional IT equipment (laptops or PDA's) be provided for the Local Plans Team to enable access to planning information on-site, at the planning inquiry and so on, and to enhance the communication of the plan proposals to residents.

A key improvement in the determination of planning applications is the availability of photographs of all applications sites. This can be achieved by equipping officers with a digital camera. The benefits of this arrangement include the availability of photographs for managers to review when determining applications and photographs that can be displayed in the Council Chamber or included in weekly list of committee reports.

The handling of significant volumes of paper and documents likely to be submitted in respect of the Local Plan consultation raises issues about technology solutions. The Council's IEG statement made a commitment to develop a document imaging system and certainly the Local Plan deposit provides one opportunity to begin to develop a suitable system.

It is proposed that for one-off purchases of equipment in 2003/04, an allocation of £20,000 be made.

F. Staffing Issues

It will be interesting to see how other Local Authorities make use of the Delivery Grant in respect of the recruitment and retention of staff. Certainly, there is likely to be further upward pressure on salaries as a result.

At this stage, it is proposed that the Delivery Grant be used to provide three year enhancement contracts initially to three selected posts within the Division.

In addition, there are opportunities to recruit new staff on short-term contracts, particularly on the basis of family friendly arrangements, to help build capacity in the Division.

The emergence of 'Local Development Documents' to replace Local Plans will provide a significant resource challenge for the Authority. The use of Consultants to provide an input to the process would certainly be useful and help to pave the way for the change.

It is proposed that £40,000 be allocated from the delivery grant to develop capacity on staffing within the division and to enable some initial consultant input to the preparation of the new local development documents.

4 CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1 The Planning Delivery Grant offers the opportunity to build capacity in the delivery of the Planning Service.
- 4.2 It is proposed that a broad programme of initiatives be developed for the service over the period of the grant from 2003 - 2006 along the lines outlined in this report. Further reports will be brought to Members as the programme develops, to explain the detail of the initiatives being developed and to monitor progress.

5 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The provision of the Planning Delivery Grant is an additional resource made available by the Government for the period 2003 - 2006. The level of grant paid in 2004 - 2006 will be dependent upon maintaining and, if possible, improving current levels of performance.
- 5.2 Detailed costings for the initiatives outlined in the report have not been prepared, given the short timescales involved in the preparation of the report.
- 5.3 It is, in any event, suggested that there should be flexibility in the allocation of funds to the initiatives outlined in the report, subject to certain pre-conditions. The proposals are structured so that, where possible, expenditure matches resources available and that this additional funding does not lead to significant long-term financial commitment for the Authority.

6 RECOMMENDATION

It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES**

That, subject to Members comments, approval be given to the broad programme of initiatives outlined in the report for the Planning Delivery Grant. (HPS)

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Background Papers:

Letters from ODPM, dated 10th February 2003 and 10 March 2003.

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