

**ISSUES ARISING FROM PLANNING SERVICES
COMMITTEE 25th JULY 2002**

**DEVELOPMENT & BUILDING CONTROL BEST VALUE
REVIEW - AUDIT COMMISSION FINAL REPORT (MIN. 372/02)**

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This item of business was referred by Planning Services Committee on 25th July 2002 for scrutiny by this Committee. A copy of the Audit Commission's summary and recommendations are attached as Appendix 1.
- 1.2 Members will need to consider the implications of the Audit Commission's recommendations.

2 AUDIT COMMISSION FINDINGS

- 2.1 Development and Building Control was assessed as providing a 'good' two star service with 'promising' prospects for improvement.
- 2.2 As Members will see from Appendix 1, the Inspectors made favourable comments about:
- the positive views of local people;
 - the efficient, consistent and competitive Building Control service;
 - the 'added value' being generated by the Development Control service;
 - the speed of decision making; and
 - consultation arrangements.
- 2.3 The Inspectors did, however, identify some areas that require attention and, as a result, recommended that:-
- further work should be undertaken on some short-term issues prior to major improvements in information technology;
 - to ensure that service to the users improves:-
 - the size of the Planning Committee should be reduced;

- new arrangements for site visits should be agreed (Note: now implemented)
- there should be more written information, advice and procedures; (Note: has been actioned)
- the Local Plan should be reviewed as a matter of urgency;
- Councillors involved in determining planning applications should have mandatory, regular training on planning matters;
- an appraisal of procurement methods for both parts of the service should be carried out; and
- the Planning Division Performance Framework should be clearly linked to Corporate aims. (Note: actioned).

3 DISCUSSION

Short Term Issues

3.1 The Best Value Action Plan included a number of short-term actions and those items which have been completed to date are:

- Updated Planning Performance Framework
- Review of Delegations
- Significant enhancements to both Intranet and Internet Planning pages
- Revised advice leaflets published
- Building Control Customer Commitment published
- Customer feedback form introduced
- Revised Performance Indicators being monitored
- Appeal Summary document being published monthly.

Therefore, good progress is being made on implementing improvements and enhancements to the service outlined in the Action Plan.

Size of the Planning Committee

3.2 The report states:

"In our discussions with Councillors, we noted their concern over the democratic aspect of allowing all Councillors a decision making role and enabling voter representation from all Wards. However, we are concerned at the failure to reduce the size of the Planning Committee."

- 3.3 The report also states that:

"All Councillors sit on the Planning Services Committee, an unusual practice, which adversely affects the speed and consistency of decisions and inhibits the training of Members in essential technical issues."

- 3.4 Members have strong views on the appropriate size of the Planning Services Committee, but those views are not, it seems, shared by the Audit Commission. At present, there is little the Commission can do by way of sanction to those Authorities that do not accept the recommendations included in Best Value reports.
- 3.5 However, in examining this recommendation further, Members do need to consider two issues. First, the introduction of Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) will provide the Government with a set of tools with which to influence the actions of Local Authorities. In particular, better performing Authorities will be allowed more freedom in their decision making. Tied to CPA, corporate audits will be the Best Value follow-up inspections where the Audit Commission determines whether an Authority has learnt lessons from the Best Value Review.
- 3.6 Second and more specifically related to Planning, the Government has announced a grant package of £350 million to be divided amongst those Planning Authorities that can show performance improvements. Given that the Audit Commission has explicitly linked the size of the Planning Committee to performance, if Members decide to retain an all Member Planning Committee, it will be important to demonstrate that this does not have any impact on the delivery and performance of the service.

Local Plan Review

- 3.7 The Local Plan does provide the essential background to development control decision making and it is important that the Review is completed as soon as possible.
- 3.8 Recruitment problems are holding up progress on the Plan. If these cannot be resolved soon, then alternative methods of plan preparation will need to be considered. A further report will be brought to Members in due course.

Training for Councillors

- 3.9 The report concluded that Councillors should have mandatory, regular training, although not as a prerequisite to sitting on the Planning Committee.

- 3.10 Some training has already taken place, following the May Elections, including general matters relating to Planning and a tour of key sites. Other sessions are planned and it is intended to draw up a programme of training sessions to be organised over the next two years.
- 3.11 However, at present, Members make a decision to take training or to opt out for whatever reason. This seems to be the key concern of the Audit Commission and Members will need to decide whether to agree a package of, say, five or six training sessions a year, to which all Members must attend. This would, in part, address the Commission's concerns about consistency of decision making.

Procurement Methods

- 3.12 This matter is being examined and it is hoped to present a report to Members before the end of the current financial year.

4 CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1 A number of the Audit Commission's recommendations have already been implemented, or have been actioned. That leaves several on which Members' views are now sought in this report.
- 4.2 As indicated in the report, there are currently no specific sanctions on Authorities who decide not to accept the Audit Commission's recommendations but, it is suggested that where Members choose not to do so, a clear statement of reasons be provided, since the Commission will return in the future to review achievements.

5 RECOMMENDATION

- 5.1 That Members consider their response to the Audit Commission's final report on the Development and Building Control Service. (HPS)

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Background Papers:

Audit Commission report "Rochford District Council - Building & Development Control - July 2002"

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