

USE OF THE PLANNING DELIVERY GRANT TO IMPROVE PLANNING PERFORMANCE**1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 On 10th February 2003 the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister reported to the House of Commons how this grant (new Government money to help deliver planning reforms) was to be delivered in 2003/4. This grant money was reported to the Council on 24th February 2003. It was also the subject of a report, in very similar terms to this one, to the Planning Development Control Committee on 12th March 2003. Any measures agreed to secure improvements need to be put in place as quickly as possible after the 1st April 2003.
- 1.2 The explanatory letter sets out that New Forest District Council's share of this grant is £109,000 out of a total national allocation of £50m. It is a performance reward grant with a minimum of £75,000 for all authorities, but substantially more for authorities who performed well or improved significantly on the government's development control processing targets between June 2001 and June 2002. Some authorities in the local area have received substantially more than New Forest because they improved their performance significantly in this period. For example East Hampshire who receive £273,000 and Test Valley £293,000 in 2003/4.

2. PURPOSE OF THE GRANT AND FUTURE ALLOCATIONS

- 2.1 The explanatory letter explains that the main purpose of the grant is to drive up performance in the delivery of planning functions, both in respect of development control and plan making. There is a total of another £300m which will be allocated in the next two years.
- 2.2 Although the letter says that decisions have not been made on the criteria for allocating the grant for 2004/5 and 2005/6, the ODPM will continue to link future grant awards to improved planning performance. This will give authorities incentive to reach and exceed the development control handling targets and produce local development plans in a timely manner. Performance will be monitored on both counts to inform future decisions on grant allocation. In future years it is not envisaged that there will be any minimum safety net allocations. In other words if no improved performance is achieved with the first tranche of the grant no award can be expected in the next two years, when a much larger sum of money is available.
- 2.3 The letter sets out the areas in which authorities might consider concentrating the extra resources to improve performance. These include completing current reviews of development plans, better resourcing of IT systems, assistance from consultants, outsourcing of certain planning functions, increased staffing levels, training for staff and Councillors and more use of technical staff.

3. THE DEVELOPMENT CONTROL PERFORMANCE TARGETS

3.1 The development control targets upon which the main part of the grant has been allocated in 2003/4 and which are likely to be a major component of future allocations are:-

- To determine 60% of major applications (eg schemes of more than 10 houses) within 13 weeks of receipt;
- To determine 65% of minor applications (eg 1-10 houses) within 8 weeks of receipt;
- To determine 80% of all remaining applications within 8 weeks of receipt.

3.2 The table below sets out New Forest District Council's performance in respect these targets in the two periods which were used by the ODPM for awarding the first tranche of the money and in the current financial year to mid March 2003. It also gives the number of applications included in each category.

Target	60%		65%		80%	
	Major		Minor		Other	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
July 00 – June 01	52	44	709	57	1846	76
July 01 – June 02	55	45	703	59	2034	76
April 02 – Mar 03	52	50	717	58	1974	77

3.3 The aim of the measures explained later in this report is to achieve the full government target for handling planning applications in the period April 2003 to December 2003. It is considered that this gives the greatest likelihood of New Forest District Council achieving a large allocation of next year's money. This however cannot be guaranteed because the government has not yet decided on the criteria, although it seems a fairly safe bet based upon the mechanism for allocating the first year's money. The emphasis on development control targets is because we already have an up to date Development Plan which is currently under review and our IT systems are modern as is our progress with e-governance initiatives.

4. PROPOSALS FOR UTILISING THE 2003/4 PLANNING DELIVERY GRANT

	Sum (£thousands)
4.1 Increase administrative support primarily to improve the speed of the planning registration process	15
4.2 Increase the hours of an existing Assistant Planning Officer in Development Control from 6 to 25 per week (term time only)	8

4.3	Increase the amount of money in the budget for the use of consultants	66
4.3.1	Planning Consultants to process appeals for Development Control	(30)
4.3.2	Architectural consultancy	(18)
4.3.3	Landscape consultancy	(18)
4.4	Increase the amount of money in the budget for engaging external legal services primarily to advocate cases at public enquiries	20
	TOTAL	109

5. EXPLANATION OF PROPOSALS

- 5.1 The extra clerical assistance in the development control section is intended to improve the speed with which applications are registered and passed to professional officers for processing. At the moment this is taking about six working days and the intention is to reduce this by half. It is likely to involve a small increase in the hours of one existing post and a temporary contract to retain a current member of staff whose temporary maternity cover contract expires in April 2003.
- 5.2 The only extra employed professional resource is the extension of the hours (term time only) of a very experienced Assistant Planning Officer who currently is only working six hours per week. This is potentially a very valuable existing resource already employed in development control. This member of staff is likely to be involved in a substantial amount of home working.
- 5.3 The largest single allocation of money is to allow the employment of planning and design consultants to outsource certain aspects of the planning service. In development control this is most likely to involve routine appeal work, but might also involve minor applications. It will also allow the employment of landscape/urban design/architectural consultants which will enable more advice to be made available, particularly at pre-application stage.
- 5.4 The time taken to determine an application for the purpose of the statistics includes the time taken to conclude legal (Section 106) agreements. The allocation for legal consultancy assistance will enable more resources to be put into the preparation of draft legal agreements in parallel with the routine processing of the applications. It is likely that this money will be mainly used to employ barristers to advocate the Council's case at public inquiries, freeing up existing staff to put more time into legal agreement preparation.
- 5.5 Overall this package of measures, combined with in-house management initiatives, is considered sufficient to allow the achievement of the government development control targets without any detrimental impact on environmental standards or customer care. It does not require any change to delegation arrangements or the workload of the Planning Development Control Committee, although changes in this area could further enhance performance in the future.

- 5.6 Significantly Members will realise that very little of this package involves the direct employment of extra staff and largely utilises consultancy assistance. This is in line with government advice, but pragmatically recognises that it will be almost impossible to recruit additional good quality professional staff in current market conditions, particularly on temporary contracts. There is also a severe limitation on the office space available.
- 5.7 There are undoubtedly other things which it might be desirable to achieve with this extra grant money. The proposals set out in this section are all specifically targeted at improving performance in terms of achieving the government's development control targets. If larger sums of money are made available in future years it might be possible to address some of the other desirable improvements.

6. PROCESS

- 6.1 The Planning Delivery Grant money is not ring-fenced, and so despite all that is said in the government's covering letter, it could be spent on other services or treated as a saving. This however will not result in an improvement in planning services and the further larger sums of money promised in the following two years would not be available to this Council.
- 6.2 The Planning Development Control Committee are recommending to the Council that a supplementary estimate of £109,000 be allocated to the measures set out in Section 4 of this report in the 2003/4 financial year.

7. IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 This report deals fundamentally with the financial implications of the Planning Delivery Grant. Not using this to secure an improvement in planning services in 2003/4 is likely to jeopardise the availability of larger sums of grant money in the following two years.
- 7.2 The measures referred to are intended to secure planning improvements without any detrimental impact on the high environmental standards required of new development by this Council.
- 7.3 There are no crime and disorder implications arising from this report.

8. PORTFOLIO HOLDER COMMENTS

These will be reported at the Cabinet meeting.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 9.1 That the Cabinet recommend to the Council that a supplementary estimate be approved in the sum of £109,000 for the financial year 2003/4 to utilise the Planning Delivery Grant and spent on the measures set out in paragraphs 4.1 to 4.4 of this report.

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Background Papers:

Letter from Tony McNulty MP
Parliamentary Under
Secretary of State to New Forest
Council dated 10th February 2003

