

TO – Environment and Overview Scrutiny Committee

SUBJECT – Planning Best Value Review

FROM – Head of Planning and Engineering

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 During late 2002, the Scrutiny Committee considered the final report of the Planning Best Value Review that had been undertaken during the course of 2202. The Committee welcomed the report and supported its conclusions and Action Plan.

During March this year, the Planning Service was the subject of an external inspection by the Best Value Inspectorate. The inspection was thorough and highly demanding of staff time and resources. In May, the Inspection Report was published. The report concluded that the service was “fair with promising prospects for improvement” The full report is attached at appendix “A” for information.

- 1.2 The outcome of the inspection was a good one for the Service and but for three factors, I believe that the result would have been the recognition of a higher level of quality. These factors were:

1.3

- The temporary drop in DC performance figures from top quartile levels during the year of the inspection as a result of staff sickness and other resource difficulties.
- Delay in the preparation of the Local Plan as a result of work pressures and staff resource difficulties
- Lack of public speaking at Planning Committee and associated Committee procedures

2. Report Recommendations

- 2.1 The report made a number of specific recommendations which can be summarized as follows:

- Take action to update the Local Plan without delay
 - Provide guidance on Section 106 obligations
 - Improve the decision making process, particularly the speed of determination of planning applications by
 - Revising the delegation agreement
 - Examining alternative ways of delivering the Service
- Revising the Code of Conduct for site Visits

Provide regular, mandatory training for Councillors. Consideration should be given to extending this to Town and Parish Councils

Review the Committee process, including public speaking, reporting of recommendations and committee decisions and public accommodation

Review and monitor costs of the Service

Enhance management of performance of the system to ensure achievement of key indicators

Improve service to customers by

- Providing regular progress updates to applicant, agents and other interested parties
- Clarification of duty officer
- Greater use of website. Emails and online application forms
- Provision of a greater range of information leaflets

3. Action to date

- 3.1 It is important as a first priority that the specific recommendations of the Inspectors are addressed in order that the Service can continue to maintain improvements. At appendix "B", each of the recommendation areas is set out together with actions necessary to achieve progress. It will be noted that there has been progress against many of the actions, though others will need to be programmed as part of the developing work of the service.
- 3.2 The overall Action Plan approved by members set out a very wide range of actions to be achieved. Although good progress has been made, there have been difficulties in meeting some of the targets. This has been due in part to being over ambitious in considering the timescales that could be met at the same time as delivering highly demanding services. This was recognized by the Inspectors, who, nevertheless, supported the Action Plan and were happy that there had been good progress made on a number of key issues. Indeed, it was on the track record of the Unit, in relation to the outcome of the previous Pilot BV Review as well as positive, early action on the current one, that led them to be comfortable with formally recognizing that the service had "promising prospects for improvement".
- 3.3 Attached at appendix "B" is a summarized version of the action plan originally approved by members. It contains all the key actions that the Plan committed the service to undertaking together with the original timescale. It indicates the actions achieved to date, actions that are yet to be achieved and the revised timescales now proposed. The Plan forms a monitoring document within the Planning BU to manage performance improvements and will also provide members with a useful summarized version of progress for member monitoring purposes.
- 3.4 The Outcome of the Review has been considered by the Change Board at its meeting of 15th Oct. The actions set out in the Appendices were agreed.

4. Conclusions

- 4.1 The Best Value Review and Inspection exercise was extremely demanding. It was rewarding to secure the recognition that we did from the Inspectorate, particularly in the light of the pressures on the service and the resource difficulties that had been experienced in the year upon which the inspection was focused.
- 4.2 It is important now to ensure progress against the action plan continues and that the necessary resources are available for the delivery of the service that the Inspection supports. The action plan is managed within the normal departmental management process and it will be appropriate for it to be the subject of regular monitoring from members to ensure progress continues.

5. Recommendations

- 5.1 That the outcome of the Best Value Inspection of the Planning Service be noted
- 5.2 That the Actions set out in Appendix “A” and “B” be supported and implemented
- 5.3 That regular monitoring reports be submitted to members

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Areas in District Affected: All

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