

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

PLANNING and TRANSPORTATION ADVISORY BOARD

23 May 2005

**Joint Report of the Director of Planning and Transportation,
the Cabinet Member for Planning & Transportation and the Cabinet Member for
Efficiency & Innovation**

Part 1- Public

Matters for Recommendation to Cabinet - Council Decision

1 PLANNING DELIVERY GRANT AND ALLIED DEVELOPMENT CONTROL MATTERS

Summary

To inform Members of the high level of PDG award achieved for 2005/6 and to make proposals for expenditure against the grant including the establishment of three new posts in Development Control.

1.1 Planning Delivery Grant (PDG)

- 1.1.1 Performance in development control is monitored against a number of Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI) targets set by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM). This report does not go into detail in respect of all of the targets but focuses on application decisions, as these were crucial to the Council's PDG award for 2005/6. Other factors such as progress with the Local Development Framework, delivery of housing development and progress towards electronic systems will also feature but it is development control performance that is the major influence on the assessment.
- 1.1.2 As a result of targeting resources to meet both the speed of performance and the proper assessment and consideration of applications the Council was able to achieve an enhanced PDG for 2005/6. Our awards have risen from £109,000 in 2003/4, to £464,296 in 2004/5 and **£506,596** (plus anticipated further **£50,000** for plan making) in 2005/6.
- 1.1.3 This has been possible because we have invested the previous two years PDG awards wisely in supporting the Development control function to enhance the throughput of work. Thus we achieved the government's targets for the accounting period for allocation of 2005/6 PDG (October 2003 – September 2004).

Application type	year to September 2004	ODPM target
major (13 weeks)	65.45%	60%
minor (8 weeks)	65.07%	65%
other (8 weeks)	82.10%	80%

- 1.1.4 The accounting period for development control performance for 2006/7 PDG runs from October 2004 to June 2005 and we are monitoring outputs to aim to continue to meet and if possible exceed these targets (exceeding targets can see a further proportional enhancement of PDG).
- 1.1.5 A key dimension of the PDG spend thus far has been to lever-in temporary staff resources necessary to improve and sustain performance in terms of speed of throughput. This has been so for 2003/4 and 2004/5. Inevitably this search for speed has meant that we have not been able to devote so much of our resources to other aspects of the service. It is now appropriate for us to turn our minds once again to addressing issues of quality both in the form of development and the service that we offer. The conflict that sometimes arises between speed and quality is one that has haunted development control since the introduction of performance targets. Targets themselves are no bad thing but as always we need to take care that the correct balance is achieved and I am very conscious that this is very important to members, officers and local communities alike.
- 1.1.6 The proposed expenditure of our current PDG resource includes a wide range of items.
- Provision is to be made for the Housing Market Assessment Study (joint with DHH) and the PPG 17 open spaces review work (joint with DL).
 - There are some large sums associated with the implementation of the End-to-End project and for the scanning of planning histories for the web-site that also has the effect of freeing up some office accommodation space.
 - A sum is included as agreed with Members to complement the Tonbridge town centre consultants work focussing on traffic issues.
 - A provisional amount has been allocated towards some consultancy work in connection with home working (remote access to back-office systems) which would bring some efficiencies for Development Control and other service areas across the organisation.

- I have made provision for calling-off design advice on a case by case basis bearing in mind that our capability in this area will be a criteria for future PDG awards. Some ongoing staff training in urban design is also included.
- There are a number of smaller items to facilitate various IT changes and improvements and to support corporate initiatives such as the West Kent housing study and the purchase of corporate display boards.
- On staff resources we have provided for the continuation of a number of temporary posts, including a contract planner, a technician and data and support staff.

1.1.7 The main dilemma is that to make further and sustained improvements in service delivery we need to increase investment in staff resources and this needs to be on a permanent basis to ensure we can recruit good quality staff and achieve continuity in our establishment.

- I believe that an Enforcement Team Leader is now required in recognition that there is a keen need to strengthen the enforcement team to bring additional capacity at an experienced level but importantly to introduce and maintain a far more structured, organised and responsive edge to the service. Because of their personal work load neither the Chief Planner nor the Principal Planning Officer can give the time to day to day management that is required. In fact I believe the distraction has given rise to some quality control issues in the mainstream development control work which we are all keen to address. I believe that to secure the right candidate and thus ensure longer-term continuity, that this post must be a permanent part of the establishment. We have safeguarded PDG funds for the post initially for 3 years (during which further tranches of PDG should also be available to “bank” to fund the post) to allow a programme for long term base budget funding to be created in the period from 2008/9 onwards.
- An additional Senior Planner post is needed to help us move to ‘the next level’ in terms of mainstream development control performance and again to improve our quality control as well as speed. We need to take the opportunity presented by PDG awards to create staff resources that allow the development control section to re-balance its focus away from pure speed of decision making towards greater “added value” and quality through negotiation. Like the new Enforcement Manager that this should be an established post and the funding arrangements are as described above.

1.1.8 A further factor in the context of the overall budget position is the confirmed increase in planning applications fees. From April this year fees were increased to a level in excess of our expectations. This means there is likely to be an increase of income in the region of £43,000 over and above the estimate included in this years base budget. This will be helpful in balancing any additional pressure on the base budget in future years.

1.1.9 We are currently well advanced in the implementation of a major software enhancement aimed at improving our productivity further and meeting a substantial number of Government requirements for e-planning/e-government. This project alone is £100,000 in value. It had been the intention to use external contract resources to scan all new applications for display on the website. There is an annual revenue budget sum of £50,000 allocated for this work. However, in reviewing how best to tackle this issue it has been concluded that a more efficient way forward is to purchase the necessary scanners from PDG funds and appoint a Scale 1-2 officer to undertake this scanning role in house. This will effect a net saving against base budget of £29,000.

1.2 Conclusion

1.2.1 PDG has enabled an investment to be made commensurate with the increasing demands on the planning service. It will also enable us to bring forward other priority corporate work.

1.2.2 The opportunity is also presented here to make a more sustained improvement in the development control and enforcement service by the investment in new permanent staff resources without impact on the base budget for several years and within a strategy to compensate for the planned expenditure in the future.

1.3 Recommendation

1.3.1 The broad principles of the spend pattern set out in this report **BE ENDORSED**.

1.3.2 The General Purposes Committee **BE COMMENDED** to consider and recommend the establishment of three new posts as set out in paragraphs 1.1.7 and 1.1.9 above.

Background papers:

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Nil

File ref: B18

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