

IMPROVING PERFORMANCE ON PROCESSING PLANNING APPLICATIONS

1 Recommendations

- 1.1 To note the action so far to secure and maintain improved performance and the proposals for a continuing improvement plan.
- 1.2 To agree that the targets for 2003/04 should be designed to place the performance in the upper quartile within Inner London:

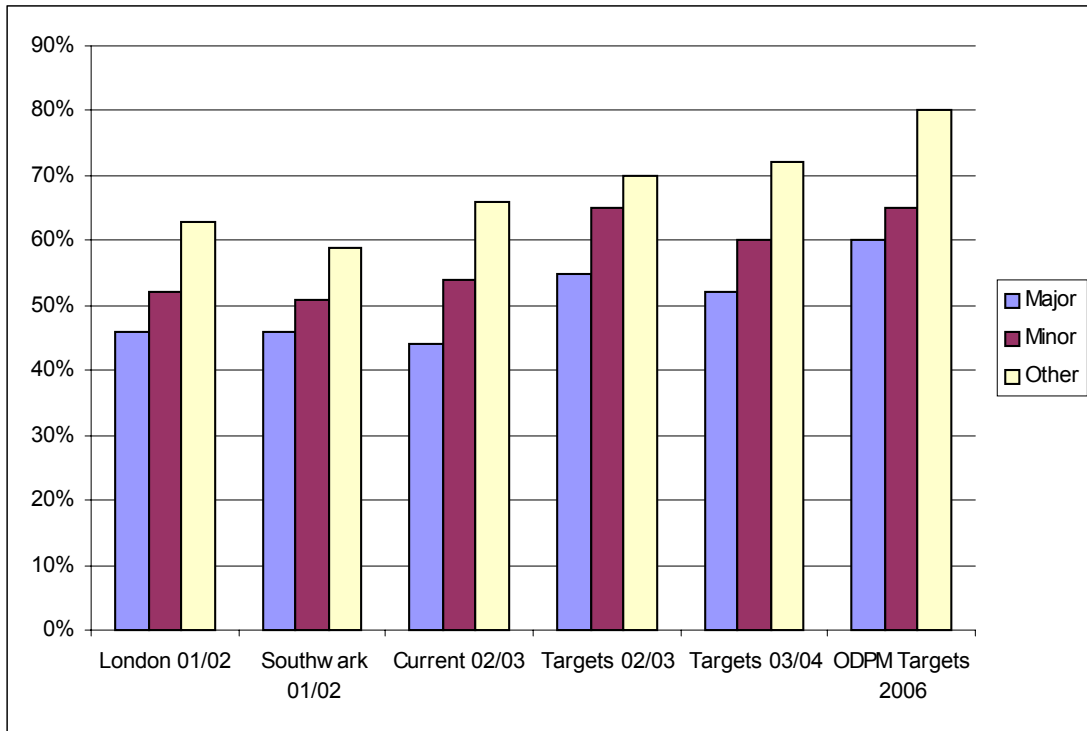
a	52% of 'Major' applications to be determined within 13 weeks
b	60% of 'Minor' applications to be determined within 8 weeks
c	72% of 'Other' applications to be determined within 8 weeks.

- 1.3 To agree that progress should be monitored monthly by the Executive Member and the Chair of Planning.

2 Background

- 2.1 Following the last quarterly performance review, Executive, on 3 December 2002, resolved: 'That in the light of a likely failure to achieve the required target performance for the processing of planning applications, the Executive instructs the Chief Executive to conduct an urgent review of the situation and put in place such changes as are required to bring about sustained improvements in service.'
- 2.2 Since then we (the service supported by the Assistant Chief Executive and corporate colleagues) have:
- Successfully introduced the new IT system and completed the training of all staff
 - Taken action to mitigate the impact of the staff time spent on the transition on the performance on current cases by the short-term re-deployment of staff to tackle administrative delays
 - Conducted a brief external review by appointing a consultant to review progress towards achieving a sustained improvement in performance (see below)
 - Prepared for the transition to Community Councils by undertaking a review of the structure of the service and commencing the recruitment of additional senior staff
 - Discussed with the Executive Member and the Chair of the Planning Committee the priorities for the development of the service in addition to the performance targets
 - Developed a further action plan to maintain the impetus for improvement

3 Current performance



The table above outlines the following data

	Major	Minor	Other
Inner London 01/02	46%	52%	63%
Southwark 01/02	46%	51%	59%
Current 02/03	44%	54%	66%
Targets 02/03	55%	65%	70%
Targets 03/04	52%	60%	72%
ODPM Targets 2006	60%	65%	80%

3.1 This data shows that:

- a. Performance for 2001/02 was at, or about the inner London average. The actual position for the current year will depend on the extent to which other London Boroughs have improved performance at a faster rate than we have.
- b. Performance for 2002/2003 is below target across all three types of application, although on both Minor and Other the performance is improving year on year.
- c. A comparison between proposed targets for 2003/2004 and the ODPM benchmarks by 2006, imply an increase of performance of 8%, 5% and 8% over a two-year period. Performance will need to improve by 16%, 9% & 14% from the current level.

3.2 The introduction of the new IT system, as anticipated, resulted in a decline in performance in Quarter 3. Out-turns for that period for the ODPM's major,

minor and other categories were 35%, 54% and 66% respectively. The impact of the transition to the new system is likely to be felt into Quarter 4, with the result that the projected out-turns for the year as a whole are now 44%, 54% and 66% respectively as shown in figure 1 above.

- 3.3 However, the average time taken to determine all applications (an adopted local performance indicator) has declined steadily throughout the year, from 16.6 weeks in Quarter 1 to 13.4 weeks in Quarter 3. The numbers of outstanding applications in hand has fallen slowly but steadily since June 2002, from 756 to 659.
- 3.4 Further action is planned to the end of the year to minimise the impact of the introduction of the new IT on performance. All cases approaching the 8 week deadline will be reviewed by managers at weekly 'surgeries' to ensure an immediate resolution is reached wherever possible. This will result in the refusal of more applications where a negotiated settlement would previously have been sought. Also, the separate 'fast-track' team set-up in October 2002 is now beginning to deal with a full quota of applications within target time-scales.

Planning Delivery Grant

- 3.5 Our improved overall 8 week performance between June 2001 and June 2002 (it rose from 46% to 53% over this period) is reflected in the award, by the ODPM, of a Planning Delivery Grant of £225,000 for 2003/04. (The grant has also been weighted to reflected application numbers and additional development pressures in London and the South-East.) The grant for 2004/05 is expected to depend on trends in performance between June 2002 and June 2003, plus progress towards adoption of the development plan. Our overall 8 week performance has risen to 59% over the first half of this period.

4 Independent Review

- 4.1 A consultant carried out an independent review of the service over a two week period in January. The brief was to review whether the new IT would be likely to deliver the required results, to consider if the service could be organised differently to increase through-put and review progress generally towards achieving a sustained improvement in performance.
- 4.2 The consultant's report confirms that previously declared targets for this year and for 2003/4 (the latter reflect longer term ODPM targets) are unlikely to be met. It includes a number of recommendations about how best to ensure the potential advantages of the new IT are fully realised. These include changes to the operational environment and a clearer focus on performance targets. It is recommended that these should form the basis of an action plan. The report also recommends a dialogue with members to identify fully any change in policy direction and the implications of this for service delivery, and for staff to be instructed accordingly.

- 4.3 In response, managers have held further meetings with all relevant staff groups to confirm and consolidate the procedural and operational changes required by the new IT. Procedures for 'fast-tracking' certain types of application have been reinforced. In addition, the surgeries referred to in 3.2 have served to reinforce a 'performance culture' generally.

5 Setting targets and other policy objectives

- 5.1 The targets set by the ODPM (BVPI 109 a, b & c), which all authorities are expected to meet by 2006, are 60%, 65% and 80% respectively. These are the targets previously adopted by Southwark for 2003/04.
- 5.2 Performance in London is consistently less than the national average, particularly in inner London where a greater proportion of applications are of a complex or controversial nature. Most inner London boroughs, including Southwark, secure a relatively large number of community and environmental benefits through Section 106 planning agreements, and the time taken to conclude these agreements even following a resolution to grant permission counts against decision times.
- 5.3 It is recommended that Southwark should aim to meet the ODPM national targets of 60%, 65% and 80% by 2006. The recommended targets for 2003/04 are 52%, 60% and 72%, which would place Southwark in the upper quartile for Inner London. These are considered stretching but realistic. The assumptions made last year of a much faster rate of change were, in retrospect, too dependent on the timing of the introduction of the new IT system.
- 5.4 In discussion with Members we have identified four other aspects of the service where continuing or enhanced priority is needed:
- To continue to negotiate substantial community benefits through planning agreements;
 - To deliver a more effective impact from enforcement;
 - To improve further the customer focus;
 - To ensure that the approach to high quality design outcomes is maintained and enhanced.
- 5.5 We will bring forward separate proposals on those aspects, including the contribution that could be made through the use of the Planning Delivery Grant.

6 Improvement Plan

- 6.1 A formal plan for continuing improvement will set out the proposals here if they are agreed. It will include action:
- a. To maintain current staffing levels (following the recent appointment of additional staff to the 'fast-track' team) through faster recruitment action where vacancies arise and a better assessment of the market for staff;
 - b. To increase managerial capacity, short and long term, to improve the management of application casework and better respond to Community Councils;
 - c. To improve further admin processing by ensuring the procedural

changes required by the new IT are fully implemented and consistently adhered to

- d. To commission, shortly, a full review of the role and performance of administrative staff, to identify better required job skills and appropriate training
- e. To enhance “performance culture” by using the new IT to track cases and identify trigger points for action, and by sharing performance data with all staff frequently.
- f. To develop the case work tracking and modelling of projected performance with assistance from corporate colleagues to improve: our early warning of and response to the impact of changing caseload; and our understanding of the elements of cases which give rise to delay (especially those which follow inevitably from the application of the OPDM measurement system).
- g. To hold weekly ‘surgeries’ of all applications sufficiently ahead of the 8 or 13 week deadline to ensure a resolution is reached in time to meet the target wherever possible.
- h. To ensure that the target time or the impact on the local average time indicator is clearly presented on cases which are decided by Planning Committee, including the new Community Councils.

7 Continuing monitoring and review

- 7.1 We propose that monthly reports should be provided to the Executive Member and the Chair of Planning on the progress of the improvement plan and the running assessment of performance and projected performance against targets. Progress would be reported to the Executive overall through the quarterly monitor.