

## **Audit recommendations – Developmental Control**

Response from the Head of Planning, Economy and Regeneration.....

Dear Councillor Evans,

Cabinet has asked that I respond to the email to them from you as Chair of Audit Committee following a discussion of its contents at a recent meeting. I will be covering the planning performance elements.

In respect of the application time taken targets for planning applications; the 60% 'majors' in 13 weeks, 65% 'minors' in 8 weeks and 80% 'others' in 8 weeks are all targets that are set nationally by the Government rather than being local performance indicators. They are some of the longest running performance indicators in planning and have been established nationally as the benchmark for assessing the speed of decision making for a long time. They form the backbone of the statistics we provide to the Government on a quarterly basis.

Whilst the Government has reviewed planning performance targets over the past couple of years, they have not amended these indicators. Their attention has been on developing new 'speed' indicators and new 'quality' of decision making indicators. These newer indicators take performance over a rolling 2 year period at look at time taken for application determination (speed) and the percentage of application decisions overturned at appeal (quality of decision making). Mid Devon is meeting the requirements of these indicators.

In the absence of a lack of change nationally over the indicators Audit Committee has questioned, there is no merit seen in developing tighter performance targets for planning application decision making that would place us at odds with the national picture. This would also be likely to divert attention away from quality of decision making and place greater strain on staff. At present the service seeks to balance both quality and speed of decision making in accordance with the Government's requirements. By all means let us aim higher than the national targets, but it is not intended that this aim to be expressed as tighter indicators.

The Service carefully manages time taken over planning applications and where appropriate negotiates extensions of time with applicants. This also reduces risk over returning a significant amount of planning fees. In recording and reporting on time taken to determine applications, the methodology set out by the Government allows for extensions of time agreed with applicants to count within the target timescale for an application to be decided. The return of planning fees to applicants only applies if there has been no decision after 26 weeks and there has not been an agreed extension of time. I believe the financial risk on fee return to be less than Audit Committee members believe due to the monitoring and proactive management undertaken within the Service.

The nationally applied 20% increase in planning fees was implemented from 17<sup>th</sup> January 2018 and is being used to offset some of the cost of the service as historically income from planning fees has not covered the cost of this part of the service. A restructure in 2017 realigned resources and saw the economy,

regeneration and planning functions amalgamated within a single service. A growth and delivery team was been created with key staff resources focused on key projects. The restructure also considered casework capacity needs within the Development Management section. The structure of the service shows 10FTE caseworkers, albeit the Group Manager for Development and the Area Team Leaders also have managerial responsibilities and accordingly are not full time dealing with casework. The 2 FTE major projects officers also take casework directly related to the projects they are dealing with as part of their wider duties.

Regards  
Jenny

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