

**EXMOOR NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY****RESOURCES COMMITTEE – 29 APRIL 2002****PLANNING DELIVERY GRANT - 2003/04****Report of the Head of Planning & Community****Purpose of Report:**

To set out detailed proposals for the allocation of the Planning Delivery Grant which has been awarded to the National Park Authority during 2003/04.

**Legal Implications including Human Rights Act 1998:**

No specific implications

**Financial Implications:**

None affecting core budget for 2003/04

**National Park Purposes:**

Improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the plan making and development control function of the Authority will help contribute to both National Park purposes and the duty.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

It is RECOMMENDED that Members welcome the introduction of the Planning Delivery Grant and support the suggestions for its allocation set out in section 3 of this report.

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**1. BACKGROUND**

- 1.1 The Government has allocated a Planning Delivery Grant of £350m, nationally to local planning authorities over a three year period, in an effort to improve the speed and efficiency of the delivery of planning. Its aim is thus complementary to that of the Planning Bill which seeks to bring about a step change in the performance of planning authorities, both in respect of development control and plan making.
- 1.2 The initial allocation has been made on the basis of awarding those authorities that have achieved significant improvements in performance in handling planning applications, although this approach has not been extended to National Park Authorities, as they have all received the minimum grant of £75000, regardless of their individual performance during the last financial year. This amount, nevertheless is significant for what are small planning authorities and compares favourably with some large urban councils, many of which have received the same sum.
- 1.3 Successive grants will also be related to performance and they are therefore an incentive for and reward improved performance. The money is not ring fenced, though local authorities need to have a clear audit trail so that the additional funding and its impact can be monitored, to inform future grant allocation.

## 2. ENPA PLANNING SERVICE – AREAS WHICH CAN BE IMPROVED

2.1 Improvement covers three areas - speed of service, quality of service and customer care. An objective assessment of where specifically we can improve should include specific actions identified in the Best Value Performance Review/Inspection and our ongoing ability to meet the targets set in the national Performance Indicators. Our performance for last year on some of the key indicators is as follows:

Performance Indicator	Target	ENPA
Number of advertised departures from the statutory plan as % of total permissions	None set	Less than 0.5%
% applications determined in less than 8 weeks	80%	76%
Development Plan adopted within last 5 years/New Local Development Framework in place by 2006	LDF in place by 2006	Local Plan Adoption target – 2004 LDF adoption target 2006
Do you provide for pre-application discussions with applicants?	YES	YES
Do you have a publicised charter which sets targets for handling different stages of the DC process	YES	NO
Is the % of appeals lost lower than 40%	Less than 40%	33%
Is the delegation rate 90%	90%	80%
No. of costs awarded against the Authority	0	0
No. of ombudsman reports finding maladministration	0	0
Court finding against the Authority	0	0

2.2 Some of the key recommendations of the Best Value Inspection were:

- More advice and information at a wider range of outlets
- Improving training for parishes and key partners
- Production of a document that outlines the level of service to customers

2.3 Generally, the Planning Service is performing well - or is producing significant improvements in performance over recent years - as is evidenced by the BV Report. However, the performance being achieved on the key Development Control indicator - that of speed is the result of a higher delegation scheme and an intense effort on behalf of key Development Control staff. This is resulting in key officers working significant hours on case work, much of which could be dealt with at a lower level and this is inhibiting the ability to attend to other areas of work, specifically, systems and personnel management, project work and cross - team working. The caseload per officer is higher than that advised by the Audit Commission by about 20% (though is lower than many other National Parks and local planning authorities which are consistently failing government targets for speed and efficiency).

2.4 Another area which is poses a constraint to efficiency is the lack of comprehensive planning history records on the PACS computer system which runs the administration of the development control process. Although this is slowly being addressed by existing admin staff, there are still 10 years of back histories to input onto the system.

2.5 Progress has been slow on improving literature and public guidance on the planning function and there is still a lack of a Planning Charter.

2.6 Customer care and accessibility of planning advice is highlighted in the Best Value Review as an area requiring some further improvements.

2.7 On the policy side, the government has just announced that, although development control targets will still be the main basis for grant allocation, a plan-making element of the grant will be introduced for 2004/05 to emphasise how important it is that local authorities have up to date plans in place and begin preparing their new Local Development Frameworks. Delays and frustration are caused in the production of the ENP Local Plan through lack of dedicated administrative support and although this can be organised internally, it generally does not have a first call on available resources. An element

of the Planning Delivery Grant (PDG) could now also be needed to attract a replacement for the key post of Principle Planning Officer which will be vacant in June, if the Local plan timetable is not to be even further delayed.

### 3. **SUGGESTED AREAS FOR ALLOCATING PDG**

3.1 The following draft allocations have been recommended to meet the areas identified for improvement and jointly represent a ‘package’ which can help to bring about the following overall improvement:

- Improving the accessibility of planning advice to members of the public – both electronically and through wider planning officer presence
- Making our policies, standards of service and planning and enforcement guidance more accessible and easily understood by customers
- Improving the efficiency of existing data management systems
- Maintaining the NPA’s position in the top 25% quartile of local planning authorities in terms of determining planning applications within the eight week target
- Improving the quality of decisions and relationship and understanding of the authority’s planning and enforcement role with parish councils and the local community
- Ensuring the Authority meets the gov. target in relation to the delivery of the Local Development Framework and the preparation of Regional and Sub-Regional Spatial Strategies

#### 3.2 Production of Comprehensive Set of Publicity/Guidance Leaflets/ Planning and Enforcement Charter

3.3 This has been a long standing action but requires dedicated project time which is not available to existing staff. It is recommended that this work is undertaken externally and will help greatly to improve the accessibility of planning advice and guidance for local people and agents and also improve customer care and public expectations. The NPAs’ policy on enforcement and monitoring needs to be publicly stated and a series of advice leaflets which summarise in plain English each of the policy chapters in the Local Plan would greatly assist in communicating to the public the Authority’s planning policy approach.

3.4 Although a start is being made this year on a review of the Design Guide (using existing staff), consideration should also be given to ensuring that this is completed, which may require the input of external consultancy.

#### 3.5 Improving Accessibility of Planning Advice

3.6 Additional assistance in development control will free up the key development control staff who could then extend the planning surgery approach which has been very successful in Lynton. It is recommended that a planning officer is present during livestock markets at Cutcombe and also on a more regular basis at Porlock or Dunster to provide a presence in the North East area of the National Park where there is a current perception of being overlooked.

#### 3.7 Member and Parish Council Training

3.8 There are specific indicators which are directly linked to the quality of the decision making process such as percentage of departure approvals and design/development quality. Member training is important in delivering an effective and high quality planning service and it is recommended that a small element of the PDG could be allocated to additional Member training beyond that which is provided by the corporate budget. Specific areas where this may be of benefit in the forthcoming

year are telecommunications development, enforcement and building design/sustainability and materials.

- 3.9 A series of parish planning training days has already been included in the work programme for the year (2003/04) in an effort to improve local understanding and support for the Authority's planning policies and the way in which decisions are made. The cost of this is more appropriately met through the PDG which will free up areas of the corporate budget for other purposes.
- 3.10 Planning Portal/IEG
- 3.11 All local planning authorities are expected to be 100% accessible electronically by 2005 and the Government has set up a national Planning Portal, which allows public access into every authority signed up to it, and at the highest level can enable planning applications to be made electronically. It is planned to sign up to the first and second stage of the Planning Portal this year and to investigate the timing for enabling the public to apply for planning permission on line. Although the Planning Portal is at present free, there is a possibility that the government will introduce a charge for this service and it may be prudent to allocate an element of the PDG for planning IEG purposes – particularly if the Authority's core IEG budget is not made available for planning purposes. There will also be a cost in terms of enabling customers in due course to apply on line using XML which will link in with the existing PACS system and this may be required from this year's PDG.
- 3.12 Creation of Planning Assistant/Technician Post (Development Control)
- 3.13 Currently the Principle Development Control Officer is dealing with too many small scale applications and public enquiries regarding the need for planning permission and permitted development. This reduces his efficiency and time to concentrate on the more complex cases and to manage the DC function. Performance is currently still high only due to commitment and excessive working hours which cannot be sustained in the long term. The 8 week figures show that during the course of the last year they are gradually falling and although some applications will inevitably take over the 8 week period (e.g., those involving the Government Office/English Heritage or subject to legal agreements), at the moment a significant proportion are those which have not had the benefit of pre-application advice.
- 3.14 It is recommended that a post of planning assistant to deal with these issues be developed which also takes on the technical work relating to digital imaging and committee presentations which is currently carried out by the Planning Office Manager. The existing post of admin assistant (development control) could provide admin support for the whole planning function including policy and enforcement once it has been freed up from the planning history data inputting.
- 3.15 Dedicated Short-term Contract for Data Inputting
- 3.16 This has already been agreed in principle and an allocation from the IEG budget for this work had already been made. It is perhaps more appropriate for this important work to be funded directly from the Planning Delivery Grant and would take the form of the appointment of two part-time staff over a period of one year/18 months to complete the work.
- 3.17 Local Development Framework Target
- 3.18 The government is committed to ensuring that all local planning authorities have in place a Local Development Framework by 2006. The role of National Park Authorities in development planning and community action planning is also set to increase, with greater involvement in regional planning and preparation of sub-regional strategies. The efficiency of the development control service is to a great extent reliant upon the existence of up to date development plans and it is essential that the Authority can deliver these within the targets set. It is therefore recommended that the existing temporary planning assistant post in the Policy and Community team is extended over the three year PDG period (existing contract is only until Dec 2003) with this post being regularly reviewed in relation to the work load imposed by the new development plan system under the Planning Bill. It is also vital that the key post of Principle Planning Officer (Policy) which is responsible for the

Authority's Development Plan work is filled as soon as possible after the current postholder leaves in June. Given the current shortage of qualified planning officers nationally and the difficulty in filling such posts at Exmoor there is potential to improve the attraction of this post (financially) using PDG monies.

3.19 Rural Housing Enabler Project

3.20 This has now been running for a year and is proving to be a very successful initiative with several housing needs surveys being completed. The rapid pace of work has resulted in the need to use part of the Planning Assistant (Policy) post for technical and administrative support and there is a need for the cost of this to be met from the project, particularly as it is likely to continue to be needed. It is therefore appropriate to allocate a small amount of the PDG for this purpose. Any additional funding allocated to the project can be used to draw down additional funding from partners and will be reimbursed, back to the Authority.

4 COSTS

4.1 At this stage any costing is only at an indicative level and further investigation now needs to take place to firm up the following cost estimates:

Action/Proposal	Cost Estimate (£)
Planning Charter/Information Guidance Notes/Consultancy Work	10000
Additional Planning Surgeries	500
Member & Parish Council Training	5000
Planning Portal/IEG	10000
Planning Assistant (DC)	17000
Data-Inputting Contract	25000
Delivery of the Local Development Framework	5000
Rural Housing Enabler Project	4000 – (refundable)
<b>Total</b>	<b>72500</b>

Chris France  
Head of planning & Community  
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Background papers on which this report, or an important part of it are based, constitute the list of background papers required by Section 100 D (1) of the Local Government Act 1972 to be open to members of the public comprise:-

ODPM correspondence on the Planning Delivery Grant