

REPORT OF HEAD OF DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT

SUBJECT: PILOT SCHEME TO INVESTIGATE THE PROVISION OF A 6 WEEKLY CYCLE OF DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT COMMITTEES

Purpose of Report

To propose the introduction of a 6-weekly Development Management Committee cycle as a pilot scheme (to coincide with the 2014/15 calendar) with the aims of assisting with the efficient working of the Development Management team and to meet and exceed Welsh Government targets and increase customer satisfaction.

Introduction

The monthly cycle of Development Management Committees are based on a traditional committee cycle. The Authority has not deviated from this cycle and as far as records show has only ever been cancelled once (2013).

Officers are constantly looking towards good practice and innovative ways of providing more cost effective and efficient ways of working – seeking to improve on Welsh Government targets, customer service and at the same time achieving maximum value for money.

Committee work

The existing cycle requires 12 meetings in a year on a monthly cycle. We operate through August (unlike some local planning authorities which have a summer recess). Moving to a 6 weekly cycle will result in 8 or occasionally 9 meetings a year.

Out of a total 457 applications determined during 2013, only 61 (13%) were made by Committee. Of these only 15 (25%) were determined within 8 weeks. Typically there were about 5 applications determined at each meeting. Some of the applications did not require additional consultation period and were therefore processed quickly and it is likely that a similar percentage would still fall within the 8 week period even with an extended meeting cycle. The statistics therefore show that moving to a 6 weekly cycle is unlikely to change the 8 week performance of Committee decisions.

It is estimated that with an upturn in the economy this will be reflected with an increase in the submission of planning applications and pre-application enquiries. It is hoped that these can be dealt with without redress to additional staff if at all possible in the interests of budgetary savings.

Development Management Time saving

There will be a saving in staff time in the DM section estimated as up to 40 man-days of Development Management planning and administrative staff being saved throughout a year (8 rather than 12 meetings). This takes into account that there will

still be meetings, but these will be extended on average by one or two planning applications.

There is also a saving (both time and financial) in the legal representation at these meetings, together with a timesaving for other officers' attendance e.g. the Democratic Services team, Monitoring Officer.

8-week target

The Authority is currently on average determining over 75% of planning applications within 8 weeks. This is clearly a Welsh Government target on which all authorities are benchmarked. The Authority is currently lying fourth in the league table. We would aim to continue to achieve a high level of performance (officers appreciate that this is achieved to a great extent by having a delegation of authority scheme which allows about 80% to be dealt with by officers and not coming through the Committee process. Officers consider that the scheme is working well and provides an acceptable balance for applicants, objectors, Community Councils and consideration by National Park Authority Members of key policy matters). 21 applications missed the 8 week target by a week or less and we estimate that by utilising some of the released staff time the overall performance should improve by between 2 and 5% over the year.

Pre-application work

Welsh Government is seeking to achieve a pre-application service which results in the majority of formal planning applications being processed in under 8 weeks.

Planning advice and information is disseminated to applicants prior to the formal commencement of their planning application. We provide a pre-application service and are at present seeking to improve and harmonise this with Pembrokeshire County Council (PCC) to enhance the applicant's experience.

Currently 428 pre-apps were closed during the year 2013 with 60% answered within 30 working days, although 34 (8%) were overdue by less than a week. We would like to improve this service.

Duty officer

Welsh Government is also seeking to achieve a duty officer rota for all local planning authorities. Currently we do not provide such a service, although applicants are able to arrange necessary meetings with officers on site or at various meeting places through the Park (we use Newport and Tenby TICs for example). We are seeking to introduce a duty officer scheme this year. This will require a number of planning officers to be available to discuss pre-application enquiries.

Monitoring

Further to the recruitment of two planning assistants with a multi-faceted role of application and enforcement work, it is hoped to improve the monitoring of developments post decision. The saving of time through less meetings will also allow for further monitoring to be undertaken, thus addressing an area of work that at present is more reactive than proactive.

Risk considerations

There is a risk that the pilot scheme does not assist in improving performance figures. However as a pilot it can be abandoned at the end of the period following monitoring, and the traditional Committee cycle can be reverted to.

Furthermore there is a risk that the Committee meetings prove to be too lengthy and Members, applicants, members of the public and officers consider this unworkable. This is considered to be of limited risk. The meetings themselves tend to be morning sessions only. Other authorities have meetings which run for significantly longer (e.g. PCC Planning and Rights of Way meetings).

It is also possible that those applications going to Committee take even longer to achieve a decision. It is estimated that there will be no additional disadvantage of a 6 weekly cycle than at present with regard to the missed 8 weekly target. However it is appreciated that this could well be a perception and hence the need for the pilot to monitor the outcomes.

Financial considerations

It is estimated that there will be a small saving in postage costs (£200) and possibly in Member travel expenses/lunches. Furthermore there will be less costs attributed to legal support at Committee through a reduced number of meetings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in the drive to achieve an ever more efficient and pro-active planning service the pilot proposal to have 6 weekly Development Management Committee meetings rather than the current monthly cycle is considered to be worth exploring.

It is considered that the time savings are sufficiently dramatic to suggest that it would be worth running a pilot scheme to see whether it results in an all round better performance in terms of Welsh Government targets and customer satisfaction. We would aim to work more effectively to maintain and achieve greater performance in WG target areas especially 8 weekly and pre-application targets.

Recommendation

That for the calendar period 2014/15 it is agreed that the Development Management Committee will meet on a 6 weekly cycle as a pilot scheme and that this is reviewed and reported back to NPA at the end of this period.

*(For further information, please contact Vicki Hirst, Head of Development Management or Alan Hare, Business and Performance Manager
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