

Report of: Planning Services Business Manager

Title: PLANNING DELIVERY GRANT 2005/06

Ward: All

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Key Decision: No

Lead Member: Cllrs John Tanner and Ed Turner

Scrutiny responsibility: Environment

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Executive Board agrees to:

- 1. RECOMMENDED to Council that the Planning Delivery Grant (£445,000) for 2005/06 be accepted as a change to the budget framework and approval be given for it to be spent wholly by the Planning Service and broadly in line with the Annex to this report.**
- 2. To agree that, in principle, any under spend of the grant at 31st March 2006 can be carried forward within Planning to the next financial year.**

Summary

1. The Council has been allocated £445,000 in 2005/06 as a reward for improved planning performance.
2. The report explains how it is proposed to spend the Grant within Planning Service this year; with some explanation behind the proposals and the ways in which it is planned this will improve the Service, not just its speed but also its quality, for the benefit of its customers.
3. It is also proposed to spend a part of the grant on meeting base budget pressures that were not met when the Council set its main 05/06 budget for Planning.

4. The report includes an Annex that identifies how the money will be spent in broad areas to achieve such improvement for the people of Oxford.

Fit in with the Council's Vision and strategic aims

5. The report contributes to the Council's Vision of Improving the Council's performance and will enable the Planning Service to make a significant contribution to the strategic priorities and key aspects of the Improvement Plan.

Background and context

6. On 23rd March Keith Hill MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State announced the distribution of the Planning Delivery Grant settlement for 2005/06. It has been announced that the Council will receive £392,829 this financial year (2005/06) and it should be announced by the time of the Executive Board meeting that the Council would receive an additional £52,000 (£445,000 in total). This is substantially more than last year's £ 378,000 and the 1st grant (03/04) of £174,000.
7. It is a reward for the Council's continuing improvement in performance, the achievement of meeting the national target for both Minor and Other applications, having an excellent web site and preparing its Local Development Scheme by the end of March.
8. There were pressures on the base-planning budget of £90,000 as the 2005/06 budget was set. These were stated to be met by freezing posts as vacancies occurred in Planning. In effect it was considered that these pressures could be met from the PDG award.

Spending Proposals

9. **New staff.** It is not proposed to recruit a lot of new staff because of the long-term implications of this. However it is proposed to have another permanent entry-level professional planning officer in Planning Control, because this is where there is most pressure from the steady flow of smaller applications.
10. **Planning Control and Conservation staff proposals.** Staff at the front line have been asked how they think the money might best be spent to improve the service that they offer and thus the planning service overall. Some of the ideas are being recommended here. Since the grant is a reward for performance last year some of the grant was used directly to reward staff in a number of ways. The staff would like this continued.
11. Staff have indicated that some relatively simple pieces of equipment would make their job a lot more productive. Planning staff consider that it is worth spending some time and money on improving public awareness of the planning process and how the public can get the best

out if the system. The work of the planning officer includes gathering together a plethora of information about a technical issue or a site and using this to write up the planning merits of a proposal. Staff would like more information available or captured electronically.

12. **Policy** – There is going to be a considerable amount of work as the Policy Section embarks on the new Local Development Framework. The Council has already agreed to fund the Natural Resource Impact Assessment SPD project. PDG moneys will contribute to a number of key supporting studies, such as Balance of Dwellings, Employment Land Review, Strategic Environmental assessment (SEA) and work for the West End Area Action Plan. There will be extra expenditure flowing from the new approach to community consultation heralded in the Council's Statement of Community Involvement. The Section is also involved in helping with the development of the City Council's housing resource, especially improving the Council's ability to provide as many affordable houses as possible.
13. **Management and Support** – In the coming year there are a number of important projects where some support funding from the PDG grant will be most helpful. Not least with the West End as the Council seeks to take the lead to drive this project forward. Also in the context of making progress to achieve Level 2 in the Equalities Standard.
14. **Members** – It is more than appropriate that some of the grant should be used to help Members keep abreast of the many changes to the planning system, national guidance and developments in the area generally.
15. **IT system and customers.** Whilst the planning system has secured a healthy score of 15 out of 21 in something called the Pendleton survey, there is still more to do to develop the electronic side of the planning systems. This is a survey for the Government by a company called Pendleton to measure against defined criteria how e enabled the planning service is in each local authority. This has the potential to greatly assist our customers both applicants and local residents.

Advantages and disadvantages of the options considered

16. While the Council has secured a substantial PDG award of £445,000, it could be argued that it missed out on a further £300,000 because its performance has yet to be up with the best, for example like its neighbour West Oxford District Council. In addition, it remains under threat of having about 20% of even the PDG it has received being clawed back by the Government because the Council's overturn rate on appeals is comparatively poor. In 2004/05 35% of appeals were allowed, whilst the national average is below 30%. The Government has already clawed back PDG from some authorities who it believes are refusing applications inappropriately since they are unable to substantiate a sufficient percentage of their decisions on appeal on planning grounds.

17. It is important therefore that this years PDG is spent wisely to improve the quality and performance of the service provided to the citizens of Oxford both by officers and Members as well.

Financial implications

18. There is only one more year of PDG. However, from the 1st April this year the government increased planning fees and they might be increased again in a year or two. The intention is that additional fee income should replace the extra resource provided for planning by the Government via PDG.
19. Agreement is sought, in principle, that any grant that is not spent by 31st March 2006 can be carried forward within the Planning budget to the next financial year 2006/07. As has happened this year, such a carry forward would be spent to meet the budget pressures of the new staff recruited with PDG or help towards general budget pressures.

Staffing Implications

20. The work of Human Resources on a Council wide recruitment and retention strategy will be important for planning. If this permits specific additional payments such as the payment of staff subscriptions to professional bodies, like the Royal Town Planning Institute, PDG means that the planning service has the appropriate budget to meet such financial implications arising from the strategy.

<p>THIS REPORT HAS BEEN SEEN AND APPROVED BY: Portfolio Holder: John Tanner, Environment portfolio and Ed Turner, Strategic Planning, Housing and Economic Development portfolio Strategic Director: Sharon Cosgrove Legal and Democratic Services: Lindsey Cane Financial Management: Claire Reed Human Resources: Anne Marie-Scott</p>
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Background papers: No unpublished papers relied upon

Version four

MCB 27th May 05

Planning Delivery Grant

Item	Theme	Activity	Cost Guide £	How it will improve performance (Strategic Improvement Plan objective)
1	Planning Control and Conservation,	Permanent posts: Planner- £25K Equipment, materials and electronic publications, Staff retention and performance rewards	80,000	Aim for 60 % of Majors decided within 13 weeks. Capacity to support existing staff to undertake training Service improvements to customers Reward for performance and hard work. Improved staff morale. Retention of key staff.
2	Planning Policy	Consultancy support, esp. Balance of Dwellings, Employment Land review & SEA Community consultation	70,000	Address key Member issues such as residential intensification, green buildings Resource up to cope with LDFs, West End. Reward for performance and hard work. Improved staff morale. Retention of key staff.
3	Planning Management and Support	Temporary Post on special projects - Consultancy support for equalities Equipment, materials and electronic publications, Staff retention and performance rewards	40,000	Taking lead on West End Meeting Equalities Standard level 2 target Reward for performance and hard work. Improved staff morale. Retention of key staff.
4	Customers	Temporary Post in IT: £30K Surveys, data capture, web improvements, other IT developments,	80,000	Greater levels of self-help by the public, fewer calls to staff and officers. Effective time spent in pre-application discussions, Greater public awareness of service can expect
5	Training	Members, Officers and Partners	10,000	Greater understanding of new issues facing planning. Ability to help constituents through improved knowledge.
6	Miscellaneous	Extra furniture and equipment for new staff, small projects	15,000	To support the work identified above.
7	Budget pressures	£90,000	90,000	
8	Staff recruited in 04/05	£140,000 carry forward towards budget requirement of £200,000	60,000	
9	TOTAL		445,000	

