

## Draft Findings For Discussion

### Review of Development Control Performance with Particular Reference to BVPI 109

#### Executive Summary for the Planning Function Review Group 7 February 2008

## 1. Introduction

This review has been carried out in response to declining performance on the BVPI 109 series of indicators (speed of processing planning applications) and the need to take early action to improve performance on this dimension. Consequently, this report focuses on identifying the factors that are impeding performance on BVPI 109 rather than reviewing the development control service as a whole. Nevertheless, the action plan which emerges from the review will deliver significant benefits across the service.

BVPI 109 comprises a series of three indicators measuring the time taken from receipt to the issue of a decision notice in relation to three categories of application as follows:

	Target
BVPI 109a = percentage of major applications processed within 13 weeks	60%
BVPI 109b = percentage of minor applications processed within 8 weeks	65%
BVPI 109c = percentage of other applications processed within 8 weeks	80%

The 'other' category comprises the majority of applications, including householder applications, advertisement applications, changes of use, and listed building and conservation area consents.

The results for BVPI 109 are reported quarterly to the government on proformas known as PS1 and PS2 returns. These also capture other data, for example, on delegation levels. The government uses the returns to publish annual performance statistics based on financial years which allow local authorities to compare their performance with that of others. The BVPI 109 returns have also been used by the government as 'league tables' for the designation of Standards Authorities and for the allocation of Planning Delivery Grant.

The combination of the incentivisation through Planning Delivery Grant and the Standards Authority regime (and the assistance and surveillance from the government and the Planning Advisory Service which came with it) underlines the importance which the government places on speeding up the processing of applications. This is a response to the concerns raised by the development industry that undue delay was being caused by the development control system and, consequently, delaying the provision of new housing, infrastructure and economic growth.

The result of the government's focus on BVPI 109, has resulted in major improvement in performance levels, especially over the last three to four years. Few LPAs now fail to meet the government targets and many are exceeding the targets by a considerable margin. This is now reflected in PDG reward thresholds which exceed the BVPI 109 targets. Nevertheless, many LPAs have struggled to consistently meet the target for BVPI 109a (major applications). This situation has now been recognized by the government in its proposals to modify the target time for 'majors' by creating more categories. The PS2 returns will show four categories of application with 'majors' being divided into 'large scale major developments' and 'small scale major developments'. The processing time categories will be expanded to include the following:

'more than 13 weeks and less than 16 weeks'

'more than 16 weeks and less than 26 weeks'

'more than 26 weeks and less than 52 weeks'

'more than 52 weeks'

These changes will be introduced from 1 April 2008. The difficulties in relation to 'majors' are further recognized by the proposal to remove the need to include applications within the BVPI 109 figures where a Planning Performance Agreement setting out an agreed timetable for the processing of an application has been put in place between the LPA and the applicant.

## 2. Performance Review

This section of the report presents and analyses statistics in regard to performance on the BVPI 109 series and in regard to other performance data which can shed light on the reasons for the decline in performance on BVPI 109.

As well as looking at relevant performance data, it is also important to analyse the profile of applications as this provides essential context for interpreting the performance statistics.

The findings arising from the review of performance are summarized at the end of the section along with the factors which have been identified as potentially impacting adversely on BVPI 109. These factors are then examined further in subsequent sections of the report and recommendations made in regard to means of addressing any adverse impact.

### (a) Volume and type of applications

The volume of applications varies from year to year. The figures for the last five calendar years are:

**Table 1. Volume of applications by calendar year**

<b>Year</b>	<b>On Hand at start</b>	<b>Applications received</b>	<b>Applications determined</b>	<b>On hand at end</b>
2007	310	1225	1202	333
2006	324	1076	1027	310
2005	312	1054	994	324
2004	295	1193	1125	312
2003	275	1112	1094	295

Source: Uniform records.

The figures show an average of 1132 applications received per annum and 1088 determined per annum. The number determined will always be less than the number received as applications may be withdrawn, 'called in' or turned away. It can be seen that the peak year for applications received was 2007 (1225 received) with a secondary peak in 2004 (1193 received). The peak in 2004 reflects both the regional and national position. Comparative figures are not yet available for 2007. The average number of applications received is important in establishing the base caseload of the unit.

In terms of the type of applications, a comparison with the national picture for the year April 2006 to April 2007 is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2. Volume of applications determined by type 01/04/06 – 31/03/07**

Type of application	Darlington		England
	No.	%	%
Dwellings	63	6.4	13.2
Light Ind/Offices	3	0.3	1.1
Gen Ind/Warehousing	10	1.0	0.8
Retail/Dist/Services	22	2.2	2.3
All other Major and Minor	122	12.5	11.6
Change of Use	73	7.5	5.4
Householder	572	58.4	50.7
Advertisements	55	5.6	4.3
Listed Building Consents	51	5.2	5.7
Conserv. Area Consents	6	0.6	0.6
Others	2	0.2	4.3

Source: DCLG, Development Control Statistics England, 2006/2007, published Aug. 2007

The above figures reveal a local pattern which does not vary significantly from the national picture except in relation to the percentage of applications for dwellings and for householder applications. This lower percentage of applications for dwellings probably reflects two factors: firstly, the higher pace of house building in the south of the country and, secondly, the greater preponderance of applications for single dwellings in rural as opposed to urban areas. There is nothing of significance in the comparative percentages which suggests a more onerous position in Darlington in terms of factors which might impact on average processing times. (For example, a high incidence of listed building applications could indicate a less onerous position as most will run in parallel with a planning application with considerable overlap between the two).

The more revealing comparison in terms of application type is likely to be provided by the proportion of ‘majors’, ‘minors’ and ‘others’. This comparison is given in Table 3.

**Table 3. Percentage of applications determined by BVPI 109 category**

BVPI 109 category	Darlington 06/07	England 06/07
Major	2.7	3.3
Minor	19.8	25.7
Other	77.4	71.0

Source: DCLG, Development Control Statistics, 2006/2007, published Aug. 2007

The proportion of majors is important in establishing base caseload and the adequacy of staffing in relation to caseload. However, numbers overall are small and will vary from year to year. Furthermore, there is significant variation in the complexity of majors since the thresholds are relatively low. Nevertheless, comparisons with the national picture do have some value. The number of majors as a percentage of all applications determined per annum in Darlington over the last four years is 2.8. This compares with the national percentage of 3.4.

## (b) Processing times – BVPI 109

Darlington's performance on this indicator is shown in Table 4 on a comparative basis for the year 1 April 2006 to 31 March 2007 (the latest year for which comparative statistics are available).

**Table 4. Processing times: comparative performance, year ending 31/03/07**

	<b>Majors Within 13 weeks</b>	<b>Minors Within 8 weeks</b>	<b>Others Within 8 weeks</b>
<b>Darlington</b>	<b>53.85</b>	<b>65.98</b>	<b>84.17</b>
Local target	63.00	70.00	83.00
Govt. target	60.00	65.00	80.00
Top quartile	80.68	83.02	92.40
Median	73.17	77.00	88.96
Bottom quartile	65.06	71.21	84.61
<u>PDG thresholds</u>			
Weight 1	<65%	<72%	<87%
Weight 1.5	65% <70%	72% <77%	87% <92%
Weight 2	<70% <=100%	77% <=100%	92% <=100%

Source: Audit Commission

The analysis of comparative performance in Table 4 reveals that Darlington's performance in 2006/07 fell within the bottom quartile for all three BVPI 109 application categories, although it is close to the threshold for third quartile in the case of the largest category of applications ('Others'). In line with this finding, the percentages for Darlington attained a score weighting of '1' (ie neutral multiplier) for Planning Delivery Grant calculation purposes on two out of the three indicators. The third, very marginally, achieves a 1.5 weighting. This will have impacted on the amount of PDG allocated.

Whilst the bottom quartile position is a matter of considerable concern, it also needs to be recognized that the performance levels achieved actually exceed the government target on two of the three indicators (BVPI 109b and c). However, Darlington's aspiration to exceed the government targets is clear in the setting of higher local targets. The local target was met or exceeded only in relation to BVPI 109c and is more than 10% short of the target in relation to BVPI 109a.

It is also useful to look at performance on the BVPI 109 series over a longer period of time. This can be useful in identifying factors which may have influenced performance. Table 6 shows performance over the last five calendar years. Calendar years have been used rather than financial years so that information up to and including the quarter ending December 2007 can be included. Consequently, the figures in Table 5 may show a different pattern to that shown in Tables appearing in the Best Value Performance Plan.

**Table 5. BVPI 109 data by calendar year, 1 January 03 to 31 December 07**

Year	Majors in 13 weeks		Minors in 8 weeks		Others in 8 weeks	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
2003	27	59.2	204	55.9	857	74.4
2004	27	33.3	169	57.4	927	82.0
2005	36	69.4	199	76.9	742	85.6
2006	30	63.3	203	67.0	804	83.8
2007	39	53.8	234	64.1	724	82.3

Source: Uniform records

The information shown in Table 5 reveals that the peak year for performance across all application types was 2005 during which performance exceeded government targets for all three indicators. The government targets were also met for all three indicators in 2006, the second best year. This contrasts with the result for the financial year 2006/07 (on which the government returns are based) which records an out-turn well below target for 'majors' (see Table 4) and demonstrates the strong influence which a single quarter can have on indicators where overall numbers of applications are small. The overall trend in terms of performance over the last five years is one of significant improvement since 2003 (when none of the targets were being met) reaching a peak in 2005 which was largely sustained in 2006 but was not sustained in 2007. A comparison of Table 5 with Table 1 reveals that the peak performance was achieved in 2005 when the total number of applications determined was at its lowest. Similarly, the fall off in performance in 2007 coincides with the greatest number of applications determined. It is also the year in which the greatest number of major applications was determined. This may indicate that staffing resources are too stretched at peak times, a finding which is supported by the later analysis of caseload comparators (Section 2b).

A more detailed breakdown of recent performance by quarter is given in Table 6.

**Table 6. BVPI 109 data by quarter, 1 April 06 to 31 December 07**

Quarter	BVPI 109a		BVPI109b		BVPI 109c	
	Majors in 13 weeks		Minors in 8 weeks		Others in 8 weeks	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<u>2006/07</u>						
Quarter 1	3	50.0	35	77.8	202	88.2
Quarter 2	5	71.4	41	61.2	153	77.3
Quarter 3	4	57.1	26	63.4	175	83.3
Quarter 4	3	50.0	26	63.4	113	86.9
<u>2007/08</u>						
Quarter 1	9	69.2	44	63.8	198	81.8
Quarter 2	5	41.7	37	61.7	182	82.7
Quarter 3	4	50.0	47	74.6	105	80.8

Source: Uniform records

It is clear from the results for the first three quarters of the current financial year that, whilst there is variation from quarter to quarter, it is unlikely that there will be any significant improvement in the annual out-turn compared to the previous financial year and that performance will remain well below the PDG thresholds. However, there may be an exception to this in the case of ‘minors’, the third quarter showing a significant improvement over the previous two. This reflects the management action that has been taken to prioritise these applications in the light of previous poor performance. Majors have also been given higher priority but, due to the small numbers of applications in this category, a longer period of time would be needed to establish a trend. It remains to be seen whether the management action in relation to minors is sufficient to improve the annual out-turn compared to last year and, in this context, it is worth noting that the improved performance in the last quarter falls short of the performance achieved in the best quarter of the previous year.

### (c) Refusal rates

The percentage of applications refused during the last year (2006/07) at 9.5% is low compared to the national average of 18%. It is also lower than the regional average for the North East which stands at 11%. The percentage for the previous year (9.3%) is also low compared to the national and regional averages.

The time taken to decision for refused applications is also worth examining. This information is given in Table 7.

**Table 7. Time taken to decision for refused applications**

App. type	<=8 weeks		8-13 weeks		>13 weeks	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<u>2006</u>						
Major	1	25	2	50	1	25
Minor	16	76	2	10	3	14
Other	49	82	9	15	2	3
All	66	78	13	15	6	7
<u>2007</u>						
Major	0	0	3	75	1	25
Minor	16	76	3	14	2	10
Other	45	88	3	6	3	6
All	61	80	9	12	6	9

It is apparent from the above analysis that 24% of minor applications refused during the last two calendar years have been determined beyond the 8 week target time. The equivalent percentage for ‘other’ applications is 15%. It is important to note in this context that minor applications can raise complex issues and may be presented ‘cold’ without the opportunity for pre-application discussions. This goes some way to explaining why negotiations may need to continue beyond the 8 week ‘deadline for decision.

The extent of ‘out of time’ refusals combined with the low refusal rate suggests that officers may be allocating more time to negotiating or nurturing unsatisfactory applications than is generally the case elsewhere. This reflects the Member and officer commitment to finding solutions which are acceptable to all parties and also the strong commitment to keeping development interests on board to achieve regeneration.

#### **(d) Appeals record (BVPI 204)**

Performance on this indicator is satisfactory. The appeals record for the four quarters ending 30 September 2007 showed that 31% of appeals were allowed (4 out of 13 qualifying appeals). This record is close to the local target set for 2007/08, which is 30%, and to the national target for this indicator, which is also 30%. However, this is an indicator that can vary considerably from year to year as total numbers are small. In 2006/07, the percentage of appeals allowed was 36.8% which equates to a below average performance compared to the English average. However, in 2005/06, it was 26.1%, a result which was close to qualifying for best quartile performance. These results, when averaged out, show that, over a longer time frame, the appeals target is being met.

#### **(e) Delegation Levels**

Delegation levels are consistently below the target of 90% set by the government and which the vast majority of planning authorities now meet or exceed. The percentages for Darlington over the last three years are:

**Table 8. Delegation levels, last three years, 1 April 2004 to 31 March 2007**

1/04/2004 – 31/03/2005	85.4%
1/04/2005 – 31/03/2006	85.7%
1/04/2006 – 31/03/2007	85.2%

Delegation levels have a significant impact on the speed of decision making, particularly where committees are held on a monthly cycle, as is the case in Darlington. However, any benefit gained from an increase in the frequency of committee meetings would have to more than offset the additional administrative burden.

The delegation scheme in Darlington reflects a clear decision from Members not to increase delegation levels and this is in line with their commitment to consult and engage across the full spectrum of planning applications and to provide an opportunity for applications which are subject to objections to be debated in a public arena.

An analysis of the time taken to decision for those applications which have been decided at Committee in the period January 2007 to December 2007 shows the following:



**Table 9. Time taken to determine applications which are subject to a Committee decision by type of application.**

Application Type	<8 weeks		9-13 weeks		>13 weeks	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Major	3	15.8	10	52.6	6	31.6
Minor	29	47.5	24	39.3	8	13.1
Other	28	33.7	41	49.4	14	16.9
<b>All</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>36.8</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>46.0</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>17.2</b>

Source: Uni-form records

It is apparent from Table 9 that only just over one third of applications going to committee are determined within 8 weeks. If major applications are taken out of the figures (the more appropriate target for these is 13 weeks, although an appeal against non-determination can be lodged after 8 weeks), the percentage improves from 36.8 percent to 39.6 percent. Clearly, there is a balance to be struck between the need for speed and the need for a fair and participatory process. Exposure at Committee contributes strongly to the latter.

### **(f) Satisfaction with the planning service – BVPI 111**

Performance in relation to this BVPI is measured every three years via a survey of users of the planning service. The latest survey in Darlington was undertaken during the period April to September 2006. The results from the survey are scored and weighted to allow the overall satisfaction level to be calculated and comparisons to be made with other councils.

The results for Darlington are excellent with an overall score of 87% being obtained. This puts Darlington well within the top quartile and into the top 20 planning authorities in England. Comparative scores are given in Table 10.

**Table 10. Comparative performance on BVPI 111 (Satisfaction with the planning service)  
Percentage score**

<b>Darlington</b>	<b>87%</b>		
<u>Local comparators</u>		<u>National comparators</u>	
Middlesbrough	90%	Mean for England	73%
Hartlepool	86%	Top Quartile for England	80%
Redcar and Cleveland	80%	Mean for all unitaries	71%
Stockton	76%	Top quartile for unitaries	76%

### **(g) Planning checklist – BVPI 205**

The Planning checklist provides another measure of the quality of the service and is based on scores within five categories. When the points are converted to a percentage, Darlington's score is 89%. Comparative performance figures are given in Table 11.

**Table 11. Comparative performance on BVPI 205 (Planning checklist)**

	<b>Percentage score</b>
<b>Darlington</b>	<b>89%</b>
Average for England	93%
Bottom quartile	89%
Median for England	94%
Top Quartile for England	100%

Table 11 reveals that, whilst Darlington has achieved a high percentage score, this score equates to the upper threshold for the bottom quartile. This reflects the fact that the checklist has been in use for a number of years and this has enabled many planning authorities to achieve a top score as reflected in the top quartile threshold of 100%. Those authorities which still do not have a full score on the checklist are almost all being held back by slow progress in meeting all 21 Pendleton criteria which, through combining scores, provide three of the 18 points required by the Planning Checklist. This is the case in Darlington. Issues in relation to e-planning and the actions required to satisfy the Pendleton criteria (and successor targets) are discussed in a subsequent section of this report.

### **(h) Complaints**

The complaints database shows that 20 complaints from 18 complainants have been received and progressed to stage 2 (or beyond) in regard to planning since January 2005. Seven of these, 3 of which are from the same complainant and have become conjoined, have been judged to be founded complaints. All founded complaints relate to procedural errors. This means that approximately 0.15% of planning applications are the subject of a complaint that reaches stage 2 and is judged to be founded.

The number of complaints to the ombudsman in respect of the planning service over the past five years shows an average of four per year with the highest in any one year being five. These figures do not include cases that were prematurely referred to the ombudsman. Six cases of maladministration leading to injustice were found during the last five years. There have been no legal challenges to planning decisions in the last five years.

### **(i) Appeals against non-determination**

The number of appeals against non-determination is sometimes used as a measure of satisfaction with the planning service and particularly satisfaction in relation to the speed of decision. However, it is a poor measure in this regard as such an appeal results in the application joining a different queue and applicants are, therefore, reluctant to go down this route. Nevertheless, the incidence of such appeals is a general indicator of frustration with the level of progress being made by the planning authority.

In Darlington, there have been no appeals against non-determination in the last three years.

## **(j) Summary of main findings arising from the review of performance**

The picture which emerges from the review of performance is one of a development control service which is delivering a quality service but which has struggled to maintain performance on speed of processing, especially when workloads are high. This has resulted in a dip in performance during the last twelve months which, combined with continuing improvement by most other local planning authorities, has resulted in Darlington's performance slipping into the bottom quartile.

The quality of the service in Darlington is reflected in a good record on appeals (BVPI 204) and a top quartile performance on BVPI 111 (satisfaction with the planning service). Whilst, performance on BVPI 205 (planning checklist) is less good, this is entirely due to outstanding requirements in relation to e-planning, an issue which is further discussed in Section 4.

The profile of application types shows nothing untoward that would adversely affect the speed of processing compared to the average authority. However, there are 'cultural' issues which will have depressed performance on speed of processing. The principal ones identified in this section of the review are refusal rates (including the number of 'out-of-time' refusals) and delegation levels, both of which are lower than for the average authority and, in terms of the latter, are towards the bottom of the spectrum and consistently below the government targets. Whilst both refusal rates and delegation levels impact on speed of processing, they are also a response to legitimate political priorities. Low refusal rates reflect a willingness to continue to negotiate, conciliate and add value, while low delegation rates reflect the desire of Members to continue to offer the opportunity for public debate on applications which generate objections. However, if performance in regard to speed of processing is to be improved, then these are aspects of the current service which may need to be re-considered.

In summary, the factors which the performance review has identified as adversely affecting BVPI 109 are:

- Case officer staffing levels
- Delegation levels
- Policy in relation to refusals (with the potential for re-submission) versus extended negotiation

### **3. Identification of issues affecting performance**

#### **(a) Staffing levels and structures**

The analysis of staffing levels and structure has identified two significant issues which can have a strong influence on performance in regard to BVPI 109 and more widely on other aspects of service quality and performance. These are:

- The workload for case officers is heavy compared to the ‘average’ authority and has exceeded the top end of the ‘reasonable’ spectrum in the last year. This situation is compounded by the fact that there has been a decline in the proportion of case officers with sufficient experience to handle major applications and this situation is expected to worsen. This change in the balance of the case officer team stems from recruitment difficulties.
- There is sufficient staff resource to undertake the administrative and technical tasks required in the processing of applications but the task distribution is too complex, too fragmented and difficult to manage in process and performance terms. This situation is discussed further in the review of procedures in the next Section.

Early consideration needs to be given to resolving the short fall of capacity and experience in the case officer team. Ideally, an additional post would be created in order to bring staffing levels more in line with the ‘average’ caseload and to ensure that workload peaks, such as that experienced in 2007, can be accommodated and BVPI 109 targets consistently met or exceeded. If the imbalance in levels of experience is also to be tackled, then an appointment at the top of the scale needs to be achieved. Given the difficulty in attracting experienced officers, some incentivisation may need to be considered.

Even with added incentives, there is a danger that recruitment at a more senior level will not be successful. Consideration then needs to be given to alternatives. This could include a call-off contract providing for individual major applications or packages of minor/other applications to be processed externally in the event of workload peaks.

The capacity of the case officer team can also be improved by making the time of case officers more productive. There are operational changes around the customer interface which can be introduced to achieve this and these are further discussed in the next Section.

#### **Recommendations**

- 1. Consideration should be given to creating an additional post within the case officer team with a view to appointing an experienced officer capable of handling major applications. This may require incentivisation. If recruitment fails then a call-off contract should be considered.**

#### **(b) Procedures and working arrangements**

The review of procedures and working arrangements has revealed a series of significant issues impacting on efficiency and speed and hence on performance in regard to BVPI 109. The main factors can be identified as follows:

- Whilst there are many well-documented and robust procedures, there is no comprehensive procedure manual in place and some procedural guidance is not fully up-to-date reflecting the lack of a systematic process for reviewing and updating procedures.
- ‘Front end’ administrative and technical processes are too fragmented, too dependent on particular individuals and lead to delays. This puts unnecessary time pressure on subsequent stages of applications processing.
- ‘Decision end’ processes are not a major cause of applications going ‘out-of time’ but tend to use the full remaining time available. This causes unnecessary delay in terms of issuing the decision and, therefore, reduces the quality of the service.
- The staffing structure which delivers the administrative and technical support to development control, together with the way tasks are distributed, does not lend itself to effective process management against tight deadlines.
- The full potential of pre-application discussions is not being realised and these discussions are not always recorded. This puts pressure on case officers further down the line whilst the ‘clock is ticking’ in relation to BVPI 109.
- There are a series of factors impacting on the productivity of case officers which need to be addressed.
- Negotiations in regard to S106 agreements start too late in the process, are not sufficiently supported by a policy framework and are prone to delay due to competing pressures in the legal team.

The resolution of the above issues would not only improve performance on BVPI 109 but would also deliver significant benefits in terms of service quality and the quality of the outcome.

### **Recommendations**

#### **In relation to the productivity of administrative and technical teams:**

- 1. A comprehensive review of procedures against best practice should be commissioned leading to the codifying of the revised procedures in the form of an on-line guide.**
- 2. A management system for the systematic updating and review of the new procedure guide should be put in place.**
- 3. Some immediate changes to streamline ‘front end’ processes should be implemented in advance of the procedural review. This includes some task re-distribution and the placing of press notices weekly rather than fortnightly.**
- 4. Following the comprehensive procedural review, consideration should be given to further revision of staffing structures and task distribution to create a dedicated, integrated team providing administrative and technical support to development control. Ideally, team members would be generically skilled, providing greater flexibility to deal with both workload peaks and staffing shortages.**

#### **In relation to the value of pre-application discussions:**

- 5. Pre-application discussions should be documented and entered onto Uni-form.**
- 6. Where ever possible, the case officer involved in the pre-application discussions should process the subsequent application.**
- 7. Design and access statements should be sought at the pre-application stage as an aid to discussion.**
- 8. A charter setting out pre-application advice should be produced.**

9. Consideration should be given to charging for pre-application advice once service levels have been established and can be consistently met.

**In relation to major applications:**

10. More formal discussions should precede major applications with a view to specifying the information requirements for documents submitted in support of the application and to commenting on drafts. In the longer term, consideration should be given to the use of Planning Performance Agreements.
11. Where a Section 106 requirement is identified, Heads of Terms for this should be agreed at the pre-application stage.
12. A service level agreement should be agreed with the Council's legal service to ensure the timely availability of legal support for S106 agreements.
13. Greater use of the 'development team approach' should be made at the pre-application stage, ensuring that the issues relevant to statutory consultees are identified early in the process.
14. A processing checklist should be introduced for major applications and used as the basis for agreeing a timetable with the applicant.

**In relation to the productivity of case officers**

15. The procedural review and guide referred to in Recommendation 1 should include the case officer role (together with related areas such as enforcement and appeals).
16. The duty officer service should be discontinued and replaced by additional training for customer services staff, an appointments system for face-to-face contact with case officers and promotion of the website.
17. Measures should be introduced to improve the quality of applications. This would involve working with local agents and developers and, perhaps, introducing some form of quality accreditation for agents. The setting up of a developer/agents forum would be an initial first step.
18. Consultation should be e-enabled and greater use made of SLAs for internal consultees.
19. Consideration should be given to making more use of the power of refusal.
20. A checklist and proforma should be put in place for site visits to ensure that site visits are fully effective and properly recorded.
21. Consideration should be given to routing calls to case officers through a customer services point.
22. Case officers should be trained in the use of Uni-form.

**In relation to arrangements for member decision-making**

23. Consideration should be given to reviewing the delegation scheme in order to deliver levels of delegation which are more in line with the norm.
24. Other arrangements for Planning Committee should be looked at in the context of the planned review of the trial system introduced in February 2008.

### **(c) Information technology and e-planning**

The review of ICT and e-planning has shown that there are serious issues to be addressed which impact directly on BVPI 109. Progress in resolving these issues has been restricted by resources, both in terms of staff time and budgetary provision. This has prevented Darlington from satisfying the Pendleton Criteria for e-planning, the deadline for which was December 2005. This, in turn, has reduced the level of Planning Delivery Grant awarded to the Council.

Priority must now be assigned to putting a programme in place to meet the requirements of the outstanding Pendleton Criteria and to move beyond this to address the new agenda for e-planning set out in the guidance which has superseded Pendleton. This guidance is contained in the 'Better Planning Services Standards' published in July 2006. The key requirement in moving forward is the introduction of live scanning of incoming applications and related correspondence, enabling significant further development of on-line access to information and transactions. Live scanning requires the purchase and customization of a large-scale scanner and an electronic document management system (EDMS).

Improvements are also needed in respect of the dedicated applications processing software, Uni-form, in order to maximize processing efficiency and provide management information.

The management of both the development programme for e-planning and that for Uni-form would benefit from stronger management arrangements, including the designation of a 'super-user'.

#### **Recommendations**

- 1. The full capacity of Uni-form should be explored and customization undertaken to maximize processing efficiency and provide management information. This should be progressed by a task group led by the Planning Support Manager.**
- 2. The software and hardware required to commence the on-site scanning of incoming applications and related correspondence should be installed as a matter of priority and an interface created between Uni-form and the EDMS. The EDMS and the Uni-form interface already in place in Stockton should be assessed for possible replication in Darlington. Potential to share the procurement and installation costs with other users within the Council (particularly the Uni-form users) should also be explored.**
- 3. The in-tray and work-flow requirements needed for the operation of live scanning should be developed in parallel with the installation of the hardware and software to facilitate the early commencement of live scanning. As with the software, the arrangements in Stockton may be suitable for replication.**
- 4. A programme should be put in place for the completion of back-scanning of 'closed' files and for the transfer of previously archived files from disc and microfiche into a database linked to an EDMS.**
- 5. A 'super user' should be designated within the department with responsibility for coordinating the customization of software and the further implementation of e-planning.**
- 6. A programme should be put in place to achieve the satisfaction of the outstanding Pendleton Criteria and to guide the further development of e-Planning in line with the government's 'Better Planning Services Standards'.**
- 7. Management arrangements need to be strengthened in relation to the ongoing development of e-planning.**

## **(d) Performance management**

It is axiomatic that improvements in performance management will have a beneficial impact on BVPI 109 as well as on other performance indicators and outcomes. The issues that have been identified which need to be addressed are as follows:

- Performance management is currently mainly restricted to performance monitoring.
- The profile of performance management within the section is relatively low except in relation to BVPI 109.
- The availability of management information on performance needs to be improved.
- Systems need to be put in place to ensure a structured approach to performance management.
- There are opportunities for engendering greater ownership of performance targets.

### **Recommendations**

- 1. A quality systems manual should be set up containing all information on the performance targets, performance management systems and performance improvement programmes which are in place, together with other related information on customer charter standards and quality control systems. If possible, this should add a layer to the corporate system rather reside within a separate database.**
- 2. Access to the corporate system (Performance Plus) should be made available to all managers.**
- 3. The capability of Uni-form to provide management information should be further explored.**
- 4. If Uni-form cannot deliver in a responsive way, then appropriate staff should be trained to extract information from the data base through other software such as Access or Crystal.**
- 5. Performance information should be routinely shared and discussed with teams.**
- 6. Consideration should be given to introducing 'earliest determination dates' to empower staff to take ownership of performance on BVPI 109.**
- 7. Consideration should be given to increasing team work to bridge the 'divide' between 'support staff' and case officers and create joint ownership of responsibility for the progression of planning applications.**