

Inspection report

July 2005



Planning services

London Borough of Barnet

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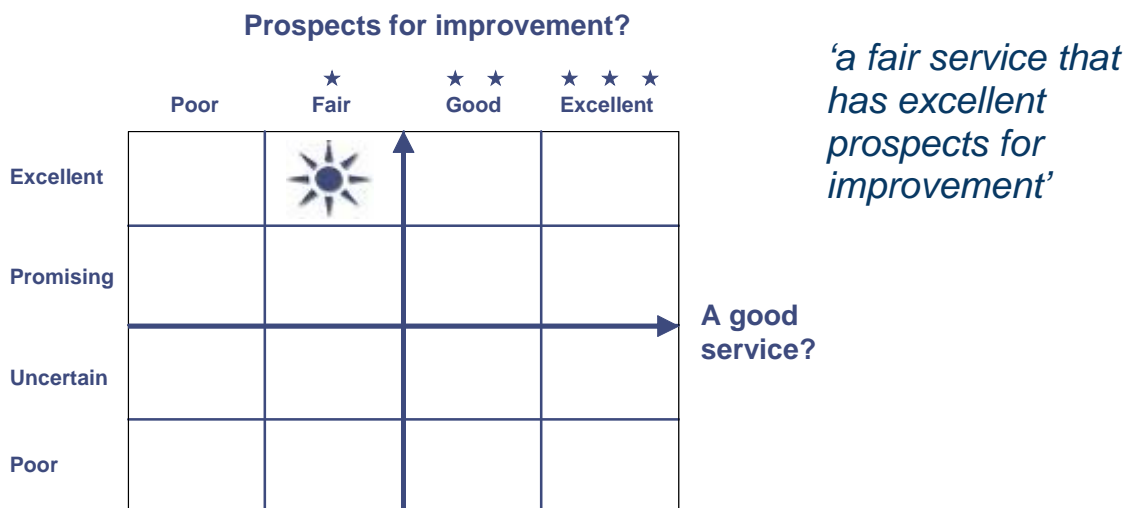
Summary

- 1 Barnet Council is the second largest London Borough and is located in the north of London. The borough covers an area of 8,700 hectares. The population of the area is 314,000 of which 26 per cent are from ethnic minority communities.
- 2 The Council has a Conservative administration which has been in power since 2002. The Council has a leader and cabinet model of governance and has 63 councillors of which 33 are Conservative.
- 3 In 2004/05 the Council's budgeted expenditure on services was £661.6 million. Barnet was rated as fair in the December 2004 comprehensive performance assessment and rated two out of four for environmental services. The planning inspection covered services delivered through the Planning Services division of the Environment Directorate and included the following.
 - ◆ Development Control.
 - ◆ Planning Policy & Urban Design.
 - ◆ Appeals and Enforcement.
- 4 Total budgeted net expenditure on the planning services was £1.7 million for 2004/05. All of the service is provided by in-house staff.

Scoring the service

- 5 We have assessed the Council as providing a 'Fair', one -star service that has 'Excellent' prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Scoring chart¹: LB Barnet– Planning



¹ The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

- 6 The service is 'Fair' for the following reasons:
 - ◆ good use is made of planning policy in achieving community goals in particular the protection of the natural and built environment, regeneration of deprived areas and provision of affordable housing;
 - ◆ government performance targets for processing planning applications are being exceeded and performance management arrangements linked to corporate and community plan priorities have improved significantly;
 - ◆ access for users to the service has been improved through the provision of on-line planning facilities, Graphical Information System (GIS) digital mapping and easier communication with planning officers;
 - ◆ the service adopts a pro-active multi disciplinary approach to development and planning policies reflect the government's approach to 'Urban Renaissance' and 'sustainability';
 - ◆ the service has been successful in gaining community benefits through the use of Section 106 agreements;and
 - ◆ transparency of the service is encouraged through the ability of applicants to speak at planning meetings, member and officer training, piloting of a Development Forum and use of a probity protocol.
- 7 However, there are a number of areas which warrant further consideration:
 - ◆ customer satisfaction with the service falls short of the Council target and compares poorly with other planning authorities;
 - ◆ users have concerns over the inconsistency in planning decisions and the quality and value for money of pre-application advice;
 - ◆ application and enforcement case loads are high;
 - ◆ the enforcement service is reactive in approach, is not meeting targets in the processing of complaints of possible unauthorised development and has a considerable backlog of complaints yet to be determined;
 - ◆ adoption of the Revised UDP has not yet been achieved;
 - ◆ supplementary planning guidance is limited; and
 - ◆ users consider that reception area facilities are small, display limited information on the planning service and lack facilities for visitors to meet with planners.
- 8 This service has 'Excellent' prospects for improvement because:
 - ◆ managers, Members and staff are committed to the improvement of planning;
 - ◆ resources are focused on priorities;
 - ◆ Barnet have identified the improvements the community and other stakeholders want in planning;
 - ◆ the series of changes planning has introduced to date have established the building blocks for continuous improvement;
 - ◆ Barnet has an innovative planning policy balancing protection of the environment and local suburban character with support for large scale development and growing experience of using this approach;
 - ◆ a comprehensive planning obligations strategy is currently being drafted;
 - ◆ the Council has taken hard planning decisions such as ensuring at least 50 per cent affordable housing in the Colindale Development and other community benefits are incorporated within development frameworks;

- ◆ the service has systems in place to provide detailed information on how well planning is performing, for example Meeting targets on responding to enquiries, or numbers of appeals, which helps officers and councillors drive improvement and is shared with service users;
 - ◆ there are clear lines of accountability for delivery of improvements in planning and the Council are about to adopt the UDP and integrate community, corporate and service plans;
 - ◆ there is a track record of improvement within the planning service recognised by users, staff, managers and Members alike; and
 - ◆ programmes are in place to improve key systems for planning like website information, digital mapping and integrated property systems;
- 9 Some issues need to be addressed to underpin continuous improvement of planning, including:
- ◆ dealing with users concerns such as inconsistencies in decisions and enforcement;
 - ◆ rapidly upgrading the reception area; and
 - ◆ delivering the LDF and other policy frameworks

Recommendations

- 10 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. In this context, the inspection team makes the following recommendations:
- ◆ Introduce further improvements to the local quality of life through:
 - ◆ production of additional supplementary planning guidance in particular relating to the use of sustainable construction and design and ‘appraisal statements of conservation areas’;
 - ◆ completion and implementation of the review of the enforcement service to ensure that decisions are fully documented, monitored and enforced in accordance with the Council’s enforcement policy and targets for dealing with complaints are complied with; and
 - ◆ granting delegated authority to officers, and or members, to initiate and speed up enforcement action against unauthorised development.
 - ◆ Further improve the efficiency and quality of the service through:
 - ◆ monitoring and assessment of past decisions of planning applications and establishment of user forums to assess and remedy concerns;
 - ◆ urgent implementation of a new planning reception area; and
 - ◆ improving the analysis of data to understand performance better, to measure what works most effectively, such as the high level of refusals, and monitoring of the officer case loads to ensure work loads are sustainable.

- 11 We would like to thank the staff of the London Borough of Barnet, particularly Stewart Murray, Clive Robinson and Rimonit Tidhar who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Bryan Arthur

Robert Buchanan

Inspectors

Dates of inspection: 21 – 25 February

Email: r-buchanan@audit-commission.gov.uk

**For more information please contact
Audit Commission
London Region
1st Floor
Millbank Tower
Millbank
London
SW1P 4HQ
www.audit-commission.gov.uk
Telephone: 020 7233 6400
Fax: 020 7233 6490**

Report

Context

- 12 This report has been prepared by the Audit Commission ('the Commission') following an inspection under Section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, and issued in accordance with its duty under Section 13 of the 1999 Act.

The locality

- 13 The London Borough of Barnet is located in north London and extends from Cockfosters in the north east to Brent Cross and Colindale in the south west. The population of the area is 314,000 of which 26 per cent are from black or minority communities. The borough covers 8,700 hectares and has 24 town centres. The borough is characterised by three areas of almost equal size namely the classic leafy suburbia, the green belt and the commercial and retail sector. In addition, there are 18 conservation areas and 1,300 listed buildings.
- 14 There are relatively low unemployment levels of 3.9 per cent compared to the London average of 7.1 per cent. The borough is generally wealthy and average house prices at £272,314 are higher than the London average of £257,000. Barnet is currently registered at 193 on the Governments Index of Local Deprivation², indicating a low overall level of deprivation. However there are pockets of deprivation with Burnt Oak ward in the top 20 per cent of wards in England. 23 per cent of school children live in 'low income' households. 30 per cent of the Council's own housing stock (4847 units) does not comply with the Government's decent homes standard (DHS).
- 15 The London Plan (2003) identifies Cricklewood and Brent Cross as an 'opportunity area' where 5,000 new homes should be located by 2016. Parts of Colindale, including Mill Hill East and the former Hendon RAF station, are identified as 'areas for intensification' including 1,600 extra homes at Graham Park and 2,800 at RAF East Camp plus other development sites.

The Council

- 16 The Council has a conservative administration which has been in office since 2002. The Council has a Leader and cabinet model of governance and has 63 councillors. The Conservative Party has control with 33 councillors. Currently, an executive cabinet governs the business of the Council.
- 17 The Council's net revenue budget for the year 2004/05 was £354.9 million. The Council has established an ALMO and will receive £88.5 million over the next five years. The Council achieved financial savings of £5 million by the end of the 2004/05 financial year, which they have put into reserves.

² Source: Hillingdon Community Plan

- 18 The Council's priorities as identified in the corporate plan 2004/05 to 2007/08 are:
- ◆ a first class education service;
 - ◆ tackling crime;
 - ◆ supporting the vulnerable in the community;
 - ◆ a cleaner greener Barnet; and
 - ◆ repairing roads and pavements.
- 19 The key aims of the community plan are:
- ◆ a secure and supportive community;
 - ◆ a healthy and caring community;
 - ◆ a learning community;
 - ◆ an environmentally responsive community; and
 - ◆ fostering an enterprising community.
- 20 The Council's key values are:
- ◆ customer care;
 - ◆ local choice;
 - ◆ an active community;
 - ◆ value for money;
 - ◆ facilitating success.

The service inspection

- 21 The planning service inspection covered services delivered through the Planning Service within the Environment Directorate and included the following.
- ◆ Development Control.
 - ◆ Planning Policy and Urban Design.
 - ◆ Appeals and Enforcement.
- 22 Total budgeted gross expenditure on planning services was £3.6 million for 2004/05 and budgeted total income from fees and grants was £1.9 million leaving net projected costs for the service of £1.7 million. All of the service is provided by in-house staff. The service employs 80 full time staff. The Council also received Planning Delivery Grant³ (PDG) of £470,370 and £736,758 in 2003/04 and 2004/05 respectively.

³ Planning Delivery Grant (PDG) is a grant introduced in 2003/04 from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) designed to improve the performance and resources of planning authorities.

How good is the service?

Are the aims clear and challenging?

- 23 Inspectors look to see how a council has agreed the key aims for the service being inspected, how clear these aims are to the people that receive the service and whether these reflect the corporate aims of the organisation as a whole.
- 24 Aims need to be challenging, address local needs and support national objectives. This requires the Council to consider and demonstrate how a service contributes to its wider corporate aims and community plans.
- 25 We found the aims of the planning service to be clear, challenging and link with community and corporate priorities. There is a policy framework to achieve these aims and good use is being made of Local Development Frameworks to initiate regeneration within the borough. However, whilst targets are set to monitor progress against these aims some need to be more developed with more specific, measurable outcomes identified for each aim. The Unitary Development Plan does not provide a comprehensive monitoring and assessment procedure to assess the effectiveness of policies.
- 26 The aims and objectives of the service are set out in the Performance Management Plan (PMP) 2005 to 2009 and can be summarised as follows.
- ◆ A cleaner, greener Barnet by protection and enhancement of first class suburbs.
 - ◆ Delivery of high quality growth and sustainable communities.
 - ◆ Provision of an excellent and responsive planning service.
- The objectives and performance measures for the service are also set out in the Corporate Plan.
- 27 The PMP also details a number of objectives which underpin these aims and sets targets for achievements in 2005/06 and by 2008/09. For example:
- ◆ take forward and develop the 'Three Strands Approach and vision and guiding strategy towards development, regeneration and planning;
 - ◆ meet key government best value targets for service delivery in particular the speed of decision of performance targets;
 - ◆ the designing out of crime in new developments;
 - ◆ the supporting of the Education Service Programme for further educational developments in growth and regeneration areas; and
 - ◆ use of planning contributions for environmental highway and transport improvements in new developments.
- 28 We consider that these aims align with the Corporate and Community Plans. For example the Corporate Plan identifies with a first class education service, tackling crime, supporting the vulnerable in the community; a cleaner greener Barnet and repairing roads and pavements. These aims also align with the Community Plan which identifies an environmentally responsive community and a learning, healthy, caring, secure and supportive community.

- 29 We found the service aims to be challenging. This is evidenced by the reference to 'enhancement of first class suburbs', 'delivery of high quality growth' and 'provision of an excellent service'. However, whilst targets are set in the PMP to monitor progress against these aims, some need to be developed with more specific measurable outcomes identified for each aim. For example 'adoption of new enforcement and regulatory standards to achieve increased regulatory controls' is a target for 2005/06 but no details of standards are provided.
- 30 The Unitary Development Plan (UDP) was adopted in 1991 and remains the statutory development plan. Some modifications were adopted by the Council in 2002 and the Revised UDP policies have since been the basis of interim planning policy for development control purposes. However at present, the UDP is still technically out of date since the Council has not met the Government target of completing a review of the UDP within a five-year period. We found that the formal adoption should be achieved this year.
- 31 The Revised UDP (the Plan) provides a policy framework to achieve these service aims and is based on six guiding principles which also identify with the aims of the Corporate and Community Plans. For example, the principles relate to the enhancement of the quality of the built and natural environment, improvement of education and employment opportunities, maintenance of transport systems and regeneration of the Cricklewood and West Hendon area. Some targets have been included within the Plan, including the following.
- ◆ No loss of Green Belt and Metropolitan Open Space.
 - ◆ Provision of 9,012 affordable homes, and 17,780 new additional homes, between 1997 and 2017.
 - ◆ 100 per cent new build on brown field sites.
- 32 However whilst the Plan provides a commitment to monitor effectiveness of policies, and contains some targets, there is no clear identification as to how a comprehensive evaluation of performance of policies is to be achieved. The Council through its Planning Policy Unit monitors development trends in the borough and changes in population, economic and social trends influencing the shape of future development. An appraisal of the Plan's policies has also been undertaken and shows policies to be compatible with a sustainable approach. The service also has work programmes requiring monitoring of a number of key policies including the provision of additional new and affordable homes, the retention of the Green Belt and the vitality of town centres. We found a commitment to produce an Annual Monitoring Report as part of the new Local Development Scheme.
- 33 In support of service aims a specific chapter on the redevelopment of Brent Cross and Cricklewood and the Council has been included in the Plan. The Council has also adopted a new policy setting out a vision and direction for regeneration and planning in a new document 'The Three Strand Approach – Protection, Enhancement and Growth' (PEG). The three themes of PEG are the 'absolute protection of Green Belt and Protected Open Space', 'enhancement of Barnet's classic suburbia' and 'sustainable growth, successful regeneration and higher density infill'.
- 34 However, although the Plan identifies the key priorities for planning obligations, and developer contributions under Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 are reviewed by an officer monitoring group, a draft new Planning Contributions SPD is yet to be implemented.

- 35 The Plan, when adopted, will be 'saved' in line with government guidance as the new local development framework (LDF), included in the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, is introduced. The Council approved a draft LDS in November last year and granted delegated authority to the Cabinet Portfolio holder for Regeneration and Development for any subsequent changes. The draft LDS, which includes a Statement of Community Involvement embracing all sectors of the community, has been submitted to the Government Office for London for signing off in accordance with the target PSA6 for development plan making.
- 36 We found a limited range of supplementary planning guidance (SPG) has been produced to support officers and applicants in their interpretation of adopted policies some of which is in need of revision. Character appraisals exist for only eight of the eighteen designated Conservation Areas and SPG for affordable housing and retail frontages is only in draft form. SPG exists for educational needs, transport and open spaces and an appraisal statement for the Monkton Hadley Conservation Area is nearing the public consultation stage. In addition there are twelve guidance notes on a range of design issues which are planned to be incorporated in a single 'Sustainable Design and Construction' SPD. SPG has also been approved in the form of a Development Framework for Cricklewood, Brent Cross and West Hendon Regeneration Area and a Development Framework for Colindale and Mill Hill East Areas of intensification approved which links to the London Plan Area of Intensification and will be the basis of an Area Action Plan.
- 37 Targets for the processing of planning applications have been set which meet the government standards for 2004/05 and exceeds them for 2007/08 (for example, a target of 72 per cent is set for 2008/09 for determining minor applications within eight weeks compared to a government standard of 65 per cent).
- 38 An enforcement policy is used to advise on the way that development control will enforce legislation taking into account a new enforcement concordat adopted by the Council. The policy advises of the reasons for likely action, that acknowledgement will be made in writing within four working days of any complaint received, that action will be taken in ninety per cent of all referrals within four weeks, and a decision, including the initiating of enforcement action where warranted in all high and medium high priority breaches of planning control within twelve weeks. However, no targets are set for the minimum time required to notify complainants or land owners following decisions being taken.
- 39 The Council has set corporate standards to improve customer care. The standards outline expected professional standards and timed responses including for example answering all telephone calls within 25 seconds or nine rings and returning customers calls the same day.

Does the service meet these aims?

- 40 Having considered the aims that the Council has set for the service, inspectors make an assessment of how well the Council is meeting these aims. The assessment is made within the context of the Audit Commission criteria for planning which seeks to evaluate the service in terms of:
- ◆ the improvement made to the local quality of life;
 - ◆ the efficiency and quality of the service to the customer; and
 - ◆ the fairness and transparency of planning decisions.

- 41 An assessment is also made of performance against specific service standards and targets and the Council's approach to measuring whether it is actually delivering what it set out to do.

The Improvement made to the local quality of life

- 42 We found the planning service is contributing to the local quality of life, encourages high quality growth and sustainability of communities and has been successful in gaining community benefits from contributions from new development. However the enforcement service is reactive rather than pro-active, is not achieving targets in responding to reports of unauthorised development and has a significant backlog of cases not yet resolved. A draft planning contributions policy has yet to be adopted.
- 43 We have made this assessment using the service's own relevant priorities:
- ◆ a cleaner, greener Barnet by protection and enhancement of first class suburbs;
 - ◆ delivery of high quality growth and sustainable communities; and
 - ◆ provision of an excellent and responsive planning service.

A cleaner, greener Barnet by protection and enhancement of first class suburbs

- 44 We found that the planning process had been effective in the protection of the Green Belt, Metropolitan Open Space and Conservation Areas. However the enforcement service is reactive rather than proactive and is not achieving targets in responding to reports of unauthorised development. Whilst an overarching planning policy is in place to protect the environment not all the supporting supplementary planning guidance is in place, as for example the completion of only eight of the eighteen conservation character appraisal statements.
- 45 The planning process has been effective in protecting the environment. The policies of the UDP are being robustly applied with no loss of Green Belt and Metropolitan Open Space in recent years. Further one hundred per cent of development has been achieved through the use of brown field sites. This view was supported by local societies, agents, developers and statutory agencies with whom we spoke who considered the service is supporting the Council's key priority of a greener Barnet.
- 46 Protection of the heritage of Barnet has also been achieved through the designation of 18 Conservation Areas, the Listing of 1,300 Buildings of Architectural Merit and the making of 5,000 Tree Preservation Orders. However, character appraisal statements which provide detail design and guidelines for applicants for development, have only been prepared for eight of the eighteen conservation areas. Whilst only twelve listed buildings are included on the at risk register the only monitoring of the condition of the bulk of listed buildings is when applications are received for permission for development.
- 47 We found that the enforcement service has adopted a reactive rather than a proactive approach and is not meeting targets in responding to reports of potential unauthorised development. This is a view shared generally with users, members and officers with whom we spoke to during the inspection. A recent survey of members has indicated that 61 per cent considered that the planning enforcement service to be not very effective. The enforcement service targets to acknowledge 100 per cent of complaints regarding breaches of planning control within four working days and to action 90 per cent of the most complex complaints within four weeks. During 2003/04 the service acknowledged 96 per cent of complaints within four days and acted on only 52 per cent of complaints within the four week deadline.
- 48 When on site we also examined a small sample of enforcement files and data and found that whilst acknowledgements were made, and action, taken in most cases within the target times there was a considerable delay in issuing the

decision letters to complainants and landowners advising of the action taken or decision reached. There are no performance targets in place requiring the issue of decision notices to complainants or landowners. The issue of an enforcement notice is subject to member approval and this implies delay in action being taken. Consideration of a more flexible procedure involving delegation to officer and a member may help speed the process and give greater focus to the service.

- 49 The use of enforcement tools seems to be low compared with the high number of complaints and suggests that follow up enforcement action could be significantly improved. The enforcement service is the second busiest in London receiving some 1,561 complaints in 2003/04 which must be viewed against the fact that Barnet received 4,924 applications in that year. In 2003/04 the service issued 71 enforcement notices (with 14 prosecutions taken), four planning contravention notices but no stop notices, breach of condition notices or planning contravention notices. However no cases of mal-administration have been found against the authority in respect of enforcement complaints.
- 50 The service has a backlog of 1200 complaints not resolved and at some stage of assessment, some of which were registered in 2003. The target is to action the backlog over the next twelve months. However case loads of officers are already high, and the second highest in London, currently at 364 per enforcement officer. When totalling the additional cases from trying to deal with the backlog of complaints this represents a potential total annual caseload of 664. The allocation of resources has been a cause of the failure to deal effectively with enforcement and additional resources have been allocated to the service. At present four full time enforcement officers are employed under the management of a dedicated appeals and enforcement officer who has been appointed to deal more effectively with the case load. Although case loads have been recently reduced this is an area that needs to be reviewed to ensure the sustainability and improvement of the service.
- 51 The Council receives a high number of appeals against refusal decisions particularly in respect of Tree Preservation Orders (TPO). In 2003/04 this was 363 or 25 per cent. Of these appeals 34 per cent were allowed which is below the national average of 36 per cent which suggests that the pressure for development is being reasonably considered. There were 16 TPO appeals in 2004/5 of which five were decided (the remainder are with Government Office for London awaiting a decision). Of the five decided TPO appeals, one was allowed and four were dismissed.
- 52 However a number of appeals against planning refusals are being lost, with costs awarded against the Council, where refusals have resulted from members overturning officer recommendations. In 2002/03 there were ten applications overturned by members of which only three were dismissed on appeal and in 2003/04 there were sixteen of which four were dismissed giving only a 28 per cent success rate. Moreover costs for awards against the Council in these dismissed cases totalled in excess of £18,000 in 2003/04. The number of appeals allowed as a per cent of refusals to date for 2004/05 is 4.89 compared to a target of six.

Delivery of high quality growth and sustainable communities

- 53 We found that the planning service is successful in initiating regeneration programmes to encourage high quality growth and sustainable communities and uses planning contributions from new developments to provide benefits to the community. However, a draft planning obligations policy has still to be adopted.
- 54 The Council has developed a corporate approach to its development and planning function providing a strategic framework for the delivery of regeneration activities. The approach identifies three strands:
- ◆ absolute protection for the green belt;
 - ◆ protection and enhancement of the suburbs; and
 - ◆ sustainable growth, successful regeneration areas and higher density infill including opportunities in town centres.
- 55 The PEG document states ‘that the Three Strands Approach has been developed to protect all that is best in Barnet but also responding to the needs of the Borough and providing areas of growth to meet the demands of our population’. One third of the Borough is said to constitute the Barnet identity of an outer London classic suburb of exceptional quality and character. In these areas the approach aims for protection and enhancement. The strategy is to provide strong planning policy protection of preserving the character and openness of lower density suburbs and conservation areas.
- 56 The latter strand identifies the Council’s corporate approach to regeneration which emphasises higher densities and lower parking but with an emphasis on high quality design. This approach also identifies with the Government’s policies on the Urban Renaissance and sustainability which reflects the main approach of the Revised UDP. The strategy also relates to the corporate priority of supporting the vulnerable in society as it relates to a housing led regeneration programme designed to meet the needs of deprived areas. Barnet has embarked on a major programme to regenerate its four largest estates and transform them into thriving mixed tenure neighbourhoods. The four areas are Dollis Valley, Grahame Park, Stonegrove and Spur Road, and West Hendon. The regeneration programme is extensive and will see over 3,500 homes replaced with 8,000 new homes for existing tenant owners, for shared owners and key workers, and for market sale. The Stonegrove and Spur Road and Grahame Park projects have both received planning approval and construction works are anticipated to commence soon on both sites. The Dollis Valley and West Hendon regeneration plans although at an advance stage have not yet received planning approval.
- 57 The use of the statutory planning framework has been instrumental in how the Council has developed its approach. A number of Local Development frameworks have been produced and these have formed the basis for tender documentation when the Council has sought a development partner. For example the Colindale LDF is a plan for the regeneration of one of the most deprived wards in Barnet, and is one of the tender documents to select a development partner for re-development of the Grahame Park Estate.

- 58 The Commission for Architecture in the Built Environment (CABE) has praised the urban design strategy produced for the Brent Cross and Cricklewood project and a firm of urban designers have been employed to advise the Council on the development of the Colindale scheme. The Council's Environment and Neighbourhood services, including environmental health, green spaces and park services, and highways and design, actively work together in delivering environmental strategies. An example has been the joined up approach to incorporating recycling facilities in major developments and design of recycling facilities generally.
- 59 We found that benefits have been attained for the authority through the prudent use of Section 106 agreements and an effective system put in place to monitor implementation of future agreements. However, a planning contributions policy is only in draft form and has still to be adopted. It is important that officers and members have a clear set of criteria to follow in negotiation with developers to ensure that the benefits for the community are maximised in accordance with corporate priorities and that these processes are open and equitable.
- 60 A total of 259 projects have been entered into since 1994 with a value of approximately £15 million accruing in financial benefits prior to the current financial year with contributions being allocated for education, highways, environment and open spaces and affordable housing. A sum of £5.3 million received from section 106 agreements is currently held in balances by the Council. The new housing regeneration projects are scheduled to realise substantial further benefits from Section 106 agreements. For example the RAF East Camp agreement will provide an £8 million contribution to education, 840 affordable housing units and £5.2 million towards highway improvements. A planning contributions policy has been drafted and has been the subject of consultation with the ODPM who have advised the Council that it is to include the case study as good practice in its Good Practice Guide to be published with a revised Planning Obligations Circular later this year. The new Section 106 guidance is to be approved as a supplementary planning document as part of the LDF. The draft contributions policy is based on a Development Benefits Toolkit (DBT), developed by the Cricklewood Regeneration Unit, which provides a template to enable benefits for the community to be maximised. The planning service is applying the DBT to all development across all Council activities. However, at the present time the proposed contributions policy to guide officers in negotiation with developers remained in a draft form.
- 61 All new agreements are subject to close scrutiny and monitored by a cross departmental board. The board has also made a review of past agreements to ensure that all funds have been correctly allocated to the respective services in accordance with the agreements. The Council has recognised that it did not have an effective monitoring system. All information is now placed on the Council's OCELLA data system and a full time monitoring officer has been appointed.
- 62 Targets for the provision of 17,760 new and additional houses by 2017 are being met and will be exceeded on completion of the regeneration housing programme. Affordable houses are now averaging thirty per cent of new units and compares favourably with the Council's overall target of between 30 and 50 per cent affordable housing in new developments. The UDP policies of protecting town centres is also succeeding with a target of 75 per cent retention of retail frontages in town centres being met.

- 63 We found that the planning service is working closely with the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) and Metropolitan Police community safety design team to ensure new developments and areas of change achieve safer and more secure environments by designing out crime. A planning guidance document is available to advise developers on the 'designing out of crime'. There is close dialogue and liaison on major regeneration and housing estate renewal projects, an example of which is the incorporation of the Colindale Police Headquarters and Peel Centre Academy into the regeneration of the Colindale Development Framework area and alongside estate and major brown field regeneration schemes at Grahame Park.

The efficiency and quality of the service to the customer

- 64 We found the Council target for customer satisfaction is not being achieved. Users express concern over the quality and consistency of decisions of officers and members, the quality and value for money of pre-application advice and the inexperience of planning staff. However the efficiency of the service in respect of the speed of determining applications for development now exceeds national standards. Access to the service has also improved.

Provision of an excellent and responsive planning service

- 65 The Council target of 70 per cent for customer satisfaction is not being achieved. User satisfaction with the planning service in a BVPI 111 General Survey undertaken in the winter of 2003/04 was shown to be 54.5 per cent and represented a 1.7 per cent reduction from 56.2 per cent satisfaction in a similar survey in 2000/01. These surveys were of applicants and agents. The BVP111 General Survey also surveyed residents, rather than users, who registered a satisfaction rate of 18 per cent (77 per cent of the non-users of the service declined to express a view about the service) with the service compared to 22 per cent in 2001/02, the average satisfaction for London Boroughs being 20 per cent. However the service also conducted in 2004 a smaller sample survey of visitors to its reception area, but representing a much wider range of planning customers, which showed an 87.5 per cent user satisfaction with the service. Whilst the results of the visitor survey have not been fully tested, or concluded, the higher satisfaction rates may be a reflection of the recent improvements in service performance and access to officers.
- 66 In July 2004 a review of the findings of these surveys was undertaken and concluded that customers had four main areas of concern:
- ◆ accessibility of planning officers;
 - ◆ time taken for a decision to be made;
 - ◆ the overall quality of the service particularly the lack of consistency in planning decisions and the ineffectiveness of the enforcement service; and
 - ◆ lack of information of progress of applications and limited guidance for applicants.
- 67 We found that whilst there had been a significant improvement in the speed of determining applications, and access to the service, there is still an issue with users over the quality of decisions. Agents and developers we met in a focus group were unanimous in their view that there are still inconsistencies in the decisions of the area committees and officers who determine planning applications and also a lack of guidance on design requirements. One agent described the process as a lottery and a focus group of amenity and residential organisations concluded 'the service needs to improve a lot more and at the present time we would only give them four out of ten'.
- 68 We found that performance against key government targets is very good. The Government sets targets for dealing with planning applications. 60 per cent of major applications should be dealt with within 13 weeks, 65 per cent of minor

applications should be dealt with within eight weeks and 80 per cent of 'Other applications' within eight weeks. Until 2002/03 performance against the major and minor applications was poor and for other applications fell short of the governments targets and consequently the service was designated a 'Planning Standards Authority' by the government in 2003/04 for not meeting interim performance thresholds for processing major applications. Delegation of decisions to officers is eighty eight per cent compared to the government target of ninety per cent.

- 69 Since then there has been a significant improvement. Based on un-audited data 84 per cent of major applications, 75 per cent of minor applications and 94.5 per cent of other applications were processed within the government time limits in the first eight months of this financial year. This performance exceeds government targets. Performance in determining tree applications has also consistently exceeded the ninety five per cent completed in eight weeks target.
- 70 The service is no longer a 'Planning Standards Authority'. This demonstrates the commitment of the service to achieve continuous improvement. In recognition of this improvement the government has awarded the Council PDG of £470,370 for 2004/05 and £736,758 for 2005/06. The Council has already used the grants to improve the service further by providing on line planning services, employment of additional staff and appointment of design consultants.
- 71 Improvements in the speed of determining applications has been achieved through increasing the delegation of decisions to more officers, employment of more staff, a restructuring of the planning teams, introduction of new computerised facilities, incentives for staff by salary reviews and introduction of performance related pay and a more focused approach to performance. We found no evidence that the number of refusals had increased in correlation to the recent improvements in performance.
- 72 Access to the service has been improved through the availability of an interactive web site which provides a wide range of information including details of planning policies, minutes and reports of committees, guidance on how to submit applications and performance of the planning service in determining applications. Details of current applications are also available on the web site and representations can be made on line. Also during the week of inspection the web site introduced the capacity to submit applications on line although no applications had been received at that time. Agents, architects and amenity groups we met in focus groups indicated that the web site was useful and welcomed the ability to submit applications on line. A Geographical Information System is also available through the web site which enables individuals to access details of maps of the borough and provides details of past planning decisions for individual properties.

- 73 A reality check was made of the planning service reception area which we found to be inadequate in terms of size, provision of private areas for visitors to meet with planners and presentation of planning information. This is a view shared by many users, officers and members with whom we spoke. Two desk top computers were available to access the planning website and a few information leaflets and performance data on display. The reception area being small does not accommodate many visitors and on our visit we found the room dominated by a group of people in discussion of a planning matter. The reception area is also the subject of complaints of overcrowding from users at focus groups we held during the inspection week. Users at focus groups also complained of missing files at reception and having to return again to view the documents. We found staff friendly, polite and three planning officers are on duty to meet visitors in reception between 2.00pm and 5.15 pm Monday to Thursday, and on Friday from 2pm to 5pm. The Council does not have a one stop shop facility but the reception is shared with the building control service. A photocopying facility is available to copy documents. The limitations of the reception area have been recognised and approval has been given for a new reception area to be provided at Barnet House the present office base of the service and work is due to start in May and be in use later this year. Planning surgeries are held twice a week in the evenings between 7.00pm and 8.30 pm, one session being held at Barnet House and the other at Hendon Town Hall. A planning officer is available to provide details and discuss applications.
- 74 Access to planning officers has also been improved. Users had criticised the availability of planning officers who were difficult to contact by telephone and who used an answer machine extensively to receive calls. However, we found that answer phones have not been used for several years and since at least July 2004 all planning officers' phones are available during working hours. A new first call arrangement allows a fast track screening system for telephone calls to be directed quicker to planning officers who are accessible by phone at all times during working hours.
- 75 Pre-application advice is available and free to applicants for small schemes. An alternative scheme is available to developers and agents who wish to discuss larger schemes and applications. For a payment of £500 or £1,000, the rate depending on the scale of the project and advice required, a meeting with planning officers is arranged and written advice issued. The initiative has been operating for some six months and is designed to speed up the consideration of major applications and has been welcomed by users. However the scheme has been criticised by agents and developers for not providing value for money and giving advice which is often at odds with subsequent advice of senior officers and committee decisions. On occasions users advised that schemes have been redesigned on advice of officers at considerable expense and with an expectation of approval only for the application to be refused by a senior officer or members.
- 76 A target of registering ninety per cent of applications within three days is now being achieved. Computerised registration systems are used in all stages of the process and monitoring is undertaken weekly and monthly and at key stages. The targets of eight and thirteen weeks are used to identify urgent cases requiring attention to comply with time targets.

- 77 Case loads of officers for planning applications averaged 240 for 2003/04 and are considered high when compared to the recommended ODPM national average of 150. Although there has been an improvement in performance in recent months this is an area that needs further review to ensure sustainability of performance. Staff in the focus group we met also considered that workloads were high, a cause of work pressure and a concern that the quality of decisions may suffer as a result of being 'target-led'. Development control staff are scheduled to assist with appeal cases and this will need careful monitoring to ensure retention of determination rates and quality of decisions.
- 78 Whilst the speed of decision making needs to match Government targets it is important that there is consistency in the decisions made. No retrospective review of decisions is made and no annual tour of the borough is made to physically assess approved developments.
- 79 The planning service closely monitors all complaints. The Local Government Ombudsman made no findings of maladministration against the service during the last two years. During 2003/04 a total of 109 complaints went to first stage, of which twenty seven per cent were justified. Eleven stage 2 and six stage three complaints were received none of which were justified.
- 80 A Development Control manual for staff is available on the Council's intranet but is incomplete. The Council has adopted a number of corporate customer care standards which set out expected professional standards to be applied by officers and a set of professional and timed response targets. These include for instance:
- ◆ seeing a customer within five minutes of the appointed time;
 - ◆ answering all telephone calls within 25 seconds or nine rings;
 - ◆ returning telephone calls on the same day; and
 - ◆ resolving queries and responding to letters within ten working days or an acknowledgement within three days.
- 81 Each service is responsible for the monitoring of the achievement of these standards but we found no recorded data or monitoring arrangements in place.
- 82 During the inspection we found that the planning service had developed significantly over the last eighteen months. This was evidenced by the motivation and support shown by staff and the leadership and direction being given by senior managers.

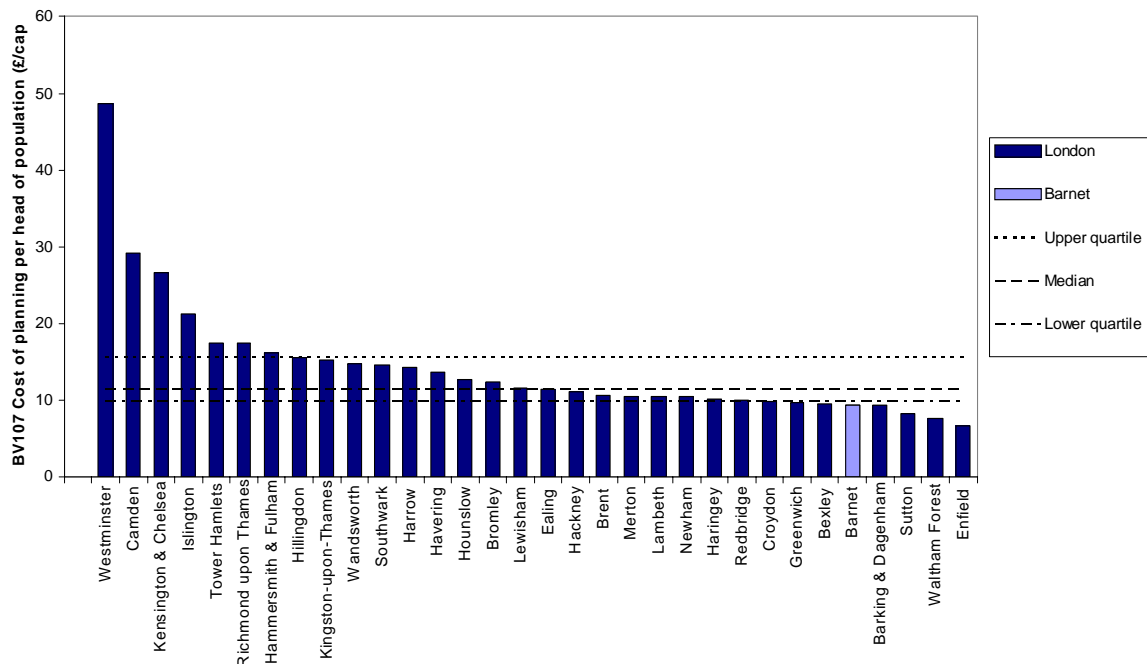
The fairness and transparency of planning decisions

- 83 We found the planning decision process to be open and transparent.
- 84 The three area planning committees collectively determine approximately 12 per cent of all applications received but these are usually the more controversial and complex and likely to conflict with approved planning policies. To ensure fairness and openness the Council permits representations on an application at a committee meeting and the applicant and three objectors can speak for three minutes each. The time allowed for each speaker was until recently five minutes and the reduction has resulted in criticism from some agents and developers. Published guidance is available on the process of speaking at committees which includes an outline of the official procedures for considering applications, information on who can speak, how to register your wish to speak, and the material planning considerations you can use to object to an application. Agents and developers are unanimous in their support for the open and fair way the planning system operates. A probity protocol is in place and members of the planning committee are obliged at the outset of each meeting to make a declaration of any personal interests relating to any application to be considered. These interests are recorded and appear in the official minutes of the meeting.
- 85 We found clear evidence from staff, and members, of an extensive training programme covering various aspects of planning policy, practice, procedures and law. Specific training sessions are provided in house and by external consultants and cover a wide range of service areas including the new Planning Compulsory Act 2004, the LDF system, planning performance, appeals and the PDG.
- 86 We found that reports to the planning committee to be clear and set out the material planning considerations and the reasons behind officer recommendations. Where officer recommendations are overturned by members the reasons for the decision are detailed in the minutes of the meeting.
- 87 The quality of information presented at committees has been improved through the use of power point presentations including architects drawings, and aerial displays. Seating accommodation has also been enlarged to permit large attendances and new procedural guides are distributed to the public at meetings. We attended meetings of an Area Planning Committee, and the main Planning Committee, and found them both open, well managed and the public given a fair opportunity to speak on applications being considered.
- 88 To encourage public participation and openness in major schemes the Council has piloted a Development Forum based on the Cambridge City model. Two pilot schemes have been successfully held and in the words of one member are an attempt 'to try and level the playing field.' The Forums considered the Barnet Trading Estate and Russell Lane Residential developments. Both Forums, chaired and presented by officers, were well attended and their success has encouraged the organising of a third session on the Dollis Valley Regeneration scheme.

How does the performance compare?

- 89 In order to judge the quality of a service, it is important to compare the performance of that service against other suppliers across a range of sectors. The aim is not an exact comparison, but an exploration of how similar services (or elements of services) perform in order to identify significant differences, the reasons for them, and the extent to which improvements are required. Where possible, we have compared Barnet with London boroughs and other planning authorities in England.
- 90 We found that Barnet does not compare favourably with other planning authorities in London, and the rest of England, in respect of customer satisfaction or delegation of applications to officers. However the service compares favourably in respect of costs per population, planning searches and development on brown field sites. Comparison of the speed of determination of planning applications shows Barnet to be average but this analysis pre-dates the recent significant improvements in performance.
- 91 Exhibit 1 below indicates that in 2003/04 the cost of the planning service per population for Barnet was £9.44 which compares very favourably with other London Boroughs and places the authority in the lower quartile. An analysis of planning costs per application may provide a more accurate value for money assessment of the service and is an area for further attention.

Exhibit 1: BVI 107 Planning Cost (£ per capita) London Boroughs 2003/04



- 92 The government has set targets for a range of planning applications; these require 60 per cent of major applications being determined within 13 weeks; 65 per cent of minor applications and 80 per cent of other applications being determined within eight weeks.

Exhibit 2: Comparison of Performance of Barnet 2003/04

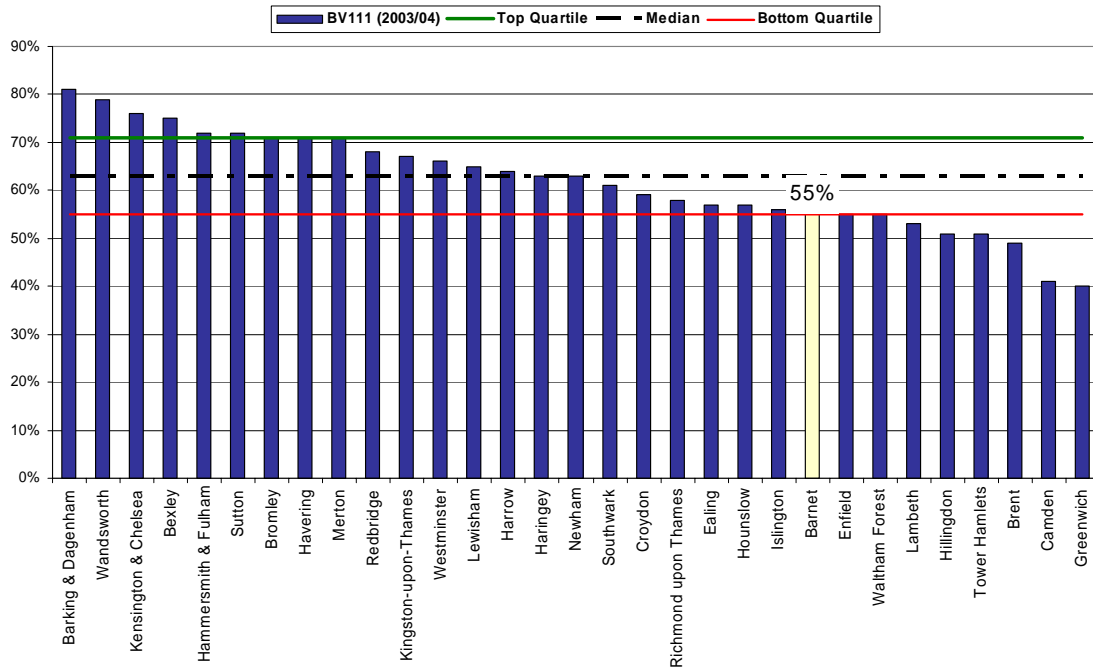
Performance Indicators	Government Targets	Per cent of applications processed /delegated in 2003/04	2003/04 London Quartile	2003/04 All England Quartile
BVPI 188 Delegated decisions to officers	90%	87.8%	3 rd	Bottom
BVPI109 (a) Planning major applications in 13 weeks	60%	51.2%	3 rd	2 nd
BVPI 107 (b) Planning minor applications in 8 weeks	65%	64.7%	2 nd	3 rd
BVPI 107 (c) Planning other applications in 8 weeks	80%	80.7%	2 nd	2 nd

- 93 Exhibit 2 above indicates that the service is average when compared with the performance of other London Boroughs and other planning authorities in England in the time taken to determine applications but pre-dates recent un-audited significant improvements in performance described above.
- 94 The Council's rate of delegation to officers is just below the government's target of 90 per cent and whilst this is average compared to other London Boroughs it is unfavourable compared with all other English authorities. The amount of development on brown field sites was 100 per cent (BVPI 106).
- 95 The data in Exhibits 3 and 4 below shows that Barnet does not compare well with London Boroughs or other all England authorities in terms of satisfaction of applicants with the service achieving third and bottom quartile positions respectively. However achievements in the completion of planning searches within ten days are fairly good in comparison with other authorities.

Exhibit 3: Comparison of Other Planning Indicators of Barnet 2003/04

Performance indicators	Data for 2003/04	London Quartile Position	All England Quartile Position
BVPI 107 Cost per head of Population	£9.44	3 rd	Top
BVPI 111 Applicants satisfied with the service	55%	3 rd	Bottom
BVPI 170 Planning searches within 10days	99.9%	3 rd	2 nd

Exhibit 4: BVPI111 Satisfaction of users with Planning Service London Boroughs 2003/04



Summary

- 96 This is a 'Fair' planning service which has clear and challenging aims, contributes to the local quality of life and supports the Council's key corporate priorities and the Council's community plan. High quality growth and sustainability of communities is being encouraged and community benefits are being gained from contributions from new development. Targets for affordable and new, additional housing are being met. Access to the service has improved. The service is open and transparent and government targets for determining applications are now being exceeded.
- 97 However the Council target for customer satisfaction is not being met and user satisfaction does not compare well with other planning authorities. Users have concerns over the consistency in planning decisions and the value for money, and quality, of pre-application advice. Limited SPG exists to assist officers in interpretation of policies. The enforcement service is reactive rather than pro-active, is not achieving targets in responding to reports of unauthorised development and has a significant backlog of cases not yet resolved. A draft planning contributions policy has yet to be adopted. Officer case loads of applications and enforcement cases are high. The reception area is inadequate in terms of size, provision of private areas for visitors to meet with planners and presentation of planning information. The Revised Draft UDP is still to be adopted.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 98 Inspectors use the following four building blocks to judge the service's prospects for improvement.
- ◆ Ownership of problems and willingness to change.
 - ◆ A sustained focus on what matters.
 - ◆ Capacity and systems to deliver performance and improvement.
 - ◆ Integration of continuous improvement into day-to-day management.

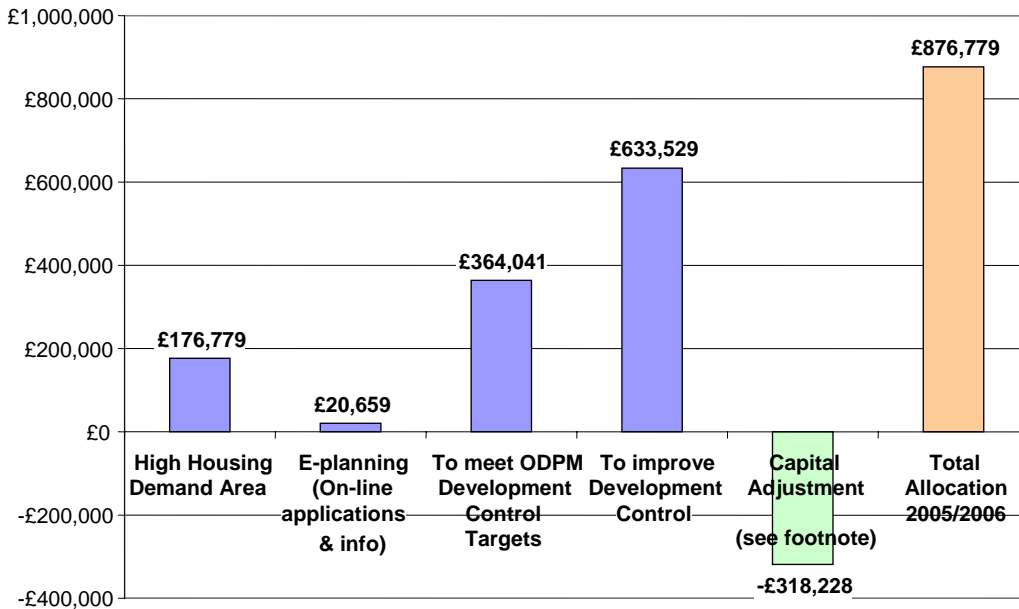
Ownership of problems and willingness to change

- 99 In good and excellent councils, senior managers and councillors are committed to continuous improvement. They are willing to tackle difficult problems, take difficult decisions and stick to them. They are open about their performance and problems and welcome internal and external challenge.
- 100 The Council has clear priorities for planning and developed a balanced policy of regeneration in tandem with protection of the green belt and local character ('Three Strands'). Planning is set to deliver an LDF underpinning the 'Three-Strands' and the Council has focused investment on improving planning to deliver community priorities. We found that the priorities and commitment for improvement are shared at all levels.
- 101 Barnet have ring-fenced resources to improve responsiveness and make it easier for users to contact staff. They are using funds from land holdings to drive regeneration projects like the North Finchley Arts Depot. A corporate asset management strategy and steering group is supporting and has evaluated the Council's full property portfolio⁴ identifying where it can be used to support developments. Planning are using corporate programmes to improve systems and infrastructure to information for users, for example online tracking of applications and GIS digital mapping. The Council has budgeted £425,000 of capital bids for this between 2005/06 and 2007/08 to integrate property based IT.
- 102 Barnet make robust decisions on developments to ensure balanced communities, for example requiring 50 per cent affordable housing in the Collindale Development Framework. Vigorous pursuit of community benefits from Section 106 agreements, for example at the former RAF East Camp site, West Hendon and Cricklewood/Brent Cross projects will achieve significant results in the future. For example, East Camp includes over £11 million of contribution for education, affordable housing and highway improvements. The West Hendon development requires benefits such as a community centre and sports facilities to be built as a prerequisite to any private and commercial elements.
- 103 The Council have imposed higher densities than in the UDP (for example up by 50 per cent in West Hendon) in order to meet affordable housing targets. Conversely, but in keeping with 'Three Strands', the Council have rigorously defended against encroachment into Green Belt including unpopular decisions such as opposing expansion of Barnet Football Club.

⁴ Barnet currently value their total property portfolio at approximately £3 billion.

104 The Council has made hard choices to deliver improvements and efficiency without significantly increasing comparative costs (see paragraph 89 above). Planning Delivery Grant from ODPM has increased annually. Barnet has attracted a further PDG allocation for 2005/06 (Exhibit 5) in response to the improvements in the planning service as well as to meet national priorities.

Exhibit 5: Planning Delivery Grant allocated to Barnet by ODPM for 2005/06⁵



105 We found that the Council welcomes both external and internal challenge and input. For example, planning has involved a number of council services and external partners in the development of the challenging aims for the service, which also clearly reflect key community priorities. The cross-cutting 'Three Strands' approach to planning and regeneration and development frameworks for major projects were produced with input from a number of regeneration partners.

106 We found that Members and officers involved in the planning service are keen to learn from others and to identify better ways of working. Examples include benchmarking visits to Cambridge which led to adoption of the Development Forum model and improvements to public access at planning meetings like public speaking and the use of visual aids. The Scrutiny Committee arranged ongoing training on customer access at committees from Cambridge. A further example of Barnet's sound use of challenge is the development of processes for robust monitoring and scrutiny by Cabinet, Planning and Scrutiny Committees. For example, regular reports on planning appeals and the planning service's performance indicators go to Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

⁵ Barnet received an increase of £140,021.36 on 2003/04. It received £176,779.36 for being an area of high housing demand. Based on their provision of e-planning facilities during 2004, Barnet were allocated £20,658.68 in accordance with the e-planning reward methodology. For Development Control, Barnet received £997,569.73 of which £364,041.16 was for meeting or exceeding BV109 targets and £633,528.57 was for performance improvement in this area in relation to previous years. The capping of PDG allocations at £700,000 and the redistribution of this money to other authorities by recycling it through the Development Control allocation mechanism had a -£318,228.41 net effect on Barnet's final allocation. (Source: ODPM 2005).

A sustained focus on what matters

- 107 In high performing councils, senior managers and councillors know what matters to local people and use this information to set clear and consistent priorities. They focus on achieving impact in priority areas and concentrate effort and resources in proportion to priority.
- 108 Barnet have a clear policy and strategy for the planning service and know what matters to local people, businesses and wider stakeholders. They have focused effort and resources on the key priorities for users and that will deliver on their policies and improve the service.
- 109 The Council has clear aims and values that focus on community priorities. There is a clear link from priorities to delivery via service plans (the four-year Performance Management Plans or PMP). Service aims and objectives cascade through managers to individuals using staff appraisals. Planning's PMP highlights national and community priorities that directly correspond with national and regional planning policy, for example faster processing of applications, supporting educational developments and creating opportunities for housing regeneration.
- 110 Barnet has established an imaginative policy framework in Three-Strands providing clear direction to balance major development with protection. Members and officers alike understand Three Strands and how it will deliver priorities. The Council has also established the building blocks to support the delivery of policy alongside continuous improvement of planning. By leading development of Three-Strands, planning have gained commitment to the policy from Members and senior managers and raised the profile of and commitment to the service. Greater focus on planning is achieving continuity on delivery of priorities, for example major regeneration.
- 111 Planning acts on feedback from service users and has put plans in place to deal with issues raised by customers such as a lack of responsiveness on applications and not public access to and participation in planning meetings. The service has identified user priorities from satisfaction surveys and other key areas for improvement through the Planning Standards Authority process and focused resources on them. Customer feedback also identified issues of the reception and lack of resources in enforcement. The service has developed a programme to tackle these problems, with creation of a new reception (delivery in spring 2005) and direction of further PDG funds to the enforcement team.
- 112 The Council is setting in place mechanisms to keep users informed of changes and improvements. For example, performance information is placed on the planning website, in the reception area and communicated to local councillors. Users we spoke to confirmed this and acknowledge they were aware of improvements on key targets and where planning are investing PDG.
- 113 Barnet have ensured that planning is fully involved in the development of strategic policy making, the prime example being development of the 'Three-Strands' approach, which planning led and continue to develop.

- 114 Planning has improved customer facing systems. The planning website gives users access to a wide range of information including on-line applications, progress, results and guidance. Comprehensive data is accessible through the digital mapping system. A national study has assessed the quality of Barnet's planning website has improved by 100 per cent (7 to 14 points).⁶ Planning is driving improvement of corporate systems to improve access for users. Integrating planning systems and databases (for example OCELLA and GIS) with other property based systems such as Land Charges and those in Building Control will significantly improve the efficiency of the service. Making the data required to perform the planning function more easily accessible will significantly enhance user accessibility to a wide range of information.
- 115 Whilst planning has prioritised areas such as application responsiveness they have also programmed improvements in other areas such Enforcement and the planning reception. They have introduced better access at committees, for example public speaking and projectors to display plans and photographs. We found this to be very effective and valued by users. The Council use scrutiny to promote quality and improvement, for example tracking planning appeals and comparing results to the external view of the Planning Inspectorate.
- 116 Officers and members identify improvements users want and are starting to deliver them. However, the Council does not yet fully engage with users in managing their expectations by communicating what planning is capable of and legally allowed to provide using mechanisms such as the Development Forums.
- 117 The Council has identified issues with the enforcement element of planning and are taking steps to improve in this area. They have identified enforcement as a future candidate for PDG, but are yet to make firm budget commitment for these funds. This is further evidence that the Council are focusing on their needs and requirements.

Capacity and systems to deliver performance and improvement

- 118 Successful councils have sound performance management systems and effective financial management including flexibility to move money and people to tackle the most important problems. They have clear lines of accountability for action and have the skills to build effective partnerships to help bring about improvements.
- 119 The Council are seeking to improve performance monitoring across the authority focusing on comparison with best performers. Planning, have appointed a dedicated business performance manager and regularly monitor performance and act on what it finds, in particular reinvesting PDG to support improvement. Customer care is not fully monitored at the moment, but programmes are in place to address this, while the Council acts on user feedback, for example the planned improvements to the reception area and improving responsiveness on applications.
- 120 Planning performance against approved indicators is reviewed through quarterly Finance and Performance Review (F&PR) meetings chaired by the Chief Executive. Robust challenge of service contributions to corporate priorities is applied through First Stat meetings which are the Chief Executive's high level review and problem solving forum attended by all key stakeholders, including external partners where relevant. Quarterly monitoring reports are sent to the relevant Scrutiny Committee.

⁶ National Planning Website Review 2004, Peter Pendleton Associates Ltd

- 121 All staff get appraisals and they confirmed at our focus group that this process works well, keeps them informed on objectives and motivated. Individuals who perform are likely to receive enhanced increments within their grade structure. Planning used their management structure to cascade to individuals and drive improvement along with upward reporting to management. There are also quarterly briefings for all staff including reinforcing priorities, for example on the latest PMP. We judge that these processes have successfully developed a staff team that knows what users want and how Barnet intends to address areas that require improvement such as enforcement and customer access.
- 122 The Council recognise the risks to their capacity to deliver major developments from key staff leaving. They have introduced robust frameworks and partnership agreements with accompanying detailed documentation to mitigate these risks. This coupled with the development of an experienced and stable staff team, including the Major Projects teams will ensure continuity on major schemes.
- 123 Planning develop a clear business case for each major development, which helps ensure the feasibility of these significant regeneration projects. They have successfully used major land holdings to underpin development proposals. For example on the North Finchley Arts Depot Barnet led the project as owners of key property and car park sites.
- 124 Significant infrastructure changes are required for major projects (a new mainline railway station and bridges over the North Circular at Cricklewood) and achieving the investment required will not be easy. However, clear guidelines such as a separate UDP chapter on Cricklewood, Brent Cross and West Hendon will help secure this. The Council developed the transport vision for this project in consultation with TfL, the Highways Agency and Strategic Rail Authority. Planning has also set in place and used a framework to formalise contributions for community benefits and developed an experienced staff group. With these elements in place, the service will be in a strong position to deliver the necessary infrastructure requirements for the major developments.
- 125 Planning has now introduced a framework for recruitment and retention in order to deal with past recruitment problems across the service. This includes performance related pay, graduate and technical staff training and proposed access to key worker status accommodation. The Council have focused on Development Control and major projects to date in order to meet priority targets with limited resources. Challenges in terms of human resources remain and the Council still use consultants, while workloads can be demanding on individuals in specialist teams such as enforcement, trees preservation and conservation.
- 126 The Council have set in place the partnerships that will deliver improvement. For example, planning has taken the lead on developing partnerships for major projects and pro-actively working with development partners. Examples of this are the Collindale, RAF East Camp, Mill Hill East and particularly the Cricklewood, Brent Cross and West Hendon project which will see the establishment of a new town in this area.
- 127 The Council have gained full private sector commitment to their Local Strategic Partnership arrangements (with the Commercial Director of Brent Cross as chair) and are developing links with NHS and have worked with these services to identify future development needs.

- 128 Through partnerships the Council now has a tested approach to successfully using statutory planning frameworks to drive strategic redevelopment. For example the Colindale LDF which will regenerate one of the most deprived wards is being used as a model for the contract for re-development of the Grahame Park Estate. In addition, TfL worked with planning on this scheme and the RAF East Camp project, also advising on the Section 106 agreements in relation to transport, developed in accordance with TfL and the Mayor of London's policies.
- 129 Barnet's innovative planning policy approach is starting to be recognised by a range of national stakeholders which has already helped to underpin delivery and service improvement. The London Plan identified Cricklewood and Brent Cross as an 'opportunity area' leading to major regeneration. Sport England provided advice on relocating playing fields and English Nature input on Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The West Hendon regeneration scheme was revised following input from the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) who advised caution on the movement of Metropolitan Open Land.

Integration of continuous improvement into day-to-day management

- 130 Continuous improvement should be seen as part of the day job, with best value integrated with other council performance management processes, not treated as an add-on.
- 131 Barnet has set in place a programme to achieve continuous improvement in its planning service. They have focused on community priorities and the areas identified as key for planning services by regional and central government.
- 132 Planning has achieved progress in critical areas, particularly introducing an innovative and balanced policy ('Three-Strands') establishing tried and tested frameworks for regeneration and major developments, improving responsiveness on applications and dealing with recruitment and retention issues. Although the Council has some way to go and needs to address key issues such as the enforcement service, perceived inconsistency in decision making and an inadequate reception, we judge that the achievements to date have established the building blocks that will drive continuous improvement.
- 133 Improvement is part of the day job in planning as the service is meeting the governments targets for processing applications and demonstrated significant progress in the last two years. Performance monitoring is in place to check progress against targets and used to drive improvement at all levels from Members to front line officers. Consultation with users and partners is used to identify what to improve when and although customer satisfaction is comparatively lower than the best performers, the Council has used user views to guide improvement.
- 134 The Council continues to use a range of devices to support improvement in planning including Member involvement and scrutiny, detailed performance monitoring by senior managers, input from partners including developers and regional government and focus on areas identified for improvement from Government via the PDG process.
- 135 Barnet has effectively used external challenge and comparison to drive improvement including improving customer access to the service based on best practice from other councils and comparison on key indicators. Challenge and comparison are now essential elements in the management of the service. Planning tests how well it is doing and is open to learning from others.

- 136 Service users have seen improvement in the planning service and the Council has used consultation with customers to inform service improvements. However, they have not yet fully set in place mechanisms such as a customer charter to manage user expectations and set out what planning can do and when.

Summary

- 137 This service has 'Excellent' prospects for improvement. The Council has significantly improved priority areas of the planning service by focusing resources and there is commitment to improvement from managers, Members and staff alike. Although there is some way to go and a number of key areas to address, the Council understand this and have worked to set the building blocks of continuous improvement in place. Barnet has an innovative policy approach, growing experience and a tested framework to deliver major regeneration and development in the future and the ability to take hard decisions on planning. Sound performance management systems provide the information to drive improvement. These are supported by clear lines of accountability comprehensive plans and supportive leadership. There is a track record of improvement within the planning service recognised by users, staff, managers and Members alike.
- 138 Some issues need to be addressed to deliver continuous improvement of planning including, rapid introduction of an improved reception, more resources for enforcement and dealing with users concerns over inconsistencies in decisions. However, improvement is now part of the day job, the Council welcomes and learns from internal and external challenge and the building blocks for improvement are in place. We are, therefore, confident the Council's programme to develop planning will be successful and continue to deliver continuous improvement.

Appendices

The purpose of a best value inspection is to make two judgements. The first is how good is the service being inspected? The second is what are the prospects for improvement? We carried out a range of activities to enable us to reach our judgements.

Documents reviewed

Before going on site and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that the Council provided for us. These included the following.

- ◆ Corporate Plan
- ◆ Community Plan
- ◆ Unitary Development Plan
- ◆ Supplementary Planning Guidance
- ◆ Performance Management Plans
- ◆ Development Frameworks
- ◆ Conservation Area Studies
- ◆ Members Protocol
- ◆ Risk registers
- ◆ Performance and financial monitoring
- ◆ Details of staff and councillor training

Reality checks undertaken

When we went on site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. We also followed up on issues relating to the management of the review and the improvements flowing from it. Our reality checks included:

- ◆ visit to planning reception and committee meetings;
- ◆ phone calls to the planning service; and
- ◆ tour of the borough viewing potential and completed development sites.

List of people interviewed

Alison Young	Head of Regeneration (Cricklewood Strategic Manager)
Andy O'Brien	Head of Corporate Performance Office
Anne Watkins	Chipping Barnet Area Planning Manager
Brian Reynolds	Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Community Services
Clive Medlam	Borough Treasurer
Clive Robinson	Planning Performance and Regulations Manager
Cllr. Andreas Tambourides	Scrutiny Committee Member
Cllr. Daniel Hope	Scrutiny Committee Member
Cllr. Jim Tierney	Opposition Planning Spokesperson
Cllr. Kanti Patel	Chair, Planning and Environment Committee
Cllr. Katia David	Chair, Chipping Barnet Area Planning Committee
Cllr. Melvin Cohen	Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Development
Darren Shuster	Business Support Manager
David Stephens	Chief Valuer and Development Manager
Focus Group	Residents' groups
Focus Group	Planning Staff
Focus Group	Agents
Graham Beattie	Director of Environment
Habib Nashat	Section 106 Manager
Iain Sutherland Thomas	Senior Planner
Jeff Lustig	Borough Solicitor
Joe Henry	Appeals/enforcement Manager
Jon Lloyd-Owen	Regeneration Manager (Housing)
Jonathan Hardy	Principal Planner
Leo Boland	Chief Executive
Martin Cowie	Hendon Area Planning Manager

Michael Lai	Deputy Manager, Waste and Sustainability
Mike Freestone	Head of Highways and Design
Mike Kallas	E-government Manager
Nick Walkley	Director of Resources
Peter Cridland	Corporate Information Manager
Philippa Gent	IT Officer
Ros Ward	Planning Policy Manager
Sam Richards	Head of Land Use Planning, Transport for London
Stewart Murray	Head of Planning

Improving public services

The Government has placed a duty upon local councils to deliver services to clear standards – of cost and quality – by the most economic, efficient and effective means available.⁷ Best value is a challenging framework that is designed to improve local services. Councils are required to assess their own performance and put in place measures to ensure continuous improvement in all of their services.

Councils must show that they have applied the 4Cs of best value:

- ◆ **challenging** why and how a service is being provided;
- ◆ **comparing** their performance with others' (including organisations in the private and voluntary sectors);
- ◆ embracing fair **competition** as a means of securing efficient and effective services; and
- ◆ **consulting** local **taxpayers**, customers and the wider business community.

The Government has decided that each council should be scrutinised by an independent inspectorate. The Audit Commission performs this role.

The purpose of the inspection, and of this report, is to:

- ◆ enable the public to see whether best value is being delivered;
- ◆ enable the Council to see how well it is doing;
- ◆ enable the Government to see how well its policies are working in practice;
- ◆ identify failing services where remedial action may be necessary; and
- ◆ identify and disseminate best practice.

⁷ This report has been prepared by the Audit Commission ('the Commission') following an inspection under Section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, and issued in accordance with its duty under Section 13 of the 1999 Act.