

Planners must hit targets, not help applicants

BY ANWEN HUMFREY

F R U S T R A T E D Pembrokeshire Coast National Park members have set themselves a deadline to improve the planning process, following a hard-hitting report from a national watchdog.

AM Jane Davidson, minister for the environment, sustainability and housing met with National Park members at an extraordinary meeting on Thursday.

She discussed issues highlighted in a report by the Wales Audit Office, which criticised the speed the authority dealt with planning applications.

Mrs Davidson said: "I have to ensure that people have confidence in the planning system, and it is going to deliver the most effective outcome for communities."

"We are talking about some major issues in terms of time limits."

The Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority dealt with 47% of applications within eight weeks. The Welsh average was 62%.

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National park authority chairman, Councillor Simon Hancock said: "We are aware of the gravity of the situation. We are drinking at the last chance saloon and we are aware of it."

"There is the determination from all members that this will be put right by the end of the year."

He added: "We have got to get our own house in order. This report could be the sword of Damocles hanging above us, it could also represent an opportunity to produce a template for excellence."

The authority has put in place an improvement plan, including a new IT system and a review of the system.

It will also look at how other

organisations have dealt with similar issues and share their findings.

Cllr Richard Howells said the members had been surprised and disappointed by the report.

He said: "It will be a rough road ahead, but we are looking forward with some enthusiasm."

Cllr Michael Williams said: "I have a feeling we have heard it all before, but the difference here is that members are determined to drive this forward."

"The dog will now start wagging the tail. We are absolutely committed to sorting this out."

Chief executive Nic Wheeler said: "I think this authority would have a greater understanding of statistics if we thought they were being collected in a comparable basis."

Mr Wheeler said some applications would have to be refused straight away, rather than trying to assist the applicant, and the pre-application process should be encouraged.

He added: "I can understand the frustration, and I apologise on behalf of myself and my staff for putting you in this situation."