

REPORT

Cllr Noeken : Cabinet Member for Planning & Economic Development

DEVELOPMENT SERVICES- UPDATE REPORT

1. Report Summary:

At the meeting of Full Council on 29th March 2004 assurances were given that members would be kept up to date on progress being made as a result of the Options Report considered and approved at that Council meeting. This report highlights the progress made and the out turns against Best Value Performance Indicator 109 a, b and c.

2. ODPM Inspection

The first major event to report was the inspection by consultants contracted by the ODPM who visited the Planning office in April to assess the performance of Salisbury District Council. In the assessment consideration was given to too our progress towards the specific performance standards that were set for 2003/04, the steps taken to facilitate further performance improvements and in the longer term our ability to reach national targets set out by the ODPM. The ODPM have now received the consultants report and whilst they accept that steps have been taken to improve performance there are still serious concerns that as an authority we have not yet met the best value development control performance standards set for 2003/04. The Executive summary of that report is attached as Appendix A. The full report is available from the HDS upon request.

3. HDS Comments on the ODPM report: This report has identified the potential blockages of resource and area committees which are commented on as follows:

Resource: The Head of Development Services has undertaken a 'root and branch' evaluation of his unit and re-structured. In addition with the help of members two posts have been authorised over complement, to address the high turnover of staff. The final position is currently out to advertisement and appointment is expected in August. It has taken therefore nearly 8 months to address the resource problem with the planning officers. In addition during this time two supervisors in the support team have resigned and left the employ of the council. This has facilitated one of these posts being revised to the post of Office and development Control Support Manager that has been identified as a requirement to ensure that procedures in support are timely and supportive to Ward Members, Parish Councils and the public. Early signs are that the strain on officers is beginning to abate and that focus is emerging on the task ahead.

Area Committees: The Options Report Identified this potential blockage but recommended that due to the high level of engagement in the Area Committees and the popularity of them with both Ward members and Parish Councillor's alike that every avenue be explored before any consideration

be given to amending the format or frequency of these meetings. At this moment in time all avenues have not been explored.

4. **SERCO :** The Second major event to report is the instruction by the HDS to SERCO, a firm of consultants already embarked upon work for the new Customer Services Unit, to visit Development Services and look at the processes we undertake and to produce a scoping report to identify where they consider further work is required. This is so that an external validation of our process can be achieved and is called Business Process Re-engineering.

Business Process Re-engineering, (BPR) is about transforming services through a rigorous process of analysing what actually takes place at the activity level and focusing on the critical elements that make the difference in the performance of a process. BPR is based on business process maps; visual displays of activities or situations and their associated strengths, weaknesses and improvement opportunities.

SERCO have completed this work and have reported inter-alia, which is attached as Appendix B.

5. **HDS Comments on the SERCO Scoping Paper:** The HDS accepts that the achievement of performance targets is not easy and over the past 15 months a number of new initiatives at the strategic level have been introduced in order that the unit can commence the process of real improvement. Resource and Political support are covered in the LAA report above. The amendments to delegation and a number of initiatives were introduced on the 1st May 2004 at the same time as the SERCO team were evaluating and drafting their scoping report. The HDS accepts that we are at the beginning of real improvement and that there are cultural and role changes that have to occur before improvement can take place. Personnel in the system are now under no misapprehension as to what the focus of the unit is, what needs to be achieved and who has to achieve it. Managers in the process are again aware that at the operational level target achievement is their responsibility, as the strategic work undertaken by the HDS has now been completed with the exception of monitoring and reviewing the process on a continual basis.

SERCO have been put on hold for the time being to allow these new initiatives to bed in, for the new staff to be trained and an opportunity for the whole team to achieve. The target time for this is the 30th September, which is the end of the accounting period for the 04/05 planning delivery grant. Once we are in a position to ascertain where we are on the 30th September the HDS will be instructing SERCO to undertake further work once this position is known.

6. **The current position regarding BVPI-109:** The first of July represents the commencement of the 2nd Quarter of 2004, which as indicated above takes us to the end of September 2004. The figures for the 1st Quarter are now available and represent two full months of processing since the 1st May, which is when the new initiatives were introduced and the new, delegated powers effected, post 29th March.

The figures can be broken down as follows:

The backlog: The figure carried over each quarter as a live workload contains a backlog, the current in date workload and applications subject to a Section 106 agreement that cannot be issued. The carry over figure for the 4th quarter 2003 was just under 700 applications. A concerted effort has now taken place by both planning officers and support staff and this figure has now been reduced to 431. This places the unit in a much stronger position to achieve target in the 2nd quarter of 2004.

There is still work to do as it is considered that another 80 applications need to be dealt with to reduce this figure to around 350. Section 106 agreements are being targeted and it is hoped that again we can reduce the number of applications in this category.

BVPI 109 a –Major Applications: Against a target of 60% in 13 weeks during this quarter we have achieved 60%, so target has been achieved. We have also been clearing out some out of date applications during this period that has skewed the figures but again confidence is high that during the next quarter we will be able to surpass this figure albeit due to the low numbers percentages fluctuate more in this category than others.

BVPI 109b – Minor Applications: Against a target of 65% in eight weeks we have achieved 52% which although not achieving target is a personal best for the unit. The unit is focused on this category and statistical information is now available to identify where the applications are in the process. Section 106 agreements represent approximately 15% of the total number of applications in this category and therefore more work is required to front load the agreements and monies so that decisions can be released promptly after authorisation.

BVPI 109c- Other Applications: This category includes FASTRACK applications and against a target of 80% in eight weeks we have achieved 84%, so another target achievement.

Delegation: Against a target of 90% we have achieved 87%, which is a 5% improvement over the last quarter and a good indicator that the new delegation procedures are beginning to pay dividend.

7. **Conclusion:** The figures above are a good indicator that the initiatives introduced are now improving performance to the point that genuine target achievement in all three categories is now a realistic possibility. It is considered that the 'building blocks' are in place and provided the staffing issues experienced during the past do not repeat themselves and the cultural change that is now in evidence continues, then confidence is high for the coming quarter.
8. **Recommendations:**
That members note the report.

Background Papers:

Lynda Addison Associates Report. SERCO Report: Development Control
BPR Project Continuation Justification Document; PSI and PS2 Returns to the ODPM.

Implications:

- **Financial** : None
- **Legal** : None
- **Council's Core Values** : In support of BVPI 109
- **Ward(s) Affected** : All
- **Consultation Undertaken:** Area Chairs and Vice Chairs of Area, Regulatory Committee, Scrutiny Panel and in addition Parish Councils at a recent meeting on the 2nd Jul 04.

Executive Summary of ODPM Report (Lynda Addison Associates)

Salisbury is a standards authority for 2003/4 because of its performance on major applications in 2001/2. There have been clear signs of improvement since 2001/2 and the authority has not been designated as a standards authority for 2004/5. For 2003/4 the authority met the standard required of 50% for major applications and they are close to meeting the national target, which should be achieved in 2004/5. There is backlog of applications and the situation requires careful monitoring to ensure that it does not increase further and is reduced during the year. Action is being taken to achieve this. Performance however has fallen for both minor and other applications since 2001/2 and they have never reached the authority's previous highest levels of 46% and 75% respectively. With the current level of performance and rate of improvement, it is still uncertain that Salisbury will meet the national target during 2004/5 for minor and other applications. It should meet the national target for major applications in 2004/5 but performance particularly on minor applications and to a lesser extent on other applications continues to be a source of concern.

However recent actions by the authority could turn round this position quite rapidly and over the next year the position should be clearer. There are significant changes being introduced as from April this year to affect improvements particularly on the processing of minor and other applications. In addition the quality of engagement with the community is being enhanced and attention is also being paid to ensuring high quality developments.

Recommendation

The ODPM acknowledges the progress that has been made but is concerned that, on the basis of the evidence' which its consultants have assembled, the Authority has not met all the best value development control performance standards set for 2003/4. Whilst it is clear that the Authority has taken steps to improve its performance it appears that further measures may still be necessary to improve performance in order to achieve the national targets of 60% in 13 weeks for major applications, 65% in 8 weeks for minor applications and 80% in 8 weeks for all other applications. The ODPM through the Government Offices will therefore continue to monitor the progress made towards meeting the targets. The possible areas of weakness identified in this report should be reviewed and action taken to deal with these issues. To support this work, workshops are being arranged on key aspects of improvement, which the Authority will be invited to attend.

Scale of improvement over last 18 months

The improvements over the last 18 months have been substantial in terms of customer care and the quality of service. In addition performance management processes have been enhanced. The culture of the service has substantially changed following the appointment of a new head of service and it is now considerably more proactive in improving performance. In terms of major applications a 36% increase in performance has been achieved over the last year (2002/3 to 2003/4) as compared with a decline in performance previously. The same level of change has yet to be seen in the performance on minor or other applications with only a slight improvement, 2% and 1% respectively, but the focus now has moved to these areas. The overall changes have focused on creating the foundations for an effective quality development control system in terms of performance and customer care as set out in the improvement plan.

The key areas of improvement are:

- Re-engineering of the processes and procedures;
- A focus on improving performance including new monitoring procedures and clarification of responsibilities, including through the new Head of Service;
- Revisions to the administrative systems to improve validation and registration times, ensure quality and the opportunity to work generically;
- Re-structuring of the development control team;
- Member and parish councillor training;
- Officer training;
- Establishment of a new ITC system including use of the web;
- Improvements to customer care through the introduction of specialists advisers;
- A review of delegation;
- Increased staffing levels;
- New fast track system for applications;
- Changes in the way s106 agreements were being used;
- Action to improve design outcomes and community engagement.

There is clear evidence that the improvements in time targets on major applications has not been at the expense of customer care or quality of decision-making.

Improvement strategy

The Best Value Improvement Plan was initially developed in 2001, has been updated for 2002/3 in terms of progress (Version 2), and subsequently a revised improvement strategy has been prepared in March 2004. In terms of the earlier improvement plans the majority of the actions have already been implemented but the recent improvement strategy looks ahead to 2004/5 and identifies, in the light of the discussions held as part of this evaluation process, a series of key actions to address key problem areas. The future outstanding proposals for improvement are:

- Continuing improvements in IT in terms of administration and web content to allow more effective use of the Internet by applicants and the community and automatic registration.
- Fully implementing the changes already identified to the development control process and procedures including the completion of a development control manual and design guidance.
- Continuation of business process re-engineering of the development control process.
- Restructuring of the development control team to facilitate cross team working and increase flexibility.
- Retention of agency staff for 6 months to clear the backlog.
- Review the area committee system in October 2004 when it is clear the impact on performance of other changes instigated.
- Review publicity procedures.
- Further work and training with Members and parish councillors to improve the processing of applications, consultation and use of IT.
- Further review of the delegation scheme.
- Increased interface with internal and external consultees especially the County Council in respect of s106 processes to unblock delays, establishment of project group to improve performance on them both in the context of major and minor applications.
- Appointment of a major applications and appeals officer.

- Maintain and improve fast track system and ensure team leaders are responsible for performance.
- Improve control of negotiation process to ensure does not detract from targets with principle planning officers assuming control of minor applications and front load s106 requirements through development team approach.
- Monitoring and improvements in pre-applications advice process.
- Enhanced performance monitoring of all applications including reporting of performance bi-monthly to Cabinet.
- Production of design guide on adding value and appointment of compliance officer to improve quality together with revisions to the architects' panel to form a Design Forum.
- More benchmarking of best practice.
- Improve recruitment and retention through introduction of "golden hello", sponsorship for planning school, private medical insurance, CPD and staff development package.

The forward projection of the improvement plan to 2005 clearly identifies actions to be taken, the cost, achievement deadline and officer responsible. It will need to be rolled forward to identify what further actions are required to ensure that the Council can meet the BVPI 109 targets by 2006/7 in the light of the actual effect of current proposals and the outcomes of the process mapping as well as the resources required particularly with increasing numbers of applications. There are clearly examples of best practice in Salisbury in relation to the use of IT, the engagement of parish and town councils in the improvement process, the customer charter and the stakeholder design forum being established.

Conclusion

The Council have reached the standard for major applications in 2003/4 and in two of the last 3 quarters have exceeded the national target. The indication given is that this will be maintained. The current performance for minor and other applications shows no clear signs of improvement in the last 2 years and is still poor, particularly for minor applications. However, actions have been initiated which means that this situation may be reversed over the next twelve months, but as yet it is too early to say. The sustainability of the current performance may be at risk given the increasing workload and previous staffing problems but these are now being addressed through a forward looking improvement plan directed at the key issues. There still remains some doubt that the national targets can be met by 2006/7 for minor and other applications although the introduction of the new IT, revised structures and staffing levels, better delegation and better procedures should overcome some current barriers.

What are the potential obstacles?

- The possible lack of resources to handle the current and growing workload particularly if the increased staffing levels are negated by staff turnover and recruitment problems.
- The area committee structure and the way they work are creating an additional burden on officers and this may continue to be a barrier to achieving targets.

Improvement is needed in respect of the following:

1. A further updated improvement plan looking forward to 2006/7 and related to the process mapping/business re-engineering for each type of application as well as the issues raised in this report so that the scale of change and how that is going to be delivered at least annually is clear.

2. A further review of the level of delegation to ensure it is meeting the target once the current proposals have settled in.
3. A review of the area committee structure and the processes in the light of the impact on speed of decision-making of the current actions now agreed.
4. The continuation of the review of staffing levels in relation to caseloads to ensure the balance is maintained with contingency plans available rapidly should they become unbalanced.
5. The completion of the review of the use of s106 and its impact especially in relation to other parts of the council and external agencies so that appropriate action can be taken.

It is considered that the national targets for minor and other applications are unlikely to be achieved in the near future without the above and may not be achieved by 2006/7 but that those for major applications should be achieved in 2004/5.

EXTRACT FROM THE SCOPING REPORT OF SERCO

Development Control appears to be primarily at the starting stage for addressing the barriers to service improvement.

Set out below are some examples that support this view are;

1. The Head of Service has developed with his staff a vision and new ways of working. A lot of energy has been put into trying to improve the service and implement new working practices, supported by documentation and staff. However, this vision and energy to make changes is diluted between the Head of Service and the staff doing the job at grass roots level. This suggests that the whole management team does not champion the leadership and urgency shown at Service Head level.
2. A wealth of performance information has been produced by the Special Projects and Support Manager as part of the Comprehensive Performance framework. This information is comprehensive, but is not being used by management to manage staff or key operational processes. This is partly due to the performance information not being systematically used to drive performance improvement.
3. Limited evidence of robust resource planning and workload allocation and management action appears largely reactive and remedial rather than planned.
4. There is also evidence that there are inadequate systems in place for monitoring public enquires, particularly postal enquiries. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there have been cases of staff going on sick leave leaving behind numerous unanswered correspondence which went unnoticed until their in tray was cleared by fellow colleagues.
5. There is evidence of resistance to change within parts of the service area. There is a perception that Salisbury is “unique” and therefore examples of good practice were felt to be not appropriate or applicable.
6. The Head of Service is involved in the operational running of the Development Services and this is demonstrated through the drafting of a series of procedures for the team. Service managers appear too involved in operational detail leaving too little for strategic management.
7. Organisational learning is weak even though the Business Control function demonstrates areas of good practice and external visits to exemplar authorities have also been undertaken.