

**Commencing: 6.00pm**  
**8 March 2004**  
**Bourne Hill**  
**Salisbury**

## MINUTES

### **Present**

Councillor P D Edge (Chairman)  
Councillor Mrs E Chettleburgh (Vice Chairman)

Councillor R Britton  
Councillor P Clegg (substituting for Councillor I Tomes)  
Councillor G Jeans  
Councillor Ms S C Mallory  
Councillor W Moss (substituting for Councillor Hewitt)  
Councillor J Noeken  
Councillor Mrs C A Spencer  
Councillor S A Willan

### **In Attendance**

D Crook (SDC)  
S Draper (SDC)  
S Milton (SDC)  
S Thorne (SDC)

### **Apologies**

Councillor A J A Brown-Hovelt

### **Public/Observers**

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#### **46. Public Questions/Statements**

There were no public questions or statements

#### **47. Councillor Questions/Statements**

There were no Councillor questions or statements

#### **48. Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of 16 February 2004 were **agreed** as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

#### **49. Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations.

#### **50. Development Control**

The panel considered the previously circulated report of the Head of Development Services. The Head of Development Services added that service provision encompasses quality and cost as well as speed. In respect of the quality and cost of the process the Development Control Department were performing very well. One of the reasons for failing to meet government performance targets was the severe staff shortage experienced by the unit. It is estimated that a full planning team will be in place by Easter which will help speed up the planning process. On the issue of the volume of referrals to committee by

HDS, and the inconsistency of referrals between the various area committees, the Head of Development Services indicated that this was an area he had already started to address. During a discussion that followed the following points/questions were raised/asked:

- Would the additional staff be employed on a temporary basis or would they be permanent?

The Head of Development Services replied that the Council would be recruiting over complement because of the high turnover of staff. These new posts would be funded by the Planning Delivery Grants that the Council would receive once it was meeting targets. Agency staff had been employed but this was expensive and was only being used as a last resort. A golden hello was being offered to applicants to try and increase the number of applications.

- If the Planning Delivery Grant was not forthcoming would some of these new officers be made redundant?

An assessment of the need for the extra staff would be made after the initial period of Planning Delivery Grant funding. If it was still felt to be necessary to employ extra staff then Council would be requested to grant the funds as a recurring cost. If there was no longer perceived to be a need then due to the high turnover of staff it was proposed that when staff leave they would not be replaced making redundancies unnecessary.

- When did these problems start to appear?

The Head of Development Services replied that this problem had been worsening incrementally over the last 6-7 years. There had been a 7% increase in the number of planning applications received by the department every year for the last 6 years. This would mean that in order to remain in the target level the department would have to be 7% more efficient every year. In addition there are applications that are not counted in the ODPM Statistics, such as crown land and Trees which can significantly contribute towards additional workload. The district contains much Crown Land and receives many applications for development of this land the total number of applications that Salisbury District Council processes is about 500 higher than counted by the ODPM.

- Do the fees for planning applications cover the administration costs?

The Head of Development Services stated that they do not. It was commented that the ODPM was looking to increase the costs of planning fees by up to 35% in some areas to try and cover the costs of processing the applications. However the increase in fees is totally within the control of the ODPM. The money from planning fees is not a budget that can be spent by the planning office and is usually seen as a contribution towards the corporate pot. However, the Planning Delivery Grant has been ring-fenced in the past so it would be fully available for use in improving the planning service.

- Is there some other way that member and officer applications could be processed as they always have to go to committee even when they are quite minor?

The Policy Director replied that the Management Team would be very wary of any review that affected the transparency of the system and could potentially bring the Council into disrepute. Any changes to the area committees would be part of the phase 2 review.

- What are the arrangements for expediting legal agreements?

The Head of Development Services replied that policy R2 was not unique to Salisbury District but did cause applications to be delayed. Therefore the department was looking into the possibility of frontloading the agreements and unilateral undertakings so that immediately upon receipt of an application a letter would be sent to developers asking them to sign the standard agreement and pay the money. If the money was not received by the 7<sup>th</sup> week then the application would automatically be refused. If the application was refused the grant would be refunded. He added that the money must be paid before planning permission was granted as experience showed that the Council would often face an increased enforcement caseload if it was paid after the event. The Cabinet have agreed to fund a compliance officer and an R2 officer (for administration), through S106 contributions.

- At present a Councillor can demand that any application dealt with currently under FASTTRACK scheme be referred to Committee for consideration. Under the new proposals would this still be the case?

The Head of Development Services stated that the proposals would prevent members from referring any FASTTRACK applications to committee. A target of 90% delegation had been set and this means full delegation to officers which does not allow Councillors to call a decision to committee. However, FASTTRACK only applies minor applications, which are usually non-controversial, and for these applications the emphasis should be on speed. This will leave more time to be spent where it is needed on the quality of Major and Minor applications (Minor being any development up to 10 houses).

- Several Councillors felt that they could not support the idea of members having no right of call in under any circumstances. It was noted that over 20% of officer recommendations were subsequently overturned by committee and they felt that this indicated that the right of referral was necessary.
- How many applications come to committee that are FASTTRACK applications? How many applications that would have previously come to committee, would now not because of this reform?

The Head of Development Services stated that those figures were being compiled at present as he was not exactly sure. However, he estimated that around 14% of all applications that go to committee are FASTTRACK applications.

- Some Councillors from the City Area felt that the implications of the reforms on the City had not been properly investigated as the report mostly focused on the influence of Parish Councils. There was some concern that these reforms would only make a small amount of difference in the City Area.
- The Portfolio holder noted that an attempt to reform the system had been made in October 2002 and it had failed to solve the issues. He also commented that Salisbury was one of the few Councils that allowed the parishes to refer applications to committee.
- Some Councillors expressed the view that the reforms would still not solve the problem, as Councillors are unlikely to refuse to call an application to committee when a Parish Council requests it. However, other Councillors felt that it was possible and that this would lead to a reduction in the number of applications coming to committee.

- A concern was expressed that the Parishes did not fully understand the proposals in the report. Therefore it would be sensible to await the views of the parishes before making any final decisions.
- The Portfolio Holder and the Policy Director informed the panel that the option to do nothing was not available. The Audit Commission were returning very shortly to investigate Development Services and they would keep coming back until the problems were solved. If targets were not met then it would become increasingly difficult to recruit quality planning officers to work in a department that was perceived to be failing.
- It was commented that a reluctance to implement phase 1 proposals fully now would lead to no overall improvement in performance figures and would make phase 2 necessary in the long term.

**RESOLVED** - that the Cabinet recommendations to Full Council be supported namely :-

- (1) The options set out at 4.4 to 4.7 inclusive of the previously circulated report be approved and recommended for adoption by Full Council.
- (2) The quickest possible implementation of the improvements at 4.4 to 4.7 inclusive of this report in order to attract maximum Planning Development Grant be recommend to Full Council
- (3) Subject to acceptance of recommendations 1 and 2 a revised Improvement Programme be developed in line with the Council's resolution in March 2004.
- (4) That a report be submitted to the City Area Committee outlining the impact that the above proposals will have on the City Area.

It was also **RESOLVED** as a result of the above recommendations that the impact of the phase one changes be reviewed in 6 months.

Note: It was recognised that a mechanism for ward member referrals still needed to be worked out before Full Council for both single and multi member wards. For the former a buddy system is proposed whereby a named councillor from an adjoining ward will stand in where required.

Note: Councillor Mrs Spencer requested that her dissent from paragraph 4.5.1 in the previously circulated report be noted.

## **51. Date of the Next Meetings**

The next meeting will be held on **Monday 19<sup>th</sup> April 2004.**

The meeting closed at 2015hrs