

CABINET – 6 APRIL 2005

PORTFOLIO : ECONOMY & PLANNING

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – PARISH AND TOWN COUNCIL LIAISON PROCEDURE

Summary of Purpose and Recommendations:








To review the procedure for liaison with Parish and Town Councils initiated with part of the Council's Planning Delivery Grant for 2004/5. It is recommend that subject to some minor changes that the liaison procedures be continued.

Cost to Council: £80,000

Within existing budget? Yes/No/TBA

* from 2003/4 PDG

Contribution to Corporate Plan (Minor/Moderate/Major/Neutral):

	+		-		+		-
	V			Priorities			
	V			Clean Streets and Public Space		V	
		V		Crime and Disorder		V	
		V		Housing		V	
	V			Managing our Finances		V	

Comments on Impacts on Corporate Objectives and Priorities:

The procedure has resulted in a high level of satisfaction from our Parish Council partners and the size of the Planning Development Control Committee agenda has reduced.



PARISH AND TOWN COUNCIL LIAISON PROCEDURE

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 In June 2004 the Council considered the allocation of the £523,022 as its planning delivery grant award for 2004/5. In response to the paper produced by the New Forest Association of Local Councils entitled "Crisis in Confidence in Planning" it was considered important to use some of the additional grant money to foster a stronger partnership with the Parish and Town Councils. In turn it was anticipated that this would reduce the numbers of planning applications being considered by the Planning Development Control Committee and thereby assist in development control performance.
- 1.2 One aspect of this was the use of £80,000 of the planning delivery grant allocation for additional Development Control staff to work with local Parish and Town Councils prior to consideration of planning applications by Planning Committee. These were to be temporary contracts or Agency staff.
- 1.3 A new liaison procedure was set up and begun operation on 1st October 2004. The purpose of this report is to review this procedure in accordance with the recommendations of the Cabinet and make amendments to the procedure as required.

2. THE NEW LIAISON PROCEDURE WITH TOWN AND PARISH COUNCILS

- 2.1 A briefing note is sent to Town and Parish Councils on all planning applications. The briefing notes are prepared by planning officers as soon as possible in the process and following a site visit. It outlines the policies, relevant planning history, and key planning issues associated with each proposal. These comments are however made before consultations have been completed so cannot pre-suppose the final decision that is likely to be made. Provision is also made in the procedure for a supplementary briefing note to be prepared on complex applications where amended plans are submitted and further advice to the Town and Parish Councils on outstanding issues is required.
- 2.2 The purpose of the briefing note is to give the Town and Parish Councils a greater understanding of the planning issues associated with a particular application so that this can inform their recommendation to the Council. As well as promoting partnership working this is intended to reduce the number of applications referred to the Planning Committee. In the past, many applications were considered for reasons which can be resolved by the provision of additional information.

- 2.3 There has been no extension in the time allowed for the Parish and Town Councils to provide their comments on planning applications - which is still within 28 days of an application being registered. Whilst this puts pressure on planning officers to prepare the briefing notes and Parishes to respond, it is imperative that these timescales are retained in order to ensure that statutory application determination targets are met.
- 2.4 In order to deliver this new procedure a more disciplined approach has been adopted by planning officers in undertaking their site visits very early in the process, identifying and assessing issues and in some cases indicating the likely recommendations. Whilst this has involved a change to some individuals working practices it is however helpful in the overall processing of an application and also provides agents and members of the public with an indication of the planning issues at a very early stage.
- 2.5 The briefing note is currently completed on a proforma by hand, a copy is retained for the planning file and another sent to the Town or Parish Council by post.
- 2.6 A revised standard response proforma is sent with the briefing note. This proforma is now being used by more of the Town and Parish Councils as the basic application information is now included. This makes it easier for planning officers to understand and interpret the comments made.
- 2.7 Requests can be made by the Town and Parish Councils for a site visit with the planning officer or attendance at their committee meetings. Limited requests of this nature have been made to date but it is considered to be an important part of the procedure.

3. EFFECT ON COMMITTEE REFERRALS

- 3.1 One of the purposes of this new procedure was to reduce the number of planning applications being referred to the Planning Committee. This, in turn, would reduce committee agendas and help improve overall development control performance.
- 3.2 There has been a reduction in the length of committee agendas and numbers of referral requests by Town and Parish Councils.
- 3.3 For the three committees in the period December 2003 – February 2004 the average number of planning applications considered at each meeting was 45 with a maximum number in December 2003 of 52 items. For the same period this year (December 04 – February 05) the average number of planning applications considered at each committee was 27 with a maximum in February 2005 of 28 items. This indicates a reduction on average of 18 items on each agenda.
- 3.4 The number of referrals has also reduced from an average of 34 items (December 03 – February 04) to 18 items (December 04 – February 05). This information is shown the table in Appendix A

3.5 From this analysis there are clear indications that the new procedure is having an influence on committee referrals and that there has been a significant reduction in the length of agendas and numbers of cases. It is not however possible to be categorical that this reduction simply relates to the new procedure as there may be other factors involved including the types of applications that are being considered. The picture will become clearer as the procedure becomes more established and if the trend towards a reduction in agenda lengths remains.

4. COMMENTS MADE BY TOWN AND PARISH COUNCILS AS PART OF THE REVIEW

4.1 As part of this review the views of the Town and Parish Councils have been sought. 23 of the 37 of the Town and Parish Councils had responded by the end of the consultation period.

4.2 With one exception there is general consensus that the procedure is a good step forward and there is positive support for its continuation.

4.3 A number of other comments have been made:-

- There should be more time to respond.
- Briefing notes should be sent with the planning application and not afterwards.
- More details of policies and numbers should be included.
- There should be a simpler response proforma and an opportunity to suggest conditions.
- Whilst there has been limited use of the site visit and committee attendance part of the procedure they should continued to be offered.
- Site visit/committee referral request forms need not be included with every application.
- The briefing notes should be typed.
- Some would like electronic exchange of information whilst others prefer the briefing notes to be posted.
- The procedure should be reviewed every 6 months

5. PROPOSED REVISIONS TO THE PROCEDURE

5.1 The positive response of the Town and Parish Councils is welcomed and the liaison procedure should be continued.

5.2 Whilst the points raised about timescales are acknowledged it is not possible to extend the time given for the Town and Parish Councils to respond due to the need to determine planning applications within target. Similarly it would not be appropriate to delay sending planning applications until the briefing notes have been prepared and in any case the overall time for response could not be extended for the reasons already stated.

5.3 A number of changes are proposed to refine the system in response to comments made by the Town and Parish Councils and the development control staff involved in the operation of the procedure.

- i. Briefing notes should identify “principal policy issues” only and not all policies. They should give details of these policies and how they relate to the proposal. General policies should not be included. This will enable the key policies to be clearly identified and help to focus on them.
- ii. The standard proforma for response should be retained and sent with each planning application. No amendments are proposed to this form. It is difficult to simplify the form if it is to give a clear indication of the Town and Parish Councils views. There is the opportunity to add conditions if appropriate in the “comments” box at the bottom of the form.
- iii. The facility for a Town or Parish Council to request a site visit or attendance at a committee should be retained as it is a worthwhile part of the procedure. It is not however proposed to send site visit request forms with each planning application. The Town and Parish Councils will be provided with a supply of request forms for their use.
- iv. A typed version of the briefing note will be produced in future. This will make it easier to prepare, easier to read and more professional in appearance.
- v. The briefing notes will continue to be sent by post. Whilst some Town and Parish Councils would welcome the briefing notes by e-mail it is inefficient for us to have two different methods of sending the briefing notes at this time. However, when the new computer system is in place and to meet our e-planning requirements all briefing notes will be sent by e-mail and placed on the web-site. It is anticipated that this will be in operation by April 2006.
- vi. This initial review has been done in order to iron-out inevitable issues associated with introducing any new procedure. In future the procedure will be reviewed on an annual basis.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 On going commitment, through future allocations of planning delivery grant money, to retain temporary staff who have enabled this new procedure to operate effectively.

7. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 Investment in the planning service is directly linked to environmental protection and enhancement, as well as promoting economic and social well-being.

8. CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 None

9. CONSULTATION

- 9.1 There has been consultation with the Parish and Town Councils on the original procedure and on the changes they would like to see as part of this review.

10. PORTFOLIO HOLDER COMMENTS

- 10.1 Councillor Wyeth (Chairman of Planning Development Control Committee) is very pleased with the positive reaction from the Town and Parish Councils and knows from her own experience that Lyndhurst Parish Council find it useful. On this basis the resources to continue the scheme will need to be found when Planning Delivery grant is no longer available.

Councillor Heron Comments:

The planning process operates with a partnership between the District and Town and Parish Councils and the liaison procedure was introduced to assist Town and Parish Councils in their role in that partnership. Whilst it has not addressed all the issues raised by them it has been favourably received and is considered to be a valued service. Further to this, the reduction in the number of applications being brought forward to Development Control Committee has also provided the District Council with a significant benefit.

11. RECOMMENDATION

- 11.1 That the Cabinet notes the content of this report and agrees to the continuation of the liaison procedure as amended. The procedure will subsequently be the subject of future annual review, reported to the Chairman of the Planning Development Control Committee and the Economy and Planning Portfolio holder.

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Background papers:

None.

APPENDIX A – ANALYSIS OF COMMITTEE REFERRALS

Committee date	No of items on agenda	No. of Parish referrals *	No. of Parish & other referrals**
10 th December 2003	52	39	2
14 th January 2004	37	24	5
11 th February 2004	46	37	2
8 th December 2004	27	19	2
12 th January 2005	27	22	1
9 th February 2005	28	14	5

* Where this was the only reason for them not being delegated

** Where a contrary Parish/Town Council view was only one of the reasons for referral