

**Wigan and St Helens Joint Building Control and Development Control
Service Users Forum Eighth Meeting**

9.00am – Wednesday, 3 August 2005 – The Arena, Robin Park, Wigan



Present:

Paul Swift	Wigan Council – Planning and Regeneration
George Parkinson	St Helens Council
Penny McGinty	Wigan Council – Planning and Regeneration
Dan Murphy	Wigan Council – Planning and Regeneration
David Hallam	St Helens Council
Kevan Williams	United Utilities
P T Ball	Peter T Ball – Architects
Mike Allen	Richards Design
Bill Wadeson	W R Wadeson Design Services
Brian Rimmer	Wigan Council – Community Protection
Mark Copeland	Architectural Services
John Copeland	Architectural Services
George Broomes	Building Design
Tim Smith	ALG Investments
John Mann	Wigan Council – Building Control
Kathryn Barker	Wigan Council – Planning and Regeneration
Michael Jones	Wigan Council – Planning and Regeneration
Bill Pye	Pye Design
Malcolm Cawley	Cawley Design Services
Richard Percy	Steven Abbott Associates
Simon Wallis	MCK Partnership Limited
Stephen Kay	MCK Partnership Limited
Gordon Nash	Nash Building Consultants Limited
Geoff Clark	CPC Planning Consultants
Chris Waring	Environment Agency
Dawn Hewitt	Environment Agency
Andy Houghton	Helena Housing
Julie Clark	Clark Planning Consultants
Nigel Smith	Bellway Homes Limited (Manchester Design)
Chris Weetman	St Helens Council
Dave Melling	Wigan Council – Planning and Regeneration

Apologies

Arthur Hallworth

Allen Group

Action

1. **Minutes of meeting held 27 January 2005 – Noted and agreed as accurate**
2. **Matters arising**
 - i) The process which will enable planning applications to be viewed on line is likely to be available in both Wigan and St Helens by 1 October 2005.
 - ii) In response to a request by Peter Ball for foundation information on dwellings approved by NHBC, Paul Swift reported that he had been informed by NHBC that this information was not held in a format in which it could be provided to enquirers.
 - iii) In response to the enquiry by Geoff Clark, regarding the inspection of letters submitted by the public in response to applications which were to be decided under delegated powers, Dave Melling reported that an open file policy is shortly to be introduced in Wigan which should meet this requirement.
 - iv) With regard to the responses to pre-application enquiries, Dave Melling advised that a performance indicator has now been included in the Service Plan which measures response times on pre-application enquiries.
3. **Presentation on Access for all document by Wigan Planning and Regeneration Department Access Officer, Kathryn Barker**

This document encourages Forum Members and others to consider access issues at the earliest possible stage of the design process. The document describes the Access Design Chain and gives website links to further advice available on the internet and Wigan Council website. Comments were requested from Forum Members on the document.

Agents
to note

A supplementary planning document will be prepared in Wigan on Access issues. This will include the concept of access statements which Kathryn briefly introduced.

During discussion Geoff Clarke and Nigel Smith enquired about any differences of approach between Development Control and Building Control with regard to access issues. Kathryn explained that it is important not to adopt a too simplistic approach and emphasised that the detail of access arrangements could impact on the planning position and optimum design solution.

Particularly in larger developments there may be access issues which are not covered by the Building Regulations. These would involve providing an accessible environment as well as an accessible building.

Julie Clark recognised that the implications for planning may well go beyond the Building Regulation requirements. Kathryn agreed that this may be the case but that access statements should include wider issues.

Nigel Smith asked that procedures remained as simple as possible as there was now an emphasis on front-loading planning procedures.

Kathryn Barker provided samples of an information pack on the Disability Discrimination Act, further copies of which can be provided by the Department on request.

Agents
to note

4. Design and Access Statements for Outline Planning Permission

Dave Melling introduced this extract from a much larger consultation document published by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. The document makes it clear that in the future it is the Government's intention to require that all planning applications other than those for householder and other minor development should be accompanied by a combined access and design statement. It was explained that it is also the Government's intention to expand the concept of outline planning permission to include additional reserved matters and to require additional information to explain proposals at the outline stage. It is currently unknown when these changes will come into effect.

Agents
to note

5. Presentation by David Hallam, Urban Designer at St Helens on New Design Guidance

David introduced the now imminent St Helens design guide and explained the stages of the design process which it advocates:

1. Background research and appraisal.
2. Developing a design concept.
3. Formulating and refining detailed proposals.

David explained that it is crucial to understand the context of the area within which the site is situated.

Bill Pye expressed the view that design can be a personal matter and he would be concerned if guidance were used inappropriately. David Hallam explained that the main focus of the guide is not to be prescriptive but to encourage the use of the design process.

Geoff Clark was concerned that this would be another document which planning staff would need to absorb and that this would take time.

David Hallam explained that staff training will be provided to improve their skill level.

Geoff Clark agreed that design and development briefs can be very useful on major sites and Chris Weetman agreed.

Julie Clark welcomed the guide as a positive move and agreed that training of staff would be very useful.

6. **Wigan's Draft Shop Front Design Guide**

Penny McGinty introduced this guide which is currently out for consultation and the views of Forum members were requested.

Agents to note

The guide covers access arrangements to shops, security and signage. Geoff Clark welcomed the guide as a positive measure which could help to deal with inappropriate roller shutters which can be highly inappropriate.

Peter Ball enquired whether it could be applied also in St Helens. Penny McGinty replied that the principles would be applicable in other locations outside Wigan but it was important to look at the context within which the site was located.

7. **Wigan's Draft Design Guide to Residential Development**

A note was circulated indicating the purpose and content of this guide which is to be published on 15 August 2005 for consultation.

Agents to note

8. **Wigan's Draft Supplementary Planning Documents for Open Space in Housing Developments and Financial Contributions and for Landscaping Design Submissions**

Both these documents are now out for consultation until 15 August 2005.

Agents to note

Julie Clarke was interested in how the guidance relating to contributions for open space would be applied in relation to developments as small as one new dwelling.

Penny McGinty replied that, where possible, Wigan would endeavour to use planning conditions which had the effect of requiring a Legal Agreement to be entered into regarding the payment.

9. **Wigan's Development Control/Building Control Newsletter**

A copy of this second edition of the Newsletter was circulated and favourably received by the Forum.

It was explained that the articles had been written by individual members of staff within the Building Control and Development Control teams.

10. **Changes of Staff and New Planning Guidance in St Helens**

Chris Weetman explained he has now been appointed as Head of Development Services and that his position as Head of Development Control will be taken up by Mark Dickens, previously with Chester City Council.

The St Helens Local Development Framework Document is expected to be issued for consultation on 8 August 2005 and it can be viewed on the website. There is also new information on the website in relation to Development Control and Building Control.

Agents
to note

Chris explained that St Helens have signed up to Team Knowledge which provides an interactive page on the website which enables enquirers to determine whether planning permission and Building Regulation approval is required for their particular proposals.

11. **Development Control Performance in Wigan and St Helens**

Information was circulated showing the performance of the two Development Control teams for the three quarters of the year ending 30 June 2005.

Geoff Clark enquired about appeal performance and Chris Weetman commented that it is not the policy in St Helens to refuse schemes merely in order to meet timetable targets.

Geoff Clark was also concerned that requests for additional information were sometimes not made until the application was five or six weeks old. This then left very little time for information to be provided before the eight week determination period ended.

Chris Weetman emphasised that planners are often waiting for consultee responses before requesting additional information or clarification.

Brian Rimmer explained how Community Protection Department in Wigan had changed their procedures to respond more speedily to consultations on planning applications.

12. **Charter Mark Success in Wigan**

The Forum was informed of the Charter Mark award for Building Control and Development Control in Wigan. Paul Swift thanked George Broomes, Norman Lowe, Colin Brogan, Richard Percy and Tim Smith for assisting with the assessment and meeting the assessor.

13. **High Hedges Up-date**

Dave Melling and Chris Weetman explained that both Wigan and St Helens are now dealing with High Hedges complaints and both authorities have adopted the same £500 fee level.

14. **Changes to Class A3 of the Use Classes Order**

A copy of the report considered by Wigan Planning Committee was circulated which explains how this Use Class has now been sub-divided to include classes A4 and A5 which relate to drinking establishments and hot foot takeaways respectively.

Agents to note

15. **Government Proposals for Standard Planning Application Forms**

Forum members were advised that the Government is rapidly moving towards a national suite of standard application forms covering each type of application submitted to Local Planning Authorities. A detailed consultation document has been issued.

Agents to note

16. **Pre-application discussions with Officers, Members and Local Residents**

This item was requested by Nigel Smith of Bellway Homes. He stressed that pre-application discussions are of vital importance to developers. Therefore the training of case officers is essential to ensure that relevant issues are identified and discussed at the pre-application stage. Nigel was not critical of officers in Wigan or St Helens. He would like to have the confidence that the case officer's views will be followed through the application process. Dave Melling explained that applications often give rise to considerable discussion and debate within the Planning Department and Nigel should understand that, on occasion, the views of senior officers may well depart from more junior colleagues.

With regard to pre-application consultations with residents and members, Nigel Smith said he would prefer to discuss the appropriate way forward with officers and obtain their advice before launching into consultation exercises.

Chris Waring of the Environment Agency said that he was happy to have pre-application discussions with applicants and agents and that these were beneficial.

Agents to note

Geoff Clark enquired about the promptness of replies to pre-application enquiries and was informed that this is now a performance indicator in Wigan's Service Plan.

17. **Results of Neighbour Satisfaction Surveys in Wigan and St Helens**

Officers briefly reported on the outcome of these surveys which were of 1000 people who had been informed of planning applications in each authority.

It was clear from the survey that most people notified were satisfied with the procedures and that letters from the Planning Department were the most common way that people found out about applications. In Wigan, over 70% of respondents who inspected plans did so at their local library which indicates the importance of this service. However, less than half of respondents did not look at the application plans before deciding whether or not to comment. Over 80% of visitors to the Planning Office in Wigan were happy with the information provided. Three quarters of respondents indicated that they wanted to be kept informed of the application and advised of the decision. However, less than a third of respondents actually submitted any comments regarding an application. It is currently the policy in Wigan that only those people who submit written representations are informed of the decision. This is probably an approach which needs further thought.

DM

There was discussion of the main points raised by the survey.

18. **Other Development Control Business**

i) Malcolm Cawley enquired whether the letterbox at the Wigan office could be made larger to facilitate deposit of bulky packages.

DM

ii) Brian Rimmer from Community Protection outlined that the new provisions of the Licensing Act may have implications for Forum members because some landlords are applying for opening hours which exceed those permitted by planning permissions. Forum members found this of interest.

Agents to note

iii) Geoff Clark commented that the submission of planning applications via the planning portal tended to be a tedious process which wasted a considerable amount of paper.

WH

19. **Building Control Performance in Wigan**

Paul Swift advised the Forum of a number of performance details for the last financial year. During 2004/5 Wigan Building Control had received 3002 applications, a 22% increase on the previous year and a 58% increase on the 2002/3 figure. They carried out some 9040 site visits. Plan check performance was improving over the year with 75% of all applications checked within 2 months, although the 3 week plan check performance is rather low at around 26%. Paul said that he intended to address this as part of this year's Service Plan. Costs per application remain low compared to surrounding authorities.

Paul also referred to the customer survey that is carried out at completion stage and was pleased to announce that the vast majority of replies are favourable. 92% of householders were satisfied with the time to process their applications and 96% had a positive impression of the service.

PWS

20. **Building Control Performance in St Helens**

George Parkinson reported that St Helens Building Control had received 1600 application in the last financial year, this was a 14% increase on the previous year and a 53% increase over the previous 2 year period. He was most pleased to report that 91% of all applications had been checked within 10 working days. Applications received in 2004/05 had a construction value of £80m, a 9% increase on the previous year.

21. **Building Regulation Changes**

Paul Swift gave a brief summary of changes over the last year including Parts A, C, M and P. He also advised the Forum that the ODPM issued their consultation document on Part B Fire Safety on 19 July. This document (some 700 pages) suggests a number of changes. Paul briefly highlighted some of these:

PWS

- Document to be in 2 parts, domestic and non-domestic buildings.
- Greater emphasis on smoke and heat alarms.
- A requirement to provide alarms in the main or largest bedroom.
- Removal of the requirement for self closers to fire doors in dwellings (other than to doors between a garage and the house or doors separating the common areas of apartments).
- Removal of current requirements for loft conversions in houses in favour of the provision of a fully protected stairway (FD20 doors throughout).
- Consideration of sprinklers, apartment buildings with floors above 7.5m and in residential care homes.
- Requirements for fire stopped cavity barriers around windows.

Changes proposed for non domestic buildings include:

- Omission of fire fighting shafts in storage buildings, introduction of more shafts in assembly and recreation use buildings.
- Resolve the disparity of Local Acts on warehouse buildings by setting a national limit of 440,000m³ before requiring sprinkler protection. (Greater Manchester Act and Merseyside Act currently consider this at 7000m³).
- Discount phased evacuation in buildings (this will heave the effect of requiring more stairways in tall buildings).
- Greater requirements for fire mains.
- Application of National boundaries between industrial buildings on the same site.
- Requirements that all corridors in warehouse buildings are at least half hour fire resisting.
- Changes to early warning requirements in raised storage areas.
- Requirement to pass on information on a building's fire engineering design to the owner/ occupier and to subsequent owners and occupiers.

Paul was still considering the full extent of the proposed changes and will report further at the next meeting.

PWS

He went on to refer to other changes proposed to Part L which had been expected to be released in mid-July but as yet have not been confirmed. Paul has been involved with meetings at the ODPM offices on behalf of RICS over these and suggested they will be quite radical. There is concern that the technical content of the new requirements may require independent certification by recognised experts for larger commercial buildings. Proposed changes include removal of the current Elemental Method of determining compliance with reliance on a Carbon Emission Rating for all buildings. Part F (Ventilation) will also be revised as ventilation matters have a considerable impact on thermal efficiency.

22. **Quality Awards in Wigan**

Paul Swift advised the Forum that Wigan are pleased to confirm they have secured sponsorship from Modus Properties and the first annual Built In Quality and Urban Design Awards ceremony will take place on 3 October at the Investment Centre, Waterside Drive, Wigan. The awards form part of a co-ordinated initiative to improve the quality of design and development within the Borough.

PWS

Categories in the Built In Quality Award will follow the Local Authority Building Control (LABC) national awards format with awards for small domestic (extensions and alterations), housing schemes and commercial and industrial buildings. Winners of the Wigan awards will be entered into the LABC national awards scheme the following year. The Urban Design Awards will consider categories of individual new building or group of buildings, conversion/conservation/refurbishment, environmental quality including landscaping, street furniture and public spaces.

PWS

23. **Should the Forum be expanded to include other neighbouring Districts?**

Views were requested from the Forum on the possibility of inviting other authorities to take part. There was general agreement that the Forum currently works well encouraging meaningful dialog between all parties. There was a suggestion that an increase in participants from other local authorities could result in the session simply becoming a mechanism for the councils to tell members what they were doing without time for the interaction we currently enjoy. Forum agreed to remain with current membership.

24. **Any Other Business**

None.

25. **Next meeting**

Dave Melling suggested we remain at Robin Park and meet in February rather than January so that the following meeting avoids peak holiday time. The Forum agreed that this venue is very accessible and welcomed the suggestion.