

## **Planning Committee Review Sub-Committee – 23 March 2006**

---

Minutes of the meeting of the **Planning Committee Review Sub-Committee** held on **23 March 2006** when there were present:-

Chairman: Cllr M G B Starke

Cllr T G Cutmore  
Cllr K H Hudson  
Cllr A J Humphries

Cllr R A Oatham  
Cllr Mrs M S Vince

### **VISITING MEMBERS**

Cllrs Mrs S A Harper, C A Hungate and D G Stansby.

### **OFFICERS PRESENT**

S Scrutton	- Head of Planning Services
S Worthington	- Committee Administrator
K Kersley	- Administrative Assistant, Committee Section

### **ALSO PRESENT**

Mr G Percival, Political Reporter, Evening Echo

## **4 MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 7 February 2006 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

## **5 CONSULTATION WITH THE LOCAL PRESS**

The Chairman welcomed Mr G Percival, Political Reporter of the Evening Echo, to the meeting. Mr Percival had been invited to provide Members with a local press perspective of the operation of the Planning Services Committee.

Mr Percival advised the Sub-Committee that, prior to the establishment of Rochford District Council in 1974, meetings of the Rochford Rural District Council were open to the public, but this could only be achieved by having all Members sitting on the Committee, an arrangement that continued after re-organisation.

Mr Percival believed that the two issues that were of major importance to any resident were Council Tax and whether or not someone was going to build something where they lived.

Mr Percival had over 40 years' journalistic experience of Local Authority Planning meetings and it was his belief that Rochford's performance with respect to planning has been outstanding over many years. He felt that the Authority's Planning Services Committee was one of the most effective and

efficient he had encountered and he would not wish to see any changes. As a result of the Council's scheme of delegation with respect to planning, fewer planning applications went to the Planning Services Committee for determination, than was the case with many other Authorities. The Planning Services Committee only considered major planning applications. Members did, however, retain the right to refer any items from the Weekly List to the Planning Services Committee.

It was Mr Percival's view that a smaller Planning Committee worked well in urban areas, but that in rural areas, such as the Rochford District, a smaller Committee would struggle to be fully representative of the whole District. He had experienced instances in other Local Authorities, with smaller Planning Committees, when some Councillors suffered discontent that they weren't able to vote on major planning applications. Conversely, he felt it was important that Rochford Councillors were able to vote on all important planning items.

Parish and Town Councils, in addition, had an opportunity to speak on any major planning applications at the Planning Services Committee. He felt that the Ashingdon Hall application had demonstrated the value of this approach. In conclusion, he believed that Rochford Members, by and large, demonstrated a better knowledge of planning matters than many colleagues in other Authorities.

In response to a Member enquiry relating to training for Councillors, Mr Percival confirmed that, in his view, planning training was essential for Members. He believed that Rochford Councillors appeared to have a good grounding in planning processes.

Responding to a further Member query as to whether or not Councillors should relinquish their right to vote in order to represent their residents on large planning applications, Mr Percival advised that Councillors should be able to represent their residents on planning applications and also vote. He did not perceive that Councillors faced a conflict of interest in instances where they, on one hand sat on a Committee that made a policy decision and then sat on a Committee that then applied the policy. Policies were often referred to full Council, in any event. In his view it was laudable that Members, through involvement in developing policies, had a good understanding of them. He also believed that the Local Development Framework would result in less potential for any conflict of interest, given that there would be less Member involvement, and more community involvement in the process.

Officers confirmed, in answer to a Member enquiry about delegated planning decisions, that the Government encouraged Local Planning Authorities to adopt a great degree of delegation. However, in the case of the Rochford District, there had been a high level of delegated planning decisions since the early 80s. Approximately 90% of planning applications were determined under delegated authority to officers, including those applications reported through the Weekly List.

Mr Percival advised that, in the case of most Local Authorities, applications that appeared on the Weekly List would go forward to the Planning Committee for determination rather than being delegated to officers.

Responding to a Member enquiry relating to delegation, officers confirmed that Local Authorities found it difficult to recruit skilled, qualified planning officers. This Authority had accordingly been seeking to attract graduates with no planning background and sending them on postgraduate courses in an attempt to build up planning expertise in the Council. In response to a supplementary query relating to the criteria for delegation, officers advised that Planning officers followed the scheme of delegations, set out in the Council's Constitution, rather than being driven by a need to achieve a certain percentage of delegations. Mr Percival also confirmed that he could not recall ever receiving a complaint from a member of the public relating to a planning application having been determined under delegated authority rather than by the Planning Services Committee.

One Member made reference to the poor attendance by Members at planning site visits. One Member expressed the view that Members should go on planning site visits for all major planning applications. Another Member voiced the opinion that Members should make an effort to go to see application sites independently, if unable to attend the organised site visits. Members also believed that there would be merit in more photographic evidence being made available at Planning Services Committee meetings.

Another Member was of the opinion that planning site visits were essential, particularly accompanied visits where someone was on hand to talk Members through the specifics of the particular application. It would also be worthwhile for those Members unable to attend an organised site visit to be issued with some fact sheets outlining the site location and any particular points of conflict. The view was also expressed that Members making independent planning site visits should be able to claim mileage allowance.

### **6 REVIEW OF PLANNING SERVICES COMMITTEE – PROGRESS REPORT**

The Sub-Committee considered the report of the Head of Planning Services on arrangements for visits to other Local Authorities, for the organisation of a focus group and for public speaking at the Planning Services Committee.

#### **Public Speaking at the Planning Services Committee**

Appendix 2 to the officer's report comprised a draft public speaking protocol, outlining arrangements for members of the public to speak at meetings of the Planning Services Committee. Members endorsed the protocol, with the proviso that the third paragraph from the bottom on page 7.6 should be re-worded for the sake of clarity.

In response to a Member enquiry relating to Parish Councils, officers

confirmed that it was proposed that Parish Councils would continue to retain the right to speak on major applications at meetings of the Planning Services Committee. It was noted, in addition, that there was currently no time limit for Parish Councillors speaking at the Planning Services Committee.

During debate, the following points were noted:-

- A time limit of 3 minutes for Parish Councillors to address the Committee would be advisable, but it was likely to be difficult to enforce.
- Members of the public should be informed that there would be limited time available for them to speak at the Committee. It was essential that this time should be strictly enforced. It would be necessary for the Chairman to make an announcement early on in the meeting reminding all members of the public of the practical arrangements for public speaking during the meeting.
- There would be merit in exploring the possibility of projecting a digital clock on screen in the Council Chamber that would visually count down the time for each public speaker.
- The addendum to the Planning Schedule should be made available to all public speakers on arrival at the Council Chamber.
- Consideration would need to be given to the possibility of public speakers having access to one of the Chamber microphones.

### **Focus Group on the Operation of the Planning Services Committee**

It was noted that the consultants suggested that two separate focus groups be run, both with members from the citizens panel, one for those who had had experience of how the planning system operated, and one for those who had no such knowledge.

Members concurred that, given that there was funding available within identified budgets for the work, that it was important that this work be commissioned, so that it could be clearly demonstrated that members of the public were consulted.

In response to Member enquiries relating to recruitment for the groups and their operation, officers advised that the consultants would be responsible for recruitment, liaising closely with officers, and that the consultants would devise a series of questions to be addressed to both focus groups designed to elicit the required information.

It was further noted that it was not usual for Members to observe focus group sessions, as there was the possibility that debate could be influenced by their attendance. It was important that the groups should be operated independently by the consultants to ensure that completely independent views emerged from the process.

### Visits to Local Authorities

It was noted that arrangements were in place for Members of the Sub-Committee to visit East Cambridgeshire District Council on 5 April and Brentwood Borough Council on 12 April in order to observe the operation of their Planning Committees.

### Resolved

- (1) That the arrangements for the site visits to East Cambridgeshire District Council and Brentwood Borough Council be confirmed.
- (2) That the arrangements for the focus groups, as outlined in Appendix 1 to the officer's report, be agreed.
- (3) That the draft public speaking protocol be endorsed by the Sub-Committee, subject to the wording of the third paragraph from the bottom on page 7.6 being amended, for clarification purposes. (HPS)

The meeting closed at 12.03 pm.

Chairman .....

Date .....