

REVIEW OF PLANNING SERVICES COMMITTEE

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report outlines progress to date on the review of the operation of the Planning Services Committee and summarises the main issues requiring a decision.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Reports to this Committee on the 20th September and 18th October 2005 provided detailed statistical information about the operation of the Planning Services Committee and comparisons to the arrangements operated in other Authorities in the Audit Commission Family Group. Copies of both reports are appended.
- 2.2 Two specific actions have arisen from these reports. First, a survey of Parish Councils seeking their views on the operation of the committee and second a survey of Rochford's Members to ascertain whether any Members prefer not to sit on the Planning Committee. A verbal report on the outcome of both surveys will be presented to the meeting.

3 ISSUES TO CONSIDER

Size of the Planning Committee

- 3.1 Members will recall that the final reports of the Best Value Review of Rochford's Development Control and Building Control and the comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) both recommended a reduction in the size of the Planning Committee.
- 3.2 In the final report of a Best Value Review at East Hampshire, the following comments were made that reflect the Audit Commission's latest views on the operation of a Planning Committee. In East Hampshire there are two Area Committees. However, the similarity with Rochford is that all Councillors sit on one or the other Area Committee; hence all members have an involvement in the planning decision making process. The comments from East Hampshire's report are examined in a little detail as they do provide a pointer to the matters that will need to be resolved to conclude this review. To quote directly from the East Hampshire report -
- *Currently all 44 councillors sit on one of two Area Planning Committees. Consequently ward members involved in planning committee are prohibited from getting involved at a ward level in planning issues because of their membership of the planning committee. A smaller planning committee would be more dynamic, less bureaucratic and allow councillors more flexibility to represent their wards freely.*

- *It would also allow for the substitution of councillors if they are unable to attend and would ensure that the full planning committee would always be present and improve the credibility of the committee.*
 - *There is poor attendance at some planning committee meetings. This leaves customers with the impression that councillors do not place a high level of importance or commitment to the planning function, contrary to councillors' intentions.*
 - *The knowledge and understanding of planning issues is variable among councillors. Some councillors appear well informed and follow appropriate procedures. However, other councillors do not focus on planning issues or inform the debate appropriately. It is clear that although training opportunities are offered to councillors these are not always actively taken up. A mandatory training scheme is considered to be best practice and ensures that the democratic debate adds value to the planning process.*
 - *The involvement of all councillors in planning committee decisions means that those councillors serving on the Cabinet are involved in both formulating Council policy and in making regulatory decisions. This is not best practice and can leave Cabinet members at risk of challenge due to the potential for conflict between these two distinct roles.*
 - *The Council allows a representative of the applicant, objectors and parish council to address the planning committee during the debate. This is welcomed by customers and enables the councillors to ensure that their decisions take account of local representative's views.*
 - *The council's planning service is also more costly per person than other similar councils with a cost of £17,505 per 1,000 people compared to an average of £13,320 per 1,000 people. This additional cost could be reduced by improved efficiencies and a reduction in non-fee-earning work generated unnecessarily.*
- 3.3 Other than a straightforward reduction in the size of the committee other ideas that Members might consider include selecting a smaller committee prior to each meeting to reflect the relevant ward members plus other Members dependant on availability. Such an arrangement would of course be complicated, but would enable Members not sitting on a particular committee to act as advocates for their electorate if they choose to do so.
- 3.4 The Audit Commission's response to East Hampshire suggests that a smaller committee would be, "more dynamic, less bureaucratic and allow councillors more flexibility to represent their wards freely". Members will need to consider these comments which are as close as the Audit Commission will come to justifying their view on the size of the committee.

Role of Non-Members if the size of the committee is reduced?

- 3.5 This is discussed in the comments above, but is an important consideration.

Effectiveness of a Smaller Committee

- 3.6 The Audit Commission makes various points about the effectiveness of an all Member committee in East Hampshire and Members will need to consider these matters. The Audit Commission particularly refers to a concern that councillors do not focus on planning issues or inform debate appropriately.

Public Speaking

- 3.7 In East Hampshire, the Council is commended by the Audit Commission for allowing a representative of the applicant, objectors and Parish Council to address the Planning Committee.

Other Matters

- 3.8 In addition to the points commented on, other matters that need to be considered include:
- operating costs (note: costs information will be available at the meeting)
 - arrangements for site visits
 - procedures for deferment
 - compulsory training
 - other options for operational improvements.

4 RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The review of the operation of the Planning Services Committee is in response to the CPA. The timetable requires the review to be complete and operational by June 2006.

5 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 None at this stage.

6 RECOMMENDATION

- 6.1 It is proposed that the Committee considers the issues outlined in the report and deliberates on the options for the future operation of the Rochford Planning Services Committee.

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Background Papers:-

Best Value Review of the Planning Service in East Hampshire, September 2005.

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