

PLANNING SERVICES

Report from research
carried out on behalf of
Rochford District Council

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Rochford District Council is reviewing the operation of its Planning Committee. Currently, this comprises all 39 members of the authority, an arrangement that has been in place for 40 years. The Council is unusual in this respect; nearly all other Councils have adopted the smaller committee size of 12-15 members in recent years. This has been noted by the Audit Commission that has been critical of the Council's unwillingness to contemplate a change in the size of the committee. A review has been underway since Autumn 2005, with papers presented to the Council by officers that include the Audit Commission commentary on another Council that has full membership. Members believe it would be useful to gather views of residents to add evidence to the debate on the future of the size of the Committee.

The specific objectives are to investigate:

- Attitudes towards the delivery of the planning service in Rochford;
- Residents' understanding of the process, and the role and limitations placed on members by being part of the committee;
- Views on the operation and benefits/disadvantages of an all-member committee versus a small committee;
- Whether residents would see advantages in being able to ask non-members of a small committee to lobby on their behalf;
- Whether having all members, despite the limitations, is a better arrangement.

1.2 Methodology

The research study was based on qualitative methodology. Qualitative research is evaluative in nature gaining insights of depth into issues that are important to participants, and the reasons why they hold their opinions. Typically qualitative research is based on individual depth interviews, or interviews with 2-3 people, or – as in this case – group discussions with 7-9 people in each group. Qualitative research is used where we need to find out the underlying reasons behind peoples' opinions and beliefs and the range of

beliefs held. How widespread agreement is with each of those beliefs and opinions would be collected using a statistically robust sample through a quantitative survey, which has not been commissioned on this occasion.

In this project RBA were commissioned to conduct two focus groups, each containing nine residents from the Rochford area drawn from the Council's citizen's panel. The panel database was provided to the research agency by the Council. RBA randomised the database and then recruited from the database contacts according to the quota being filled for each group, as shown below.

The first of group (referred to in this report as the 'experienced' group) was recruited from residents on the panel who had previously been involved in some aspect of planning in the Rochford district, such as submitting a planning application of their own or opposing a development in their local area. The second (the 'inexperienced' group) comprised residents on the panel with no personal experience of planning issues in Rochford but who had, in many cases, taken some interest in high-profile community planning matters they had read about in the local press or become aware of near to their homes. This quota control was deliberately chosen to reflect the fact that Rochford has a significantly different approach to the committee structure than other Councils.

Ensuring a broad spectrum of opinion, each group included a wide range of ages, from residents in their twenties through to those in their seventies. It should be noted, however, that no females below the age of 40 agreed to take part in either session. Younger men (one in his 20s, two in their 30s, all in two adult households) did agree and attend. It cannot be concluded from this that younger women do not make applications on their own behalf, or take an interest in planning matters, or that in young, two adult households it is the man that takes such decisions. The research sample is too small to draw such conclusions.

The gender balance was even, as was the split between participants residing in rural and urban parts of Rochford District Council geographical area. During the discussion, the experienced group tended to focus on domestic planning issues, many arising from their own experience, while the inexperienced group looked to cases with a wider community focus, such as those involving local supermarkets, hospitals, airports, and undeveloped

or abandoned buildings. The latter group had no experience of domestic applications or objections in Rochford, although one had experience elsewhere in the country.

Whilst there was no quota control on ownership and usage of computers, and usage of the internet, the findings were striking and should be noted for future communications campaigns and information dissemination. Five out of nine people in the 'inexperienced' group used computers either at work or at home, and four of these had access to the internet over broadband. None of the four had been on the Council website. Amongst the 'experienced' group, nearly all used computers, most had access to the internet and five had been on the Council's website – usually drawn in either professionally or through notification in the Council Tax demand and being given a password. Only two had been on the Planning Department pages but found them difficult to navigate.

The group participants were guided through a general discussion of planning issues towards a focused examination of their understanding of departmental planning procedures and responsibilities. RBA's moderator displayed prompt material in the form of showcards quoting policy, the wording of which was taken directly from publicly available documents on the Council website (see appendices). A representative from the Planning Department was present to offer clarification and explanation of points of detail where necessary, clear up any misunderstandings and answer related questions. The representative observed but did not take part in the group discussions.

2 MAIN FINDINGS

2.1 Residents' understanding of planning policies, procedures and timings

The level of knowledge about the Council's Planning Department, the Planning Committee and planning policies is low, with most residents having only a limited understanding of procedures, typically restricted to that relating to their own experiences.

"Are local Councillors allowed to attend this (the Planning Committee)? Would they be the people that represent your view?" Experienced

This means that the 'experienced' group, or those that have had experience in other areas of the country of planning matters, tend to feed back their own experience.

"I just remember engaging an architect, and applied everything, so he's just going back if there were issues. We didn't deal direct with the planning department." Experienced

Few participants were able to feed back the process in any detail.

"From what I remember, a planning application has to be publicly announced so that it gives the public time to respond to the application to allay any doubts and queries ... it has to go to public consultation stage. When is that?"

"21 days isn't it?"

Inexperienced

Even the experience group had very little if any real knowledge of the difference between national and local policies which could lead to over reliance on rumour and speculation, with the potential knock on effect on the corporate image of the Council.

"It is all very nice to have all those words (text on the Council website) but when you have got pressure from up above, the government saying you need x amount of new houses in an area, is that (local policy) really 100% kept to? I don't think so. They change the process to suit the application." Experienced

The 'inexperienced' group tend to have much less detailed knowledge and usually express their views in terms of wanting to be given more information about schemes with which they are concerned.

"What would they mean by 'development'?"

"I want to know what is going on around Cherry Orchard Way, like I think several of us do."

"I am very conscious of some problems with various planning applications around the Carpenter's Arms area. There are rumours of things like flats and stuff being built, possibly retail development."

"There is always something in the Echo, even if it is only once a month. It used to be called the 'Drawing Board'... The official notices, that is mainly for the domestic stuff, anything big is a news item I think, on its own." Inexperienced

There is also a limited understanding of the complementary roles of the officers and the members in this regard. Even the 'experienced' group required considerable probing to reach a differentiation between the officer and member roles.

Who actually takes the decisions?

"The Planning Department."

(Later in the group) You have mentioned the Planning Department and the committees. Are they different things or the same thing?

"I think it is just one and the same thing."

"The committee within the Planning Department." Experienced

"We wrote a letter of objection and ended up getting a petition... It gave our opinions why we didn't think it was suitable... It ended up we went to a meeting at the Council offices."

And was it an open meeting?

Yes. They represented us, really.

Who represented you?

The Councillors who we'd written too...

So when you said the Councillors represented you, what do you mean by that?

...from the Department...the person that was allocated for dealing with it, and he represented us."

So somebody was allocated to you to represent your views?

"Yes."

And he's one of the elected Members, is he?

"I can't recall that, but I think so."

Experienced group

Despite the level of detail on the website for example, few people if any have a detailed understanding of what happens, or why it happens, even if they have put in an application or an objection themselves.

"We complained to Planning through our local Councillors but the attitude was very much that because it only affected xxx and not xxx, they wouldn't take any action. So I said, 'Well, my action is I'm not going to pay you my Council tax, if you're not giving me a good service, you're not going to get nothing.' They're not bothered (about views of individual residents)." Experienced

“All I got was a letter back saying ‘We have noted your objection’ and then when it was refused they just sent a letter saying it had been refused. But there was no one-to-one, nobody rung up or anything like that. It would have been nice (to have an explanation). What I couldn’t understand is (explains re-submission on appeal that didn’t make logical sense) They wanted to build bigger.” Experienced

This level of knowledge means that residents are also often not aware of and do not always understand the stages involved in decisions, including how far along the process their own applications or objections have progressed. No one remembered having seen the flow chart that is on the website for example, when it was handed around in the group. Perhaps for these reasons, residents appear to describe their dealings with the Planning Department as *seeming* lengthy, whether or not this is actually the case in terms of weeks.

“I went to an architect to start with, because he was dealing with the main communication. My contact was when it was taking a length of time. So over-the-phone communication, just trying to chase things up when they said they were going to come back to me on certain dates, (they) hadn’t. Once you actually spoke to them they were fine, but there was no deadlines or any, you couldn’t really (put) time pressure on them.” Experienced

Participants in the ‘experienced’ group agree that the amount of detailed feedback they have received from the Council during the process is very limited, which makes the process seem even more drawn out and uncertain. In particular they expect to be told how long the process will take, where in the process they have reached, and to be given detailed reasons for any decision taken.

“If you knew what criteria they were working to...”

“What does ‘planning’ mean?”

“What were the reasons?”

“If they said ‘We granted that. We are aware of this one but we can’t do that because this was different...’

“Be more open about it.” Experienced

Because there is a general lack of understanding of policy issues, whether local or national, participants whose applications have been refused without detailed reasoning why are very surprised – particularly if in their view there is a precedent locally. There is a degree of expectation that plans *should* be approved which will be discussed in detail later in this report.

“It would be nice to see some consistency.”

“When you walk round an estate and you think ‘We were told we couldn’t do that but they have done it.’ How come it says here you can’t do it but they have already done it? Who polices it?” Experienced

2.2 Residents’ understanding of representations to decision takers

As well as being initially uncertain about who takes the decisions, residents are also uncertain as to who should represent them in their communication with the planning department, and during the decision taking process to the Committee, especially if they have an objection rather than an application. There is an underlying assumption that elected members take on this representation role on behalf of their ward residents should any dispute arise.

“You appeal to your Councillors.”

“Why did you want it here, why didn’t you want it there...”

“She said that she put the petition in through the Councillors. It’s in their interest to keep their voters happy.”

“These Councillors may well sit on the committees, and so they would have some weight.”

Experienced

In conflict with this notion, however, residents also acknowledge that members are expected to remain impartial, and even support this policy in further discussion, which was seen as a potential tension.

“I suppose it has to be unbiased, but obviously the Council is a political body, so they are only going to give you (their political slant on the issue).” Experienced

Groups differentiate between making representations, which they assume happens anyway, and some process of ‘lobbying’, which might involve moving out of the guidelines unfairly. This rests of the interpretation of the word ‘lobbying’.

“I think it depends on the application. Sometimes it would be beneficial is there is someone lobbying. The bigger the application – if they are building 100 houses that can have a greater impact on the people already within the area, it would be helpful to have someone to lobby on people in that area for us.” Experienced

“You’d get the money side coming in.”

"Yes. People getting bunged."
"Financial gain. I know they are not meant to..."
"It is undue influence." Experienced

The research findings highlight the subtle difference participants attribute to the *terms* representation (arguing my case) and lobbying (pushing up to and beyond the limit of what is allowable, perhaps unfairly). The former they take for granted will happen, the latter is often regarded as inappropriate. This is particularly important in the largest applications that impact on whole communities where rumour, whether founded or not, is easily spread.

"I wonder how much influence really does come to bear from elsewhere...I read about things in the national press as well as the local, and you begin to wonder who is pressing the buttons. I know that is very cynical."

"There is a specific Housing Association that seems to get most of the applications, most of the land purchases. They are responsible for most of the Council estate sales. Whether or not there is undue influence there, but how can you say, it looks suspicious even if it isn't suspicious because one group always seems to get it. And there is rumour that one of the applications they successfully applied for has changed its usage between the application being agreed and the object being built." Inexperienced

Using words that private citizens will understand – and checking that the public take the same meaning as is intended is very important. It is not only avoiding 'jargon' that is important but also everyday words that might have a specific meaning with reference to planning matters. Typically in these circumstances it is helpful to check any communications material for comprehension and communication *before* it is published. For example, the findings of this research show that in any communication with the public, the Council should not use the word 'lobbying' because understanding of the word is so inconsistent. A plain English explanation would be preferable instead of, or attached to the word 'lobbying'.

Thus there is a degree of uncertainty about who will represent the individual and 'fight their case' with the committee but the expectation that *someone* must be taking on this role. This is for two reasons. Firstly because of the belief that the individual is not allowed to undertake that task themselves. This, combined with the perceived lack of communication from the Department, results in individuals feeling distanced from the system and processes.

"That is the thing that everyone gets upset with, that we don't know what the guidelines are. We just look at it (applications). We are the lay people. We want to know why developments are passed." Experienced

Secondly because of the widely held belief amongst the resident participants that builders and developers have a *real* advantage over private citizens when submitting plans. This view is based on the feeling that builders "*know the system*" and are able to play it to their advantage. Such firms it is felt have more experience and money than private citizens and they are therefore better positioned than residents to make multiple applications and appeals *until their plans are approved*. The private citizen in contrast is expected either not to appeal at all or only to do so once. It is commonly believed, for instance, that developers apply for permission to build *more* premises than they actually want, in the hope that, when these plans are turned down, the Council will approve plans for a smaller number.

"I think that is why builders get more put through because they have done it more, and more times. They know what will pass and what won't."

"They know the criteria."

"You have a base guideline for everybody and then a base guideline for builders."

"Joe Public puts one in, gets refused, and it is 'Oh! Right! OK I can't do that.' Builders just keep going, and keep going, and keep going." Experienced

"All the residents were up in arms because it was rumoured that a piece of land was sold at well below market price by the Council to a firm of developers in exchange for some cash benefit coming to the Council later. Now when you talk about proper principles, is proper financial accountability part of that, or where does that come into it?" Inexperienced

If the individual themselves is not allowed to represent themselves, some participants argue that it must be one of the professionals they have contracted with, such as an architect, that will make representations on their behalf to the planning committee. However, there is discussion about whether these people *are* the most appropriate. For example, when using an architect, some participants express disappointment that plans and proposals drawn up for them are turned down by the Council. They expect that it is part of the professional responsibility of architects and others to research and keep within planning guidelines so that plans are already acceptable when submitted. On the other hand there are examples of individuals with experience who drew up their own plans (that were rejected) who later turned to professionals:

"I have been talking to a builder and he looks at my plans and he says 'No, you haven't...(detail of plan)...give them to me. I'll get them passed for you.'" Experienced

2.3 The planning decision process

Turning to the ways in which the Council deals with residents' applications, a strong feeling exists amongst both the 'experienced' and 'inexperienced' groups that planning decisions are not consistent. Residents who report having plans turned down comment that they cannot understand why similar permissions have been granted in nearby areas, either before or after their own. In the absence of any explanation they remain bewildered. In this mind set it is very easy for negative opinions about the Council to be formed because the individual is so distanced from the process, which feels 'unfair', and does not feel the Council is putting their best interests forward. A suggested method of preventing such confusion and feelings is for the planning committee to explain exactly why plans are denied, rather than simply stating that they have not been successful.

One participant with greater knowledge of domestic and business application decisions believes that any fault lies with central government for constantly changing rules and regulations, and that local Councils are effectively only trying to 'keep up'. Several people name John Prescott (at the time of the research fieldwork the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister) as a kind of 'grand adjudicator' in planning decision disputes. The belief is that eventually planning decisions go 'up' to central government, but interestingly people do not make the connection that (at least part of the) policy actually comes 'down' from central government in the first place.

2.4 Residents' views on the size and representation of the planning committee

In the research, only one out of all 18 residents (an 'experienced' participant) spontaneously guessed that the full 39 Council members currently sit on the committee. This lone voice reasoned that *"they are all voted in, and they are all Members, so perhaps that is why they should all be there having their say"*. When asked to guess the size of the current planning committee, all the other participants expected it to have less than half the full number of Councillors. Typically participants guessed less than 15

Members. 8-12 was considered what one participant described as a “*sensible*” number, with residents concerned that any more than this would make the group and its powers “*unwieldy*” in practice.

“I’d guess 8-10. It sounds a sensible number. If you have 31 (sic) people on there, it will be a free-for-all. So a standard number I would guess.” Experienced

“12 is rather a common number when it comes to committees.”

“You said there are 39, so 12 is near to a third isn’t it... That is a fair amount out of 39.”

Indeed, one ‘inexperienced’ resident suggested that six members would be a number “*small enough to be workable but large enough to ensure that all political parties were represented*”. This participant later added that the number should be odd to ensure a “*deciding*” vote.

Having collected participants’ expectations, the moderator then revealed to residents that the current committee comprises all members. The first reaction from the ‘experienced’ group is genuine surprise that all members are on the committee; the reaction of the second group, who have no experience of the committee, can only be described as one of incredulity.

“Surprise.”

“Good grief.”

“They can’t possibly meet for every planning application.”

“How many turn up?”

“A nice waste of money.” Inexperienced

This is partly due to their expectations of efficiency and effectiveness. One asked, “*How does anything ever get decided?*”, while another described such a committee as “*overloaded*”.

“The bigger the committee the less you can get to an answer.”

A balancing view given by one participant is in terms of coverage should members not turn up to meetings.

"Of course, the larger the committee the less effect personal interest will have. So you can afford to lose five or six committee members and still have a nice representation." Inexperienced

Inexperienced participants also discuss the level of interest individual members have in planning matters.

*"It doesn't matter how many sit on the committee, it is how many bother to show."
"And how many are really interested. If you are more or less dragged there, you are just going to let everything go through...."* Inexperienced

Many inexperienced participants think that it must cost more money to have a larger committee, even if this is not the case in reality. They also expect it to cost more to train a larger committee in terms of time and resource of the trainers, and expenses for the trainees. Interestingly, the 'experienced' group focused less on the cost, but more on the efficiency and effectiveness angle, and particularly on the ability of the members to fulfil the dual roles of representation and decision taking that participants expected they undertake.

"You couldn't have the same people." Experienced

After some discussion some people in both groups concluded that the size of the planning committee should not (and would not) matter if decisions are indeed *"objective and made according to proper procedures"* as laid out in Council literature. In other words it is the fairness of the planning decision taking that is the first priority, not the number of people on the committee per se. Having said that nearly all believe a full 39 membership is unnecessarily onerous and time consuming.

"So that is why it takes so long."

"All the arguing." Experienced

It should be remembered that participants believe the *role* of each individual in delivering fairness may preclude all members from sitting on the committee. In other words an individual cannot wear 'two hats' and remain able to fulfil his/her role, which in participants' minds argues against the full 39 membership.

Similarly, it is widely held that whoever is on the panel should be acting on behalf of all residents when taking decisions, not just those from their ward. In this respect residents do not consider the ward representation of members to have particular bearing on their eligibility to sit on a smaller committee. This reflects the stipulation in Council literature that members “represent the whole community in planning matters” and “must take into account all relevant views”.

“It depends on things like the definition of being ‘lobbied’...how do you define ‘relevant’?”

Inexperienced

The challenge is that this is at variance with their equally strongly held belief that an individual’s own ward member should (in lay terms) ‘represent’ the individual’s interests and case to the committee when someone is making an application. This again argues that ward members will find it difficult to wear ‘both hats’. Whilst the rules state that members represent the community interests in making decisions, the public want their ward member free to represent a citizen’s application or objection if a professional, such as an architect, does not do so. There is also much speculation about members’ ability to leave aside their political interests.

“Local people. They are the ones that are really involved, so they come up with different ideas and issues, which may be they are not important...(in comparison with more powerful representations of developers and builders).” Experienced

What are the advantages of having everybody on the committee?

“The whole wards are being represented.”

“Although it is also a disadvantage, in that, strictly speaking, the people who should be discussing planning applications are those whose constituents would be directly affected by it. It is conceivable that, although not strictly a personal interest, committee members could shift planning applications to areas which won’t affect their chances of re-election.”

Inexperienced

Interestingly it is assumed that some degree of political influence might affect planning decisions. The quasi-judicial nature of the committee in contrast to the political nature of other Council committees is not fully understood. Lay people expect that party politics must impinge because members are voted into office on party political lines. This is particularly likely to be the case, they argue, on high profile, contentious applications. Participants think it preferable that policy-making is kept separate from planning-related decision-making as far as possible, so as to ensure unbiased and impartial outcomes. In this respect, the size of the committee, they reason, will be less important than attempts

to encourage and ensure this impartiality. With impartiality in place, there is less need to attempt full representation by having all members on the committee.

"If they are working to the guidelines...then it shouldn't really matter (what the size of the committee is)." Experienced

The inexperienced group also feel that potentially being on the Planning Committee may compromise members' ability to perform if they also sit on the Standards Committee and vica versa. Participants find it difficult to understand that individual members can sit on both, if one is policing the decisions and conduct of the other.

Moderator reads out section on lobbying

"I wasn't sure what to expect."

"I am finding it quite interesting."

"It is very comprehensive, more so than I had envisaged."

"Is there an inter-governing body actively looking at the members?".....

Officer representative explains the role of the Standards Committee

....."Who are the members of this committee?".....

Officer representative explains the make up of the Standards Committee

..."I would assume the same rule applies, where if they themselves are being directly investigated, then they would not be allowed to sit on the Standards Committee because there would be a conflict of interest." Inexperienced

A popular recommendation from residents in both groups is that a smaller committee will serve for most planning decisions, with the additional option and possibility of taking particularly difficult or contentious applications to a larger (or full) committee for 'adjudication' if the outcome is likely to affect wider communities or prove particularly controversial. In this scenario there will be a three tiered approach: devolved decisions that the Head of Planning makes as present; a small committee taking the vast majority of referred decisions; the full member committee sitting for exceptionally difficult cases.

"I think if you had a major development, maybe 100 houses, then you should have all 39." Experienced

"If it is a very contentious thing, 'cos it has been reported in the press, it is referred back to the full Council meeting."

"It depends how..."

"Controversial" Inexperienced

Other comments relating to the size and constitution of the committee are as follows:

- One resident comments (and is supported by the agreement of others) that, with all members on the committee, it is possible for any one of them to attempt to influence and 'shift' certain plans outside their ward whilst not appearing to object to them in principle. This cannot happen under a small committee structure.
- An 'experienced' group member with a professional history in the trades union movement, comments that having a smaller group releases other members of the Council from the 'collective responsibility' associated with decisions ostensibly credited to the full Council. This results in members being free to express their true opinions on local planning issues.
- An 'inexperienced' group member points out that currently, those who are setting at least the local policies are the same people making the planning decisions, with the possibility that the planning policy decisions will directly affect what the individual is going to press to pass or to reject, which might put them in a difficult position.
- A popular suggestion regarding *how* committee members should be chosen if the size of the group is to be reduced is that all 39 members vote on committee membership. This ensures that party politics are kept out of election to the committee. Nevertheless it is recognised that all political parties should be represented if the committee is made smaller. Even in that context residents reaffirm the notion that political matters be prevented from having bearing on planning decisions.
- Similarly both groups expect that one person per ward should be co-opted on to a smaller committee where a ward has more than one member. This will ensure that a member is available to represent applicants' or objectors' cases, if the individual is not allowed to represent themselves, or a professional is not representing on their behalf.
- Finally it is agreed that a smaller committee would allow the membership to become more expert in the subject. The expectation is that there would be elected members who have *"some involvement in planning or building"* that should sit. *"It would be better to have 12 expert minds than 39 non-expert minds."*

At the end of the discussion each participant was asked for their preference to be fed back to the Council. The results of this very limited poll must be read in the context of what most group members understand to be the meaning of 'lobbying' – i.e. going much further than representation of an applicant's case than is the default expectation. In other words participants expect someone (Council member, officer or professional such as an architect) will represent their interests if the rules preclude the public from representing themselves. This is not the same as what they interpret as lobbying.

Experienced group:

1 vote for 39 Members: *"There are more points of view, more minds getting together."*

3 voted for a group of 10-12 with lobbying.

5 people voted for a committee of 10-12 without lobbying.

Inexperienced group:

1 voted for a committee of 39: *"Stay as it is. It is giving a say to everybody."*

1 voted for a 7 member committee with lobbying.

7 voted for a 12 member committee without lobbying.

8 out of 9 thought it would be good to have a small committee with the option to go to full 39 for the most complicated, and/or contentious applications.

2.5 Communication issues

One of the most important findings of this research has been the perceived lack of outbound communication from the Council officers and members to the public on the policies, process, applications, objections and decisions. It is not that most of this information is not disseminated at all (although it appears that reasons for decisions are not), but it is the channels of communication, the opportunities for communication, the content of communication and the language used that are the issues.

The value of effective communication between Council and public cannot be overestimated. Planning issues are one of the most complex areas that the Council deals with. It is clear from this research that participants feel 'in the dark' even when they have put in applications or objections and should be more educated in the process. Where an individual is inexperienced the sources of information that come to mind first are often not

within the control of the Council. Talking to the Planning Department is often not top of mind to the inexperienced.

Lets take the example of the possible new ASDA store. If you wanted to find out about that, what would you expect you could do in terms of finding out information or raising concerns?

“Speak to the newspapers, find out from them.”

“I suspect there is probably someone at the Council who takes questions on specific applications.” Inexperienced

In the context that only few of the experienced participants have been on the Council website, and only two on the planning pages, it is most important not to rely on putting (even plain English) explanations of the processes on the website. Relationships between the Council and the public will benefit from the Planning Department pro-actively sending information to the public through other channels, rather than expecting the public to seek information out through channels that few currently access. That is not to say that the website information should be withdrawn. On the contrary the experienced group expect the web to be used extensively. Rather, for internet users it is the communication campaign *signposting* the web content that is currently missing. The experienced group were very surprised to learn that all application transactions can take place on line, for example.

Many participants in the ‘inexperienced’ group, half of whom it will be remembered do not use the internet, comment that they would like to receive a newsletter laying out all the current plans being considered. This would not need to describe each application in detail, but act as notification of plans, and a warning to seek out the plans in greater detail if desired. Currently much of what they learn comes from editorial in the local press the ‘spin’ of which is out of the control of the Council of course. Given that the press are likely to pick up stories on high profile applications, the onus is on the Council to present information on such applications to balance communication through appropriate channels. The knock on effect of this will mean that any objections are based on fact rather than possibly speculation and rumour.

“The only planning that I am really aware of ... (is) for developing the centre of Rochford, the supermarket, the library and the rest of it. And what I know of it has come mainly from

reading the Echo. I kind of feel none of us know as much about it as we would like to.
Inexperienced

How do you find out about consultations?

"In the paper."

"On lampposts."

"It is not well advertised."

Several participants in the inexperienced group suggest using the Rochford Matters as a vehicle for the higher profile cases. Obviously that depends whether the timings fit press deadlines, but the concept of a direct mail shot into local homes, especially for the most important cases is worth considering.

"The problem with publishing them in the local press is that they're published on a day, then it is not published again, so if you don't get the paper on that day...." Inexperienced

Whilst it is generally known that 'neighbours' are notified by the Planning Department when an application is received that may affect them, there is debate about whether the definition of 'neighbours' accurately reflects the impact of a proposed plan. In other words the geographical 'footprint' of impact will be unique to each application. As one participant put it, it is not appropriate simply to draw a radius around a property and send out notifications to all within that, or to send to a set number of properties away from the applicants'. The fact is participants do not know how the Planning Department decides who to notify. Some participants shared examples of applications they found out about too late - that they personally would have regarded their property being a 'neighbour' of.

"The problem with the concept of consulting relevant people is the definition of relevant. The flats that were built down by me, now we are over the road from the flats but we never received a mailshot saying a planning application because we are not next door to the flats. But it would affect, for example, our access. So to my mind it should be anyone within a given distance of an application." Inexperienced

The 'experienced' group do want to deal with the Planning Department over the internet in the first instance, as the default option, with telephone back up, but are unaware whether this is available because they have never accessed that part of Rochford District Council website. There is a widespread and outdated belief that all communication with the Planning Department is by post and plans have to be handed in personally, or viewed in the Council offices in person for reference only, that nothing can be 'taken away' –

even amongst the 'experienced' group. The degree of surprise at the end of the 'experienced' group to the information that all planning services are on line was striking. This suggests that the Council must have a comprehensive information and education campaign to promote the website.

The 'experienced' participants who are on the citizen's panel, and could be argued to be more informed have not found the Council website on their own, despite the fact that they have access to the internet. Most of the 'experienced' group appear to be from the BC1 social groups. BC1 socio economic groups are typically middle and junior management levels and 'white collar' workers. Most of the 'inexperienced' participants do not have access to the internet at all. In the inexperienced group, participants ask for a newsletter format. This group appear to be from C2D social classes, and it may be that they do not have the level of disposable income available to make personal planning applications. C2D social groups are typically 'blue collar' workers in skilled and semi skilled vocational workers and craftsmen.

3 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research shows that these days there is a clear expectation of pro-activity on the part of the Council in terms of information dissemination. In other words the recommendation is that the Council needs to go out of its way to communicate the process, timings, reasons for decisions, as well as information about procedures and responsibilities (whether they be the Council's or residents').

For example, people want to know exactly why their applications are rejected and accepted. Standard answers about 'falling outside the guidelines' are deemed insufficient and inappropriate in the modern business world of customer service orientation that local government is espousing. Such a response potentially distances the Council from citizens, and perpetuates the view that Councils less driven to act in the interests of the public are more entrenched in secretive and process driven bureaucracy. The Planning Department has all information and forms online and therefore this view is clearly unfounded. The challenge is that *the public do not know that* and need signposting. The onus is on the Council to develop a comprehensive information and education campaign that ensures this information reaches every household through *media channels* that are meaningful to the public.

Responses to the exact text that is published on the website show that there is considerable room for misinterpretation. People do not understand what 'lobbying' is for example, nor what 'planning matters' are, nor the definition of 'relevant' in the context these phrases are used, so they guess. These are just three examples that came up during the group discussions; there may be many more. It is most important that all communication is in plain English, and the language and vocabulary used very carefully chosen. The danger is that if a word is misunderstood or misinterpreted *and*, if it used to summarise what a member can do for the individual, the word may inadvertently miscommunicate what the Council is intending - to the possible detriment of Council's management of public relations. It is strongly recommended that the content of communications campaigns is researched at the development stage to check that comprehension and communication is as required. It may also be appropriate to work with the public on checking that the text on the website is communicating the intended messages clearly and comprehensively.

The spontaneous expectation of residents is that the committee is small and manageable. The reasons for this are those of efficiency, effectiveness and possible cost saving. After discussion only one person expects all members to sit on the committee, although two people guess at full membership at the outset. At a prompted level most participants express surprise that the full Council sits and there is considerable debate about whether this is workable and the best use of members' expertise and time. The conclusion the public reaches is that the committee should be at around 12-15. There are mixed views as to whether other Councillors should be able to lobby the members or not. This should be read in the context that people do not understand what lobbying means. Importantly, there is a view that even with a small committee, the full Council may be appropriate to sit for the most contentious applications. The public would feel reassured by the fact that full committee would vote on certain issues.

The recommendation from this limited research project with the public is therefore that the Council considers:

1. The Planning Department continuing to take decisions on the most straightforward applications.
2. Those applications that are sent forward for committee consideration are divided into two groups. The majority to be considered by a smaller committee of 12 - 15 members, preferably an odd number to ensure a deciding vote. The make up of the committee is expected to ensure:
 - a. No more than one member sitting per ward in multi-member wards.
 - b. There is a good spread across all political parties.
3. The committee is widened to include all 39 members on the minority of particularly controversial or far reaching decisions that affect the whole District.
4. Clarifying the issue of representation and lobbying with the public so that individuals understand what they can and cannot do.
5. Clarifying the fact that the interests of the community take precedence over those of the individual, even in small applications of a domestic nature.
6. Clarifying the complementary roles of the members and officers.
7. Ensuring that all interested members of the public (usually those making an application or objection) are sent not only a plain English explanation of all processes and time scales, but are also kept up to date with progress and given a full explanation of the final decision with reasons. Step by step guides to the appeals process is also needed.
8. Review the definition of 'neighbour' in the context of notification of planning applications.

Given the importance and gravity of the decision under review, we also recommend that the Council put any final short list of options on the size of the committee, or the final option if there is only one, back into research. The same participants would be approached to complete the discussion and provide comprehensive feedback. This is a particularly valuable step in situations where the decision is subject to external scrutiny. Depending on the options on the table, the focus groups could be re-convened or short telephone interviews undertaken with individual participants.