

REVIEW OF PLANNING SERVICES COMMITTEE – PROGRESS UPDATE

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report summarises the main elements of the review of the operation of the Planning Services (now Development Control) Committee. To assist Members, a copy of the scoping form for the review is attached as appendix 1 to this report.
- 1.2 It is intended that the final recommendations of the Sub-Committee will be reported to the Policy, Finance and Strategic Performance Committee.

2 ISSUES

- 2.1 Arising from the review to date it is considered that the following issues now require a recommendation to the Policy Committee:-
- the size of the Committee;
 - the role of non-Members if the Committee size is reduced;
 - the effectiveness of a smaller Committee;
 - public speaking; and
 - compulsory training.
- 2.2 In addition to these matters, other points will no doubt emerge from an analysis of the evidence base, but it is suggested that consideration might be given to:-
- the arrangements for site visits;
 - live webcasting of the Committee proceedings;
 - arrangements for substitutes if the committee size is reduced;
 - Parish Council attendance at meetings.

3 VISITS TO OTHER AUTHORITIES

- 3.1 Two visits were carried out to other Authorities to review the operation of their Planning Committees. Members will need to consider the lessons learnt from the visits and determine whether changes would be appropriate, as a result, in Rochford. To assist, a brief summary of points noted from each visit is provided, though of course this is very much an officer view.
- 3.2 **East Cambridgeshire**

- The Committee comprises **16** Members, with membership being determined on a pro-rata political breakdown.
- No specific attention given to the need or otherwise to select membership across all wards in the district.
- Parish Councils are invited to attend each meeting where an application in their area is to be determined, but attendance is voluntary.
- Ward Members can register their intention to make a short statement in support or against an application.
- Chairman of the Council is an ex-officio Member of the Committee.
- Members were required to state very clearly their reasons for not supporting an application.
- Public speaking was ordered and well managed. Speakers were given a maximum of 5 minutes, and the Chairman was not required to intervene on time.
- On completing their presentation, Members of the Committee asked questions of the public speakers.
- Case officers presented their applications, but this meant most officers attended the meeting.
- Meetings commenced at 2pm in the Council Chamber, which was informally laid out with tables and chairs.
- Presentations made use of technology to an extent, but were somewhat low-tech and the projection screen was very difficult to see from any distance.
- Prior to the meeting commencing, Members assembled at 9am and visited every site on the agenda.
- Taking account of site visits, the Committee lasted for a substantial part of the day and in some instances probably into the evening.
- As well as planning officers, specialist conservation, arboricultural, etc, also attended.
- Overall the atmosphere in the Council Chamber was relaxed, but still businesslike.

- A 'Delegated Scheme Review Panel' comprising the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Committee, any interested local Members makes decisions about whether a selection of applications should be determined under delegated powers or referred to full Committee.

3.3 Issues to Consider

- Time allowed for public speakers.
- Whether the current arrangement for allowing the Parish Councils to attend the Planning Committee is sufficient.
- Whether site visits should be arranged as a matter of course to all Committee applications – it is worth bearing in mind this may cause problems for items referred from the Weekly List.
- Whether, if the Committee is reduced in size, non-Members should register their intention to speak on an item in advance.

3.4 Brentwood Borough Council

- The Committee comprises **15** Members, with membership determined on a political pro-rata basis.
- Meetings take place in the Council Chamber – a formal chamber very similar to Rochford's Council Chamber.
- Members are required to visit each site on their own volition and sign a book in the Council Chamber prior to the meeting commencing.
- In order to assist site visits, officers arrange a date and time slot with applicants when Members can visit.
- Members generally make their own arrangements to car share in order to carry out the site visits; officers do not attend the visits.
- Meetings commence at 7pm approximately once a month; a recent innovation is that meetings are now broadcast live on the Council's website.
- Applications are presented by senior officers; plans only are projected onto a screen – no information is shown to Members other than the formal submission of 'black and white' application plans.
- Parish Councils have representatives co-opted to the Committee – nine representatives in all.
- There are nominated substitutes.

- Brentwood operates a Weekly List system similar to Rochford's, which is designed to ensure that only the larger, more controversial applications are determined by the Committee.
- There is no mandatory training, but an induction session is organised for new Members.
- Public speaking has been in operation for more than 10 years, speakers are called in turn and allowed 3 minutes to present their case – the Chairman does not allow speakers to overrun their time.
- Amenity groups are also allowed an opportunity to speak to the Committee.
- Committee Members do not ask any questions of the public speakers.
- Non-Members of the Committee regularly attend to speak for or against applications.
- Following the Planning Committee, any one Member can refer an application to Full Council – the Planning Committee does not have full executive powers.

3.5 Issues to Consider

- Would there be a value in allowing amenity groups to make representations to the Committee?
- Is there any merit in requiring Members to sign a declaration at the start of each Committee to confirm they have visited or are familiar with the application sites?
- If the Planning Committee is reduced in size, should it have full executive powers?

4 FOCUS GROUPS

- 4.1 On 24 April 2006, two focus groups were asked for their views on the operation of the Planning Services Committee.
- 4.2 The final report is attached as appendix 2 to this report. Members will need to consider the findings in detail. The recommendations emerging from the research suggest that a smaller Committee of 12-15 Members deals with the majority of Committee level applications, but that for a minority of controversial applications, there continues to be an all Member Committee.
- 4.3 The report also recommends a number of process improvements to ensure residents understand the planning process and that information is communicated by the Council as straightforwardly as possible.

5 PUBLIC SPEAKING

- 5.1 Members have previously considered a draft protocol for public speaking. In light of the findings from the visits to East Cambridgeshire and Brentwood, it is suggested that one aspect of the protocol merits some further thought. A copy of the draft protocol is attached as appendix 3 to this report.

6 CONCLUSIONS AND DECISIONS

- 6.1 Taking account of the evidence that has been examined, including the visits to other Authorities and the focus groups, the Sub-Committee now must determine its views on the matters summarised below, plus any other matters Members consider to be important.
- (a) A reduction in the size of the Development Control Committee – in reaching a decision, Members need to recognise the importance of the Development Control Committee relative to the policy making Committee. The preparation and adoption of the policies against which development control decisions are taken is fundamentally the most important part of the planning process. If residents are unhappy with the decisions taken by the Council in relation to planning applications, it is because the policies developed by the Authority do not reflect their wishes and aspirations.
 - (b) If Members conclude the Committee should be reduced in size, based on the evidence, then:
 - How many Members should sit on the Committee?
 - Should there be substitution?
 - Should the Committee have full executive powers?
 - Should non-Members be able to lobby the Committee and if so should they register their intention to do so in advance?
 - (c) The introduction of public speaking, subject to an agreed protocol and, in particular, the length of time speakers will be allowed to make their representation.
 - (d) The need for changes to the current arrangements that allow Parish Councils to present to the Committee.
 - (e) Compulsory training – two mandatory sessions in every Municipal Year totalling four hours in total is proposed.
 - (f) Site visits – should these be required for all Committee items and/or should Members be required to visit all sites on their own cognisance and confirm they have done so.

- (g) Should amenity groups be invited to make presentations to the Committee?
- (h) Officer presentations – is there a need for changes or improvements to the arrangements?
- (i) Webcasting – the costs are outlined in resource implications.

7 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

Size of the Committee

- 7.1 Given the current funding arrangements, it is not envisaged that reducing the size of the Committee will result in significant cost savings to the Authority.

Site Visits

- 7.2 The current arrangements for site visits on an 'as and when' basis do not give rise to any significant cost implications for the Authority. However, whilst it is difficult to provide an accurate figure, introducing compulsory visits, particularly if the Committee remains as an all Member Committee, could be quite significant if Members travelled together on a coach, for example. Visits would also need to be on a Saturday.
- 7.3 The annual cost of coach hire is estimated at between £2000 and £2500.

Compulsory Training

- 7.4 This would be no more intensive of resources than the current training programme.

Webcasting

- 7.5 Members observed webcasting in operation during the visit to Brentwood. The cost per annum for a fixed solution in the Council Chamber would be £11,750. A mobile solution is priced at £15,500 p.a. and a hybrid solution, suitable perhaps for use in the Council Chamber and Committee rooms, would be £18,500 p.a. In each case this would allow a total of 5 hours broadcasting per month. Increasing the number of broadcast hours substantially increases the costs.
- 7.6 In addition to the annual running costs there would be considerable staff time required for pre-broadcast production work and running the system during a meeting. The staffing for this is usually identified from within the Committee Section of the relevant authority. The level of staff resource needed is such that it cannot easily be identified from the current staff complement.

7.7 An alternative to a full webcasting might be to broadcast sound only and also to record the proceedings for release through the Council's website as a 'podcast'. Some investment would also be required in equipment and there would also be ongoing costs associated with operation, including the commitment of staff time. These costs have not been quantified, but are being investigated and will be reported to the meeting.

7.8 It is also worth bearing in mind that the conduct of meetings will need to be carefully managed to ensure that recordings are legible. It might be useful to consider whether a trial recording either of sound or sound and vision might help identify the issues and problems associated with this proposal.

8 PARISH IMPLICATIONS

8.1 Parish Councils are currently able to send a representative to speak on any item considered by the Committee.

9 RECOMMENDATION

9.1 It is proposed that the Sub-Committee **RECOMMENDS**

Its conclusions on the operation of the Planning Services (now Development Control) Committee and related matters.

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Background Papers:-

None

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