

REVIEW OF THE PLANNING SERVICES COMMITTEE – PROGRESS UPDATE

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report provides statistical information about the operation of the Planning Services Committee and a look at the financial perspectives of the current versus a smaller Committee.

2 ATTENDANCE AT COMMITTEE

- 2.1 A breakdown of attendance at the Planning Services Committee is attached as appendix one to this report.
- 2.2 Between May 2003 and May 2004 there were 13 meetings of the Committee and the average attendance was 30 Members.
- 2.3 In the following municipal year June 2004 to April 2005 there were 10 meetings with an average attendance of 29 Members.
- 2.4 Finally, in the current municipal year to date there have been 5 meetings so far with an average attendance of 28 Members.
- 2.5 Whilst there is a minor downward trend, attendance at the Committee has been fairly consistent over the last three years, usually in the high twenties.
- 2.6 The average attendance in percentage terms has varied from between 72% and 76% over this period, with therefore an average non attendance of around 25%.

3 ATTENDANCE AT SITE VISITS

- 3.1 Unfortunately, a consistent record of attendance at planning site visits has not been maintained.
- 3.2 In the municipal year 2004/05, 8 site visits were organised and average attendance was 12 Members or 31% of the membership of the Committee.
- 3.3 In the current year there have been 3 site visits with an average attendance of 14 Members.
- 3.4 It is clear from these figures that average attendance at site visits is around half of Members' attendance at Committee.

This level of attendance inevitably means that some Members will be better informed about the site visit application than others when it comes to determining the application. It would be difficult to reach a view on whether

there has, as a result, been an effect on consistency of decision making. That having been said, recent information from the Ombudsman suggests that if Members vote having not attended a site meeting this could result in a finding of maladministration.

- 3.5 Certainly, it is interesting to look at the information provided in response to the survey reported to the Committee on 20 September. The majority of survey returns indicated that most Authorities did not arrange formal site visits as a matter of course.
- 3.6 That having been said, several Authorities commented that Members were expected to familiarise themselves with the sites on an informal basis.
- 3.7 Clearly there are points to be made on both sides of this issue, but Members need to consider the implications arising from the poor turnout at formal site visits and the fact that as a result some Members may be better informed to take a decision than others. Is it likely that a smaller Committee will increase the percentage turnout at site visits?

4 NUMBER OF COMMITTEE REPORTS

- 4.1 A schedule of the number of applications reported to the Planning Services Committee from May 2003 is attached to this report as appendix two.
- 4.2 Whilst the number of reports to Committee does inevitably vary, the average number is 5-6 per meeting and given the complexity and controversial nature of the applications reported to the Committee, this does not seem unreasonable.

5 APPEAL PERFORMANCE

- 5.1 A key measure of performance and a measure of the effectiveness of the Planning Services Committee is the success rate of the Authority on appeal and particularly whether there have been any awards of costs.
- 5.2 Between May 2003 and September 2005, 32 applications have been refused by the Committee against officer recommendation. Of that total, 7 appeals still await a decision.
- 5.3 Of the remaining 25 applications, the following breakdown applies:

Allowed on appeal	11
Dismissed	1
No appeal	5
No appeal – revised scheme	5
Appeal withdrawn	2
No appeal as yet	1
Number of cost awards	4

6 MEMBER TRAINING

- 6.1 In the period May 2003 to date, there have been 9 Member training sessions dealing with planning and planning related issues. The average attendance at these sessions is 20 Members or 51% of the membership of the Committee.

7 FINANCIAL APPRAISAL

Cost Inputs

- 7.1 These are considered to be as follows:

- The Council chamber – is likely to continue to be used regardless of the size of the Committee.
- Committee Administrator – no change, regardless of the size of the Committee.
- Agendas and Minutes – it is assumed these would continue to be circulated to all Members, then no change. In any event, the cost savings from reducing the number of agendas printed would not be significant.
- Member costs – Members are paid a fixed sum not related to attendance at Committees and so no change.
- Travel and subsistence – there would be a small reduction in payments as a result of a smaller Committee, but of course, the average attendance is just under 30 at the moment and so expenditure on this item 3 is never at the maximum.
- Training costs – over the period 2003-2005, there have been 9 training sessions dealing with planning matters. The costs associated with training sessions include the room hire, refreshments and external facilitators (where used). There is only likely to be a marginal additional cost associated with delivering training to all Members as opposed to a smaller number.

8 OTHER MATTERS

- 8.1 As a reminder, the issues on which a view must finally be reached are:

- Size of the Planning Committee?
- Role of non-Members if the size of the Committee was reduced?
- Assessment of operating costs for a smaller Committee.

- Whether a smaller Committee would be more efficient/effective?
- The arrangements for site visits.
- Procedures for deferment – are they adequate to avoid unnecessary delays?
- Compulsory training.
- Are there any operational improvements that might be made in respect of, for example, Committee reports, presentations, etc.
- Public speaking.

8.2 A consultation has been sent to all Parish Councils and the Town Council seeking views on the operation of the Committee. The results of this consultation will be reported back in November.

8.3 At an earlier meeting, Members expressed a preference for the whole Committee to visit one or two other Authorities to view the operation of their planning Committees.

8.4 A view on this requirement is requested to enable arrangements to be made. The majority of Committees meet in the evening and, given this, it will be difficult to travel too far a field and it is suggested that if Members still consider visits a good idea the Authorities to visit be selected from the following: Castle Point, Basildon, Chelmsford, Maldon, Brentwood or Southend.

9 RISK IMPLICATIONS

9.1 The review of the operation of the Planning Services Committee is in response to the CPA. The timetables require the review to be complete by June 2006.

10 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

10.1 None at this stage, other than a small cost for the Committee visits, which can be met from budget.

11 RECOMMENDATION

11.1 That the Committee considers the issues outlined in the report and continues to deliberate on the options for the future operation of the Rochford Planning Services Committee.

Shaun Scrutton
Head of Planning Services

Background Papers:-

None

For further information please contact Shaun Scrutton on:-

Tel:- 01702 318 100

E-Mail:- shaun.scrutton@rochford.gov.uk

Appendix One

ATTENDANCE AT PLANNING SERVICES MEETINGS

MAY 2003 - MAY 2004

JUNE 2004 - APRIL 2005

MAY 2005 - AUG 2005

Date:	Attendance:	Date:	Attendance:	Date:	Attendance:
29.05.2003	34	30.06.2004	32	26.05.2005	28
24.06.2003	33	27.07.2004	31	30.06.2005	26
31.07.2003	30	26.08.2004	33	26.07.2005	29
28.08.2003	28	23.09.2004	30	25.08.2005	29
25.09.2003	33	21.10.2004	27	29.09.2005	26
23.10.2003	22	25.11.2004	29		
27.11.2003	29	16.12.2004	29		
16.12.2003	33	20.01.2005	28		
22.01.2004	30	17.02.2005	27		
19.02.2004	31	22.03.2005	28		
25.03.2004	27				
22.04.2004	29				
20.05.2004	30				

Appendix Two

Number of Planning Application Reports to Committee from May 2003 to Date

Date	No of Reports
May 2003	4
June 2003	5
July 2003	7
August 2003	3
September 2003	8
October 2003	5
November 2003	5
December 2003	2
January 2004	5
February 2004	11
March 2004	4
April 2004	4
May 2004	3
June 2004	5
July 2004	6
August 2004	3
September 2004	5
October 2004	5
November 2004	5
December 2004	2
January 2005	8
February 2005	7
March 2005	4
April 2005	6
May 2005	9
June 2005	5
July 2005	6
August 2005	6
September 2005	4