
Appendix 1

OUTLINE OF RESEARCH

At the moment, the Planning Services Committee comprises all Members of the authority rather than the normal arrangements in almost all other authorities of a committee of around 12-15 Members. The Audit Commission has been critical of the Council's unwillingness to contemplate a change to the size of the committee, but a review is underway at the moment and Members have concluded that it would be useful to gather together views from residents.

I am therefore interested in:

- Investigating attitudes to the delivery of the planning service in Rochford
- Exploring residents' understanding of the process and the role and limitations placed on Members by being part of the Committee.
- Test views on the operation and benefits/disadvantages of an all Member committee versus a small committee
- Understanding whether residents would see advantages in being able to ask non-members of a small committee to lobby on their behalf; or
- Whether having all Members, despite the limitations, is a better Arrangement.

I have in mind bringing together a representative sample of residents from the citizens panel (25-30?) to discuss and debate these issues.

PROPOSAL FROM CONSULTANT

Your brief sets out very clearly what you need and want from this research and I agree with you that a qualitative approach using residents drawn from the citizens panel is a cost-effective way of addressing this. I do have a couple of observations to make, however:

Opinions of the planning service are, in my experience, as much if not more influenced by the outcome of the application than by the process, which is only important to many people if it is seen to be limiting an applicant or an objector in getting their views heard. So whatever we do has to distinguish between views of the outcome and views of the process that led to that outcome. The difficulty will be in getting residents to consider objectively whether they think a different process would have led to a different outcome! Care will be needed in facilitating such a discussion.

I think too that there will be a group of people who are at least fairly well informed on a subject like this - those who have recently "been through" a planning process, either as applicant or as an objector - and another, probably larger group of people for whom the issue is still important but where they have much less experience of how it works in practice - those who care what the environment and streetscape look like, but have never experienced the system for themselves. A mixed group such as

Appendix 1

a workshop that included both these groups would be likely to be heavily influenced by the "greater knowledge" of those with experience, and I suspect that the less aware would probably defer to them, meaning that their ideas and perceptions as potential future applicants are less likely to emerge clearly.

So my suggestion is to run two separate focus groups, both recruited from the citizens panel, one for those with experience of how the system works (where we could explore how well it works, what the pitfalls of the present arrangement are, explore reactions to alternative approaches in the light of their experience) and one for those without experience of the system, who could be given a scenario in which they are potential applicants/objectors, presented with the options and asked to debate the strengths and weaknesses of each, from the viewpoint of potential applicants. This gives the advantage of separating the two groups - we think this is vital to success - whilst preserving enough common ground between the two groups to allow valid comparisons to be made between their conclusions.

Each group would have no more than 12 people in it, so we'd end up talking to about 20-24 people. If that isn't sufficient, we can expand the number of groups as long as there are sufficient names of suitable people to be recruited. We assume that there are sufficient people on the panel with recent planning system experience who can be recruited, but if we had to go beyond the panel for those with experience, we could I think recruit from among recent applicants to top up, since applicant details are in the public domain.

Our cost for this work would be £4,750 plus VAT, which includes a full written report on the outcome and our conclusions. It also includes a "thank you" payment to participants, which we find helpful in getting people to turn out and which covers expenses such as travel, parking and childcare. We assume that council meeting rooms and refreshments can be made available for this (we'd expect the discussions to be in the late afternoon and evening); if not, we'll hire suitable local premises but will need to charge the cost of this back to you in addition.