

Wiltshire Council

Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee

20 March 2018

Final Report of the Planning Committee System Task Group

Purpose

1. To present the conclusions and recommendations of the Planning Committee System Task Group for endorsement and referral onwards as appropriate.

Background

2. The possibility of a scrutiny review looking at planning was first raised in 2016 during working planning meetings between the relevant Overview and Scrutiny (OS) and Executive members. It was subsequently supported in principle by the Environment Select Committee and recommended as a legacy topic by OS under the previous council.
3. OS Management Committee then established a Planning Committee System Task Group in June 2017. The Committee specified that governance of the planning process was to be the topic of the review, rather than planning policy. Following this a meeting was held with the Cabinet Member and Associate Director with responsibility for planning to discuss where a scrutiny review in this area could add value.

Terms of Reference

4. The following terms of reference were approved by Committee on 26 September 2017:
 - a) To explore the extent to which the council's current development control processes meet the needs and objectives of Wiltshire's residents and communities, to potentially including consideration of:
 - The public's and applicant's experience, including digital access;
 - Communications and liaison with local councillors and their role.
 - b) To investigate whether the present planning committee structure is best suited to delivering an efficient, effective and sustainable service; with particular reference to the number of and geographical areas covered by the existing area committees, their agendas and meetings.
 - c) To suggest any recommendations for improvement of the planning committee system as appropriate.

Membership

5. The opportunity to take part in the task group was offered to all non-executive councillors and the following were appointed:

Cllr Ian McLennan (Chairman)
Cllr Ernie Clark
Cllr Peter Fuller
Cllr Sarah Gibson
Cllr Jose Green
Cllr Ruth Hopkinson

Methodology

6. The task group met on 8 occasions between September 2017 and March 2018. It is grateful to the following witnesses who contributed to its review:

Cllr Toby Sturgis	Cabinet Member for Planning and Property
Tim Martienssen	Service Director for Economic Development and Planning
Mike Wilmott	Head of Development Management
Sally Canter	Head of Operations and Delivery, Economic Development and Planning
Phil Morgan	Strategic Consultation and Engagement Manager
Cllr Mark Connolly	Chairman, Eastern Area Planning Committee
Cllr Tony Trotman	Chairman, Northern Area Planning Committee
Cllr Fred Westmoreland	Chairman, Southern Area Planning Committee
Cllr Fleur de Rhe-Philipe	Chairman, Strategic Planning Committee
Cllr Christopher Newbury	Chairman, Western Area Planning Committee

7. The task group commissioned online surveys of a) planning applicants and b) planning professionals. All had submitted applications during a recent three-month period. The surveys gathered views on responders' experiences of the council's planning application service and committee process. 99 responses were received to the survey of applicants and 94 responses were received to the survey of planning professionals. The full results are presented in **Appendices 1 and 2**. The task group is extremely grateful to all those who took the time to respond to the survey.
8. 17 Wiltshire councillors responded to a task group survey regarding a) their views on the Planning application service's liaison with local councillors, and b) what factors influenced them when calling an application in to be considered at planning committee.

Evidence

Planning application service effectiveness

9. Wiltshire Council is the country's third largest Local Planning Authority and

deals annually with:

- Over 6,000 planning applications
- Over 1,700 tree work applications
- Over 2,500 pre-application and permitted development enquiries
- Over 1,200 enforcement complaints
- Almost 200 planning appeals.

10. To assess the performance at the council's planning application service the task group considered the following information:

- the service's performance data
- responses to the surveys of planning applicants and professionals
- the views of the five current planning committee chairmen
- responses to a survey of all Wiltshire councillors.

Planning application service performance data

11. The planning application service's performance indicators include the following:

Table 1

	Performance indicator	2014/15 Actual	2015/16 Actual	2016/17 Actual	2017/18 (YTD)
1.	(%) Major applications determined within the statutory determination period (or extended period agreed in writing with the applicant) Context: Latest national average is 86% (higher is better)	83%	93%	96%	95%
2.	% Of major applications overturned at appeal Context: National average over 2-year period is 2.5% compared with Wiltshire's 1.8% (2015-17) (lower better)	2.0%	2.1%	4.7%	2.3%
3.	(%) Non-major applications determined within the statutory determination period (or extended period agreed in writing with the applicant) Context: National average over 2-year period is 84% compared with Wiltshire's 96% (2015-17) (higher better)	83%	92%	97%	96%

4.	% of non-major applications overturned at appeal Context: National average over 2-year period is 1.2% compared with Wiltshire's 0.7% (2015-17) (lower better)	0.7%	0.7%	0.9%	0.4%
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Responses to the Planning application service customer survey

12. The full statistical results of the surveys of recent planning applicants and professionals are attached at **Appendices 1 and 2**.
13. For context, 91% of applicants who completed the survey indicated that their planning application had been approved (the a national application approval rate is 88%). Planning professionals (who completed a different survey) were assumed to have had multiple experiences of the planning process and were therefore not asked this question. However, they were asked to set aside the outcome of any individual application when answering.
14. The key findings of the survey are included in Tables 2 and 3 below:

Table 2

Pre-application stage		
Survey question	Of those responders who completed the pre-application process... (% Satisfied or Very Satisfied)	
	Applicants	Planning professionals
How easy it was to contact the service	71%	61%
The amount of information given	76%	69%
How easy the information was to understand	70%	83%
The time it took to get a response (see (a) below)	64%	45%
The helpfulness of staff	75%	82%
That their questions had been answered to their satisfaction (see (b) below)	77%	88%

Understood why amendments were required and agreed with the reasons	69%	60%
Felt that ample time had been given for the suggested amendments	-	78%
Reports given at the pre-application stage consistent with the response at the full application stage	-	92%

- a) 28% of professionals were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with this aspect of the service
- b) Of those applicants and professionals who did not feel their questions were answered to their satisfaction (24% and 12% respectively), the most commonly submitted reason referred to a lack of specific advice regarding the individual application submitted (as opposed to more general information on planning policy)
- c) 40 suggestions were submitted by professionals for improving the pre-application service. Of these,
- i. 14 referred to improving the helpfulness/accuracy/consistency of the information or advice provided
 - ii. 12 referred to enabling more direct conversations with officers, including on site
 - iii. 9 referred to increasing the speed of the pre-application process
- d) During their applications, only 28% (24) of applicants and 30% (26) of professionals contacted the relevant parish or town councillor. Only 39% (34) of applicants became aware of a parish or town council meeting that would be looking at their application (though 53% (43) of planning professionals did).

Table 3

Full application stage – survey responses		
Survey question	Satisfied or Very Satisfied	
	Applicants	Planning professionals
How easy it was to contact the planning service	74%	66%
The amount of information provided	71%	71%
How clear and easy to understand the information was	74%	82%
The time it took to get a response	62%	54%

The helpfulness of staff	75%	83%
The service provided overall	72%	77%

- e) 57 suggestions for improving the overall service were submitted by applicants. Of these,
- i. 17 referred to improving the speed with processing applications
 - ii. 12 referred to increasing the accessibility of, or communications from, case officers
 - iii. 7 referred to improving the accuracy or completeness of information or guidance provided
 - iv. 7 referred to improving the usability of the website
 - v. 3 referred to increasing the consistency of advice
- f) 63 suggestions for improving the overall service overall were submitted by professionals. Of these,
- i. 22 referred to increasing the accessibility of, or communications from, officers
 - ii. 17 referred to improving issues of speed with progressing applications
 - iii. 5 referred to the consistency of advice

Views of the Planning Committee Chairmen

15. Overall the five current planning committee chairmen felt that the Planning application team provided a good service to the public. There was no clear consensus on specific aspects of the service that needed to be improved.

Planning team liaison with local councillors

16. Senior managers reported that the expectations on planning officers in terms of liaising with local councillors are:
- Lists of applications and decisions to be emailed to members on a weekly basis
 - Parishes to be consulted immediately when an application is registered, giving them maximum time to review
 - Planning officers are encouraged to communicate regularly with councillors and town and parish councils
 - For information, the Planning Service recently provided planning training for town and parish councils, with over 350 people attending, representing 104 town/parish councils.
17. Overall the five current planning committee chairmen felt that the Planning team liaised with local councillors effectively.
18. 89% (15/17) of Wiltshire councillors who answered the survey were satisfied or very satisfied with their experiences of the Planning Services' liaison with local councillors. There was no consensus on how it might be further improved.

Digital access and support

19. Of the 57 suggestions for improvement put forward in survey responses, 7 referred to the website or other aspects of digital access.
20. The laptops used by officers in the Planning team are aging and due to software issues officers still need to print applications, even though 70% of applications are submitted digitally. There is also a need for planning officers to move on to mobile platforms to better support mobile working.

Planning committee structure

Background

21. The current governance arrangements for the Development Management service were approved by the Implementation Executive (IE) in November 2008 in the run-up to the establishment of Wiltshire Council as a unitary authority. The IE indicated the committee structure should be reviewed once a countywide development plan was adopted.
22. The IE supported the principle that the Development Management service should be delivered on a local basis, with area officers in Trowbridge, Devizes, Chippenham and Salisbury with an Area Planning Committee to support each of these hubs. A strategic committee was approved to consider issues of countywide interest in both development management and spatial planning. The current planning committee structure therefore comprises of the following, and the geographic areas covered by the four area committees are illustrated in **Appendix 3**:
 - Eastern Area Planning Committee
 - Northern Area Planning Committee
 - Southern Area Planning Committee
 - Western Area Planning Committee
 - Strategic Planning Committee
23. This structure was based on anticipated planning application numbers of 9,000 to 10,000 per year and four Area Development Managers under a Director of Development Services to support the committee structure and delivery of the service.
24. Another factor was that the four former Wiltshire districts each had their own local plan in place, and it was considered that each committee should have oversight of the area of the local plan whilst these remained the central element of the development plan policy framework.
25. Since this, the Development Control team structure has changed, with the Devizes area office closing and merging with Trowbridge to create a single Central team based in Trowbridge. The closure of the Browfort offices in Devizes means that the Council now hire external premises in which to hold Eastern Area Committee meetings.
26. The management structure has also changed, with the post of Director of

Development Services deleted and one Head of Development Management replacing the original 4 Area Development Manager posts.

27. The policy background has changed, with the county-wide Wiltshire Core Strategy replacing the former district based local plans on its adoption in January 2015.

Area Planning Committee activity

28. Tables are provided at **Appendix 4** outlining planning committee activity between 2010 and 2016.
29. The tables show that, during this period, Eastern Area Planning Committee has had more meetings cancelled (35 compared with nearest of 20, or 52% compared with nearest of 29%), fewer meetings held (71 compared with nearest of 97) and fewer planning items considered on average per meeting (2.8 compared with nearest of 3.5).
30. Eastern Area Planning Committee's lower meeting activity can be partly explained by it being the area with the least development (according to 2017 data – see Table 4 below). However, development within the next lowest, which is the Western area, is not significantly higher.

Table 4

Jan-Dec 2017	Delegated Decisions	Committee Decisions	Total Decisions	% Apps gone to Cttee
Northern Area Planning	1712	62	1774	3.5%
Southern Area Planning	1381	48	1429	3.4%
Eastern Area Planning	1126	16	1142	1.4%
Western Area Planning	1189	31	1220	2.5%

31. Another factor behind Eastern's lower level of activity is the comparatively low percentage of applications called in for committee decision. From January to December 2017, Wiltshire councillors within the Eastern Area called in only 1.4% of the area's applications. The next nearest was Western Area Planning, where 2.5% of applications were called in. Reasons for this variance may include a legacy affect from the four district councils' differing tendencies in this area; and potentially a lower number of contentious or major developments appearing in the Eastern area.
32. Wiltshire councillors' responses to a survey of their reasons for calling applications showed no particular correlation with their planning committee areas. Across all four area, the most common reasons for calling applications to committee were,
 - a) Public interest/concern (76%)

- b) Parish/town council request (47%)
- c) Planning considerations (47%) (NB. a) and b) above do not necessarily exclude planning considerations)
- d) Design issues (12%)
- e) Opposition to the officer recommendation (6%)

33. It is noted that the Head of Development Management is also able to call applications in for consideration by committee.

Strategic Planning Committee

34. As outlined above, the Strategic Planning Committee was introduced at the commencement of Wiltshire Council. Its role and functions are set out in Part 3 of the council's Constitution and, in summary, are,

- Making strategic decisions on the implications of major developments outside of Wiltshire that could have an impact on local residents.
- Considering the following categories of applications for planning permission:
 - Large-scale major developments
 - Major planning applications for mineral extraction or waste disposal
 - Significant applications by Wiltshire Council
 - Applications which, if approved, would represent a significant departure from the policies of the statutory development plan
 - Applications called in by a division-member that cross the boundary of two area committees
 - Any application where the relevant director considers it inappropriate to exercise delegated powers having regard to the public representations
 - Any application which the relevant director has determined should be dealt with by the Strategic Planning Committee.
- Considering documents relating to the Local Development Framework and advise Cabinet where appropriate.

35. An issue arose regarding one aspect of the Strategic Planning Committee's role: This was whether it should continue to be responsible for determining gypsy and traveller site applications, or they should be determined locally by the appropriate Area Planning Committee. The argument for such a change would be that the county's statutory target for the delivery of such sites **may** have been met and, if so, their delivery could be considered to be no longer a strategic issue.

Alternative Planning Committee structures

36. No alternative to the current planning committee structure has been proposed by the Executive. However, the following two alternatives were considered by the task group,

- a) Reducing the structure to 3 area planning committees, aligning their boundaries with those of the planning officer teams (i.e. North, Central

and South).

- b) Reducing the structure to 3 area planning committees, reflecting the draft Housing Market Areas (HMAs). A map illustrating these is at **Appendix 5**. This option was dismissed by the task group as the 'North-Eastern' HMA includes Swindon; therefore the development activity determinable by Wiltshire Council within it would be significantly lower than that in the other three HMAs.

Access to area planning committee meetings

- 37. How alternative committee structures would impact upon public access to meetings would depend on the specific options being considered. Reducing the number of area planning committees is likely to increase overall travelling distances for attendees, though potentially only by a small amount. Calculating this precisely would require analysis of how the committee areas and meeting venues were to be spread across the county and how well they aligned with population centres etc.
- 38. Of the 8 applicants who responded to the survey whose application had gone to committee, only 1 reported having attended the meeting. However, the task group is sceptical of this result, concluding from direct experience that applicants very often attend committee meetings when their application is being discussed.
- 39. Of the 46 planning professionals responding to the survey who had an application go before committee, 87% (40) had attended the committee meeting(s).

Financial implications

- 40. The task group has assessed the annual savings available through implementing option a) above (i.e. removing Eastern Area Planning Committee and adopting a North, Central, South committee structure).
- 41. These projections are inevitably somewhat approximate. Further operational efficiencies from aligning the planning committee and planning officer team boundaries **may** be available. However, no evidence has been received to suggest these would generate significant savings. The total savings projected below are therefore considered accurate enough to give an indication of the weight the council should give to finances when deciding on any change to the committee structure.
- 42. The total potential annual savings to the council through implementing option (a) are calculated as **£11,774**. Table 5 outlines how this was calculated.

Table 5

Saving area	Projected annual saving
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<p>Planning officers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Travel expense (County Hall to Devizes for meetings) • Travel time (salary) • Fewer appeal reports to committee • Fewer councillor briefings • Legal service meeting support savings <p>Assumptions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited reduction in the work required to support committees as most reports, briefings, presentations etc would still be required at a different committee • 7 Eastern Area Planning Committee meetings per year (2017 total) 	£2,537
<p>Democratic Services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre- and post-meeting work • Meeting support • Travel expense (County Hall to Devizes for meetings) • Travel time (salary) • External venue cost (Corn Exchange, Devizes) <p>Assumptions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some reduction in pre- and post-meeting work due to fewer agendas and minutes etc. • No external meeting venue now required 	£2,117
<p>Councillor costs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eastern Area Planning Committee chairman special responsibility allowance (SRA) • Travel expenses <p>Assumptions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Average roundtrip distance based on addresses of current membership 	£7,120
Total	£11,774

Area Planning Committee meetings

Customer experience

43. Only 9% (8) of **applicants** who responded to the survey had had an application go before committee. Of these, 67% (6) felt they were given a clear explanation as to why their application was to be decided by committee. The response rate to other questions on the committee process was too low to provide reliable data.

44. 50% (46) of **planning professionals** who responded to the survey had had

an application go before committee. Of these, high satisfaction levels regarding all aspects of the process were reported. These included,

- a) 85% (39) felt that a clear reason was given as to why the application needed to go before committee
- b) 95% (39) felt that how the meeting would proceed was clearly explained
- c) 95% (41) reported that they or their clients were told how to speak on their application if they wished to
- d) 81% (34) felt that they or their clients were listened to
- e) 71% (30) felt that the process was balanced and fair
- f) 81% (33) felt that the process was well-organised
- g) 100% (43) understood what was happening during the meeting
- h) 95% (40) understood how the decision was made.

Area Planning Committees – meeting procedures

- 45. The four area planning committees appear to operate a fairly consistent meeting process. However, the review has identified some small differences:
- 46. All four area planning committees hold pre-meeting briefings for the chairman. However, only Northern Area Planning Committee holds pre-meeting information briefings for the full committee membership. These are intended to provide an opportunity for committee members to ask technical questions of the planning officer in advance of the public meeting.
- 47. The four area planning committees have slightly different procedures for agreeing site visits. Southern Area Planning Committee agrees these in advance of the meeting at which the application is due to be discussed; the other area planning committees agree site visits **when the application is discussed**, effectively deferring a decision on that application until the following meeting (once the visit has taken place).
- 48. The rules on public participation in respect of planning applications are detailed in the Council's Planning Code of Good Practice and outlined on the meeting agendas. They state that "the chairmen will allow up to 3 speakers in favour and up to 3 speakers against an application and up to 3 speakers on any other item on this agenda. Each speaker will be given up to 3 minutes and invited to speak immediately prior to the item being considered. The current planning committee chairmen appear to manage public participation in slightly different ways, sometimes depending on the situation: Sometimes a **total** of 9 minutes speaking time per 'side' (i.e. those in favour and those against) is given, but this is not always broken down into individuals each speaking for 3

minutes.

Area Planning Committees – decisions

49. Paragraph 31 above reports the variances between the recent call-in rates of the four area planning committees. The committees also differ in how often they decide against the planning officers' recommendations (see Table 6 below). From January to December 2017 Southern Area Planning Committee decided against the planning officer's recommendation for 50% of the applications considered, as compared with Eastern Area Planning Committee, which did so for only 6% of the of the applications considered.

Table 6

Jan-Dec 2017	No. of Committee Decisions	No. of Committee decisions against officer recommendation	% of Committee decisions against officer recommendation
Northern Area Planning	62	7	11%
Southern Area Planning	48	24	50%
Eastern Area Planning	16	7	44%
Western Area Planning	31	2	6%

50. Further investigation would reveal whether such large variances were present in previous years. If they were, it could suggest that either planning officer recommendations, or committee decisions, are being made somewhat inconsistently across the different areas. Information on the number of decisions being overturned at appeal – following officer delegated decisions and committee decisions, broken down by area – might be informative. It is worth noting, however, that, over the past four years, only 0.4 to 0.9% of non-major applications and 2.0 to 4.7% of major applications determined by Wiltshire council have been overturned at appeal.
51. The task group received a briefing on how consistency is achieved across the three planning teams, with the Head of Development Management meeting with the six team leaders on a monthly basis to ensure that policies, guidance and legal case law are being applied consistently.

Rights of way and village green applications

52. A specific issue regarding how these applications are determined arose during the review. The task group understand that these applications undergo significant technical analysis by officers prior to being presented at committee. However, if the committee disagree with the officer recommendation then there is little or no opportunity to influence the decision at that stage.

Conclusions

Planning application service effectiveness

53. The high customer satisfaction with the council's Planning application service shown in the survey results is welcomed, particularly given that, like many departments, its staffing numbers have reduced in recent years (see **Recommendation 1**). The performance data and survey data all demonstrate an effective function with good customer and councillor satisfaction levels across most aspects of the process. These include positive responses regarding the clarity and accuracy of information provided and staff's helpfulness and accessibility. The performance figures demonstrate that the council's planning application service is performing across the board at a higher rate than the national average in terms of speed of decision making and quality of decision making using the parameters and measures adopted by the Government.

54. While satisfaction rates with the overall application service were good, the suggestions for improvement did reflect some consistent themes. (The anonymised survey responses will be forwarded in full to the Cabinet Member for consideration and action as appropriate). These are set out here to encourage improvement (see **Recommendation 2**):

- a) Increasing the speed of the overall planning process: A number of responders specifically suggested increasing the speed of the pre-application process (for which the council charges a fee), commenting that it can sometimes take as long, or nearly as long, as the full application process. The pre-application process is intended to iron out issues in advance of the full application stage, so such delays diminish the former's value.

A number of responders also reported frequent delays when non-planning consultees became involved, specifically Highways and Conservation.

It should be noted, however, that the council consistently exceeds national averages in how often it meets statutory time limits for determining applications (see Table 1 above).

- b) Accessibility of planning officers: Comments either referred to wanting more updates from planning officers on the status of applications or greater direct access to them by telephone or in person. A request made several times was the ability to undertake site visits with planning officers, particularly at the pre-application stage. Several responders were willing to pay extra for this service in light of how beneficial on-site discussions can be to a successful application.
- c) A further suggestion for the pre-application service was for it to include less repetition of straight planning policy and more guidance tailored to individual applications.

- d) A suggestion from the task group, based on the limited applicant awareness of town/parish council's involvement with the planning process, is to include a reference to this on the web and on Planning team's correspondence with applicants. (see **Recommendation 3**)
55. Achieving some of the suggested improvements above would be helped by more resources (though some system improvements may already be available). In the current financial context, Cabinet may wish to consider whether additional investment to address these areas is justified and/or whether they could be otherwise addressed by additional, optional fees payable by applicants for enhanced levels of service. This would fit with the council's focus on taking a more commercial approach as agreed in the Business Plan 2017-27.

Digital access and support

56. Survey results showed that users of the Planning pages of the council's website appear to be satisfied with their content and usability. However, the task group would welcome further information on plans to upgrade the digital technology used by the Planning team; particularly important given the mobile nature of the role and doing so could help deliver efficiencies within the planning process. (see **Recommendation 4**)

Area Planning Committees – structure

57. The current complement of area planning committees in general appear to have a reasonable level of activity, with a sensible number of applications being called in for decision by committee overall, leading to sensible meeting lengths.
58. Eastern Area Planning Committee has historically been less active than the other three area planning committees for the reasons reported. However, the task group does not consider that this variance in activity alone justifies changing the committee structure. It is concerned that a reduction in area planning committees would make decision making on developments in Wiltshire more detached from the localities affected (and provide a less effective service – see Task Group term of reference 1). Such a change would also seem to contradict the council's support for local decision making evident at its 18 area boards.
59. If, following the recommended analysis, Eastern Area Planning Committee began to call in applications at a rate more consistent with the other area planning committees its meeting activity would also increase.
60. The task group does not consider that dissolving Eastern Area Planning Committee would generate significant savings for the council. This is primarily because the total number of applications requiring committee decision would be unchanged. While every pound counts in the current financial climate, the approximately £10,000 saving available from dissolving the committee would need to be balanced against any negative impacts of the change. It is

acknowledged that aligning the area planning committees with the three planning teams might produce some operational efficiencies other than those already quantified above. However, no evidence has been presented to suggest that these would increase the savings available significantly. (see **Recommendation 5**)

61. Given all of the above, any proposal to reduce the current planning committee structure would need to a) provide strong arguments regarding the benefits of doing so, and b) include a thorough analysis of the impact on the public's ability to actually attend meetings (due to increased travel times and costs). (see **Recommendation 6**)
62. There does not appear to be any strong argument or desire to dissolve the Strategic Planning Committee, playing as it does an important role in determining planning matters of importance to the county as a whole. (see **Recommendation 7**).

Area Planning Committees – procedures and decisions

63. Applicants' and planning professionals' overall satisfaction with the planning committee process (evident from the survey results) is welcomed and suggests an effective service (see term of reference (b)). A high percentage of responders who had attended a committee meeting were satisfied with the clarity, fairness and organisation of the meeting, as well as the explanation given for why their applications required committee decision. (see **Recommendation 8**)
64. A number of the witnesses spoken to were concerned that applications are sometimes called for consideration by area planning committees inappropriately i.e. not for reasons of pure planning policy. Their concern was that this wasted council resources, wasted committee meeting time and also raised false hopes for applicants or objectors. Given the acceptable levels of committee activity shown overall, the task group did not analyse this further. However, it does believe that calling applications in for decision by committee is actually a balance between several factors:
 - a) The application's apparent accordance with planning policy/law
 - b) The risk of raising applicants' or objectors' hopes falsely
 - c) The value of a democratic decision on a matter of community interest being seen to be taken locally and in public.
65. Occasions when councillors call applications in for decision, but do not then attend the meeting to explain their reasoning, are a concern. This practice risks creating a perception that casual electioneering is influencing how applications are dealt with and a procedural change aimed at discouraging it is suggested (see **Recommendation 9**)
66. The process for agreeing site visits followed by the Eastern, Northern and Western area planning committees appears to be less efficient and more prone to delay than that followed by Southern Area Planning Committee. It is therefore suggested that the latter's approach be adopted by all in order that

unnecessary delays in the process be avoided. (see **Recommendation 10**)

67. Attendees at different planning committee meetings across the county could reasonably expect a consistent process to be followed and in general this appears to be the case. However, the management of public participation is one area where small differences do appear. The task group suggests that these are addressed. (see **Recommendation 10**)
68. While pre-meeting procedural briefings for planning committee chairmen are reasonable and help to ensure a smooth meeting process, the practice of holding pre-meeting briefings for the full committee is not supported. They risk giving an impression that the council's decision making processes are not transparent and of diminishing the debate at the public meeting. The need to allow councillors to clarify technical matters outside of the public forum can be addressed by councillors liaising with planning officers directly having read the circulated reports. (see **Recommendation 11**)
69. The public could also reasonably expect consistency across the county in terms of the likelihood of, and reasons for, their planning application being called in for decision by committee (rather than by officer). The variance in the 'call-in' rates between Eastern Area Planning Committee and the other three committees therefore deserves further analysis (including of previous years' data) and discussion by the Cabinet Member and the area planning committee chairmen. (see **Recommendation 12**)
70. There are also inconsistencies between the area planning committees in the frequency with which they overturn officer recommendations, though these are perhaps only a concern if they,
 - a) stem from inconsistencies in the application of planning policy/law by either different officer teams or different area planning committees; and
 - b) lead to council planning decisions being overturned on appeal.

(see **Recommendation 13**)

Proposal

71. To endorse the following recommendations and, where appropriate, refer them to the Cabinet Member for Planning and Property:
 - 1. To note the overall positive responses from planning applicants and planning professionals who had recently used the planning application service to a survey of their experiences.**
 - 2. To consider how the following improvements suggested within survey responses might be addressed, including, if appropriate, through the introduction of optional, charged-for services:**
 - a) Further increasing the speed of the overall planning process**
 - b) Increasing the speed of the pre-application process**
 - c) Increasing the amount of application-specific advice provided to applicants during the pre-application process**

- d) Enabling more direct discussions between planning officers and applicants, including on site.**
- 3. To inform applicants of town/parish council's role in the planning process on the website and relevant correspondence.**
- 4. To provide further information on plans to upgrade the digital technology used by the Planning team in order to support making the planning application service as effective as possible.**
- 5. To note that reducing the council's area planning committee structure from 4 to 3 by dissolving Eastern Area Planning Committee would generate an approximate annual saving of £10,000.**
- 6. That no reduction to the council's area planning committee structure should be made without sound evidence regarding,**
 - a) the benefits of doing so, and**
 - b) the impact on local democracy and accountability (including the public's ability to attend planning committee meetings without incurring additional cost or inconvenience).**
- 7. To retain the Strategic Planning Committee within the planning committee structure.**
- 8. To note the overall positive response from planning applicants and planning professionals to survey of their experiences of the planning committee process.**
- 9. To require councillors calling applications in for committee decision to provide a reason for doing so, to be presented at the relevant committee meeting by the councillor or on their behalf. When these reasons are not provided prior to the committee agenda being published, discussion of the relevant application to be deferred until the following meeting.**
- 10. The Cabinet Member and Planning Committee Chairmen to**
 - a) agree and implement a consistent approach to managing public participation at planning committee meetings, and**
 - b) adopt the Southern Area Planning Committee's approach to agreeing site visits.**
- 11. In order to protect public confidence in the openness and transparency of the council's decision making processes, pre-meeting briefings for full planning committee memberships to cease.**
- 12. That the process for determining Rights of Way and Village Green applications is reviewed and potential improvements reported to Committee.**

- 13. In order to ensure a consistent approach to determining planning applications across the county, to undertake further analysis of statistical variances in the four area planning committees' practices regarding,**
- a) Calling planning applications in for decision by committee**
 - b) Deciding against planning officers' recommendations (including any correlation with subsequent planning appeal outcomes).**

Cllr Ian McLennan, Chairman of Planning Committee System Task Group

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Appendices

Appendix 1	Results – Survey of planning applicants
Appendix 2	Results – Survey of planning professionals
Appendix 3	Map of the current Area Planning Committee boundaries
Appendix 4	Data on planning committee activity
Appendix 5	Map of the emerging Housing Market Areas (HMAs)