

## Wiltshire Council

### Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee

18 September 2018

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#### **Executive Response to the Final Report of the Planning Committee System Task Group**

##### **Purpose**

1. To present the response of the Cabinet Member for Planning and Strategic Asset Management to the Task Group's final report, which was debated by Committee on 20 March 2018 and 5 June 2018.

##### **Background**

2. OS Management Committee established a Planning Committee System Task Group in June 2017 and the Task Group's final report ([here](#)) was received on 20 March 2018. Following debate the Committee did not endorse the report but asked the Task Group to meet with the Cabinet Member to discuss it and bring any further proposals back.
3. Following further discussions with the Cabinet Member, the Task Group brought a further report ([here](#)) to Committee on 6 June 2018, presenting a summary of the discussions and, in some cases, amended recommendations. The final recommendations were all endorsed by Committee with the exception of 11, which was not supported as set out below.
4. Following debate Committee resolved that the Task Group had concluded its work.

##### **Executive response to the Task Group's recommendations**

5. The Task Group's 12 recommendations are included below, plus relevant discussions notes where appropriate.
  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.**

*Executive response: Noted*

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.**

*Executive response: These improvements are being considered within the procurement of new digital technology.*

- 3. To inform applicants of town/parish council's role in the planning process on the website and relevant correspondence.**

*Executive response: The role of town/parish council as Statutory consultees and relevant correspondence will be considered when website is reviewed.*

- 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.**

*Executive response: Upgrades continue and specification for new system is being agreed.*

- 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 £11,774 [figure corrected from the original recommendation].**

*Executive response: Noted*

- 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).**

Notes of further discussion between Task Group and Cabinet Member:

The Cabinet Member and Task Group agreed that any further scrutiny work on this matter would not be appropriate until the outcomes of the Electoral Commission's Boundary Review are known.

The Task Group concluded that, even if the total number of Wiltshire Councillors was reduced following the Boundary Review, it would not justify a reduction in the number of area planning committees.

The Task Group's report concludes that reducing the current area planning committee structure from four to three would save £11,774. If such savings were considered necessary, the Task Group would recommend they be achieved instead by reducing the number of area planning committee chairmen from four to two (chairing two committees each), yielding a reduced spend on councillors' Special Responsibility Allowances of £13,198pa.

*Executive response: Noted*

**7. To retain the Strategic Planning Committee within the planning committee structure.**

*Executive response: Agreed*

**8. To note the overall positive response from planning applicants and planning professionals to survey of their experiences of the planning committee process.**

*Executive response: Noted*

**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.**

Notes of further discussion between Task Group and Cabinet Member:

It was noted that the recommended amendment to the call-in procedure would need to be reflected in the relevant councillor guidance note, if accepted.

*Executive response: Agreed*

**10. The Cabinet Member and Planning Committee Chairmen to**  
**a) agree and implement a consistent approach to managing public participation at planning committee meetings**

Notes of further discussion between Task Group and Cabinet Member:

The Cabinet Member noted that a consistent approach is already set out within the Planning Committee Procedure note, but it is not necessarily followed consistently.

*Executive response: Briefing for Chairmen to agree a consistent approach*

- b) adopt the Southern Area Planning Committee's approach to agreeing site visits\*, with the committee chairman taking the final decision on what is a valid councillor request for a site visit when the request is made outside of a committee meeting.**

\* As outlined in the Task Group's report, Southern Area Planning Committee sometimes takes the decision to hold a site visit before the application has appeared on an agenda or the committee has met.

Notes of further discussion between Task Group and Cabinet Member:

The Cabinet Member and Task Group agreed that it was planning committee members' duty to be familiar with the sites to be discussed.

The Task Group clarified that the recommended change is not intended to increase the number of site visits undertaken. It also does not remove the ability of planning committees to agree site visits when an application is being discussed. The recommended change is only intended to **add** the ability to agree site visits **before** discussion at committee and, in doing so, increase the speed and efficiency of the planning process.

*Executive response: This has been referred to the Constitution Focus Group.*

- 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.**

*Not endorsed by the Committee and therefore no Executive response required.*

- 12. That the process for determining Rights of Way and Village Green applications is reviewed and potential improvements reported to Committee.**

*Executive response: Agreed*

- 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).**

*Executive response: Further analysis will be prepared.*

- 14. Periodic training and briefings for planning committee members (accessible online and via Skype) to be investigated.**
- NB. This was an additional recommendation added by Committee.

*Executive response: Agreed*

## **Proposal**

6. That OS Management Committee note the Executive response to the Final Report of the Planning Committee System Task Group.

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**Cllr Toby Sturgis, Cabinet Member for Planning and Strategic Asset Management**