

West Wiltshire District Council

Cabinet

29 September

Reverting to Area Committees

1. Introduction

At its meeting of 21 July, Council received a Notice of Motion calling for the reversion to area committees. The motion referred to consultation carried out in the Melksham area indicating support for local Councillors deciding local planning issues (see Appendix 1). The motion was referred to Cabinet for consideration.

2. Purpose of this Report

This report does not attempt to provide an in-depth analysis of the concept of area committees. This Council has direct experience of their operation in recent years. Rather, it aims to highlight the main issues involved in dealing with planning applications through area committees. It is presented as an aid for cabinet in debating the subject and in forming its view for forwarding on to Council.

3. The Main Issues

The main issues that are raised by the operation of Area Committees can be summarised as follows.

(i) Local People Deciding Local Issues

Local views are certainly an important input to making decisions on planning applications. After all it is local people who will be most affected by the development when it is built.

However planning applications are judged principally against a wide range of planning policies and standards which are common to the whole district. Our Local Plan policies have been developed through an exhaustive process of public consultation, have been subject to public inquiry and are now fully adopted and up to date. These should be applied consistently across the district.

It is a matter of achieving the right balance, of course. A single planning committee provides ample opportunity for the input of local views through means such as making written representations, through the local member and speaking in the Open Forum at the Committee itself. As a decision making body, a single committee is made up of members with local knowledge who can advocate strongly local views and also members from across the district who can provide a more dispassionate perspective on controversial local issues.

(ii) Expertise of Planning Committees

Under area committees, all councillors are involved in deciding planning applications, regardless of their interest and expertise in planning matters.

Deciding planning applications at member level requires a significant degree of knowledge about planning law, planning procedures and the policies of the Council and other agencies. Planning training is therefore important and is easier to arrange for a single committee rather than for all members of the Council in three area committees. A single committee enables its members to develop a specialism and expertise in planning. This in turn will contribute to the quality and consistency of the decisions made.

(iii) Consistency

The achievement of consistency is probably the greatest difficulty posed by area committees. Our three former area committees had very different characteristics and approaches and did make decisions which were very different from each other.

This issue was studied by a District Audit investigation into Probity in Planning in 2001. The report concluded that the Council was exposed to

“serious risks of impropriety in planning matters”.

One of the key factors contributing to this was that

“the three Area Development Control Committees operate in a relatively autonomous manner with little regard for consistency across the Authority. This, combined with officer autonomy, compounds to create undesirable practices and results which, in our view, are untenable as they result in a different development control service within different parts of the district.”

On the officer side, the three area teams have been disbanded and a single Development Control Manager has been introduced. On the member side, the single planning committee has largely dealt with the issue of consistency of decision making.

(iv) Performance

Improving development control performance is a corporate priority of the Council. Certainly, achieving government targets is virtually mandatory, with minimum standards being imposed and ultimately intervention taking place if performance targets are not met. At the same time, there are substantial rewards available for achieving targets; the Council received over £400,000 for its improved performance in 2002/03.

Individual area committees formerly met monthly. It was found that this made it difficult to achieve committee decisions within the eight week target. The current planning committee meets every three weeks and this increased frequency has undoubtedly contributed to the improvement in planning performance that has been achieved over the last year.

(v) Cost and Efficiency

The former area committee system required over twice as many meetings per year as the current single committee system. Each meeting brings with it preparation cycles, briefing meetings and other administrative tasks. Officers attending evening meetings are entitled to time off in lieu and this would be twice as much with area committees than with a single committee.

Area committees are therefore much less efficient in terms of staff time than a single committee. Although this does not incur a direct cost to the Council, it does mean that very scarce staff resources are diverted into servicing committees rather than dealing with planning applications. Additional staffing requirements are also generated in the Member Support section and for Office Services where meetings in external locations have to be set up and taken down.

In terms of agenda size, the current planning committee has settled down to agendas of 10 to 15 items per meeting and this is proving quite manageable. With the current level of delegation, it is estimated that area committees would, on average, deal with only 5 items per meeting. This too points to a less efficient system.

(vi) Structure

The internal structure of three area teams was terminated following the criticism in the Probity and Planning report and the Best Value review into development control. This arrangement was followed by two functional teams (Residential and Commercial) reporting to three area committees. This was a very complex and inefficient arrangement with, for example, the Principal Officer (Commercial) reporting to three different committees in three consecutive weeks.

The latest Council restructuring has resulted in two all-purpose teams in development control, together with a specialist major applications role. Again this would not integrate well with three area committees since each team would have to report to three separate committees.

To restructure yet again to reflect area committees would be both disruptive and demotivating for development control staff.

(vii) Other Powers for Area Committees

The intention of the previous area committee arrangement was that a wide range of District Council activities would be discussed and dealt with at area committees. In practice this was never remotely achieved. The consideration of planning applications dominated area committees and public attendance was overwhelmingly in connection with planning applications.

Since area committees have ceased, new arrangements for considering local and community based issues have been introduced. These include the joint Community Area Partnerships and also District Area Seminars. Three area committees would not integrate well with the five community area partnerships.

The new arrangements for community engagement are still bedding in and further change would be very disruptive to this fairly fragile process.

4. Conclusion

The re-introduction of area committees would be a very significant and unplanned for change for the District Council.

There is no right or wrong committee system for dealing with planning applications - many different forms have been made to work. Area committees do however bring with them a number of implications and, in the light of the West Wiltshire experience, these are likely to include:

- Problems of consistency between area committees
- Issues of training and expertise amongst Area Committee members
- A less efficient arrangement, with staff time diverted away from dealing with planning applications to servicing committees
- A negative impact on performance and in turn the receipt of Government grant
- Requirements for further structural change within the Development Control section
- Requirements for further review and change in the arrangements for community engagement.

5. Recommendation

It is recommended that Cabinet considers the subject of reverting to area committees for planning decisions and forwards its views to Council.

Tim Darsley
Corporate Director

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Portfolio Holder

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West Wiltshire District Council

Extract from Council minutes – 21 July 2004

193. NOTICES OF MOTION

(b) Reverting to Area Committees

The following notice of motion had been submitted by Cllrs Chivers and Barker:

“In line with good practice of engaging in meaningful consultation with the local community, some local Melksham Councillors and residents have carried out intensive residents’ surveys to gain local views.

An overwhelming majority of residents responding are strongly in favour of local Councillors deciding local planning issues.

With this in mind this Council returns to locally based area planning committees. And in doing so also considers what other powers can be delegated to area committees and seeks more effective ways of involving the community and parish councils in the decision making process. This Council should also investigate ways of devolving more power to town and parish councils”.