

Title: **The implications of fortnightly Planning meetings**

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Purpose

This report has been requested by Planning Committee to consider the implications of Planning Committee meeting every two weeks.

Background

At the meeting of 15 November the Committee considered a report about the length and late finishes of Planning Committee meetings. The Committee considered a number of steps that could be taken to shorten meetings and finish earlier. The Committee resolved:

- That front end items for dissemination of information or where or there is no urgency to consider items at a particular meeting with a lengthy agenda will be held over to later meetings where agendas and plans list are shorter.
- That Planning Committee meeting start times will continue to be at 7.00pm.
- That a report be made to the next scheduled meeting of Planning Committee to consider the implications of a change to fortnightly meetings
- That the Open Forum will remain in its current format.
- That Officers and members keep their comments as brief as possible, to the point and to avoid repetition of their own comments or of what others have said previously.
- That the Committee seeks not to make changes to the scheme of delegation.

Projected statistics

Based on projections from the statistical information included in the report to the meeting of the 15 November, planning committees meetings every two weeks would result in the following.

- 26 scheduled planning committees per annum (17 with occasional additional meetings)
- Planning applications per meeting
 - Average 8/9 (12)
 - Maximum 13 /14 (20)
 - Minimum 4/5 (7)

- Length of meeting

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|---------|---------------------------|
| Average | 2hrs 25mins (3hrs 30mins) |
| Maximum | 3hrs 36mins (5hrs 15mins) |
| Minimum | 1hr 3mins (1hr 30mins) |
- Finishing time based on a 7.00pm start

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|---------|-------------------|
| Average | 9.25 pm (10.30pm) |
| Maximum | 10.36pm (12.15am) |
| Minimum | 8.03pm (8.30pm) |
- Number of open forum contributors

| | |
|---------|---------|
| Average | 12 (17) |
| Maximum | 24 (33) |
| Minimum | 3 (4) |

The numbers in parentheses are the equivalents for a three weekly cycle of meetings.

It should be noted that the number of planning applications referred to Planning Committee remains fairly constant in the low 200s per annum.

Key Issues

The paper now considers the implications of a change to meetings every two weeks for
 Customers of the Development Control service
 Elected Members
 Development Control Officers
 Democratic Services Officers

It goes on to look at available dates for the remainder of this municipal year and the legal and financial implications of more frequent Planning committee meetings.

Implications for Customers of the Development Control service

- Shorter meetings would mean applicants, agents and members of the public spending less time waiting for the agenda item which interests them being heard.
- More frequent meetings will mean some applications being considered sooner by Planning Committee than under the current arrangement of three weekly meetings.

Implications for Elected Members

- Attendance at an additional 9 programmed planning committee meetings each year. The number of additional meetings would be offset by those meetings being shorter and ending at a more reasonable hour.
- The Chair of Planning Committee would be required to attend 9 further briefing meetings with officers
- It is unreasonable to expect members to make significant decisions affecting the district and its communities and people late at night at the end of a long meeting

Members at Planning Committee may wish to voice further implications that those suggested here by officers.

Implications for Development Control Officers

- **Planning Case Officers**

- A change to meetings every two weeks in itself will not generate an increase in the numbers of applications being referred to Planning Committee but to ease the preparation of the agenda some adjustment to the flow of work would be necessary to even out the flow of committee work. This could lead to more information received late in the application process being reported on the 'late list.'
- The preparation of papers for the next planning Committee would overlap with the current planning committee
- **Planning Support Officers**
- Again there would be no increase in the volume of work.
- Improving the flow of work with less emphasis on deadlines would be required and is possible.
- Flow of work, particularly with the preparation of papers for the next Planning Committee would overlap with the current Planning Committee. This could present difficulties and would need to be carefully managed.
- Deployment of Planning Support Officers would need to be adjusted to fit with a two weekly committee cycle.
- **Planning Officers attending Planning Committee.**
- More frequent committees would be offset by meetings finishing at a more reasonable time.
- Shorter agendas are likely to offer an opportunity of reducing the number of Development Control officers usually attending Planning Committee from three at present to two.
- 'Time off in lieu' for the time spent by officers at evening Planning Committees could be easier to manage with less pressure from officers wanting to take time off on the day following committee.
- Officer performance at Planning Committee is affected towards the end of very long and late meetings (at the very least this applies to the Development Control Manager!)

Implications to Members Support Officers

- More frequent committee agendas needing to be produced, but with the implementation of a new IT package this is not foreseen to be a problem.
- Printing of committee agendas would be more regular
- More frequent committees would increase evening meetings needed to be supported by a member support officer, however this would be offset by meetings finishing at a more reasonable time.
- Officer performance at Planning Committee is affected towards the end of very long and late meetings, mistakes can easily be made or important things missed.
- The agendas for the next Planning Committee would need to be prepared on the Friday following committee, and the minutes would need agreeing by the following Monday, to ensure they can be sent with the agendas. We would endeavour to ensure that this target is achieved, but this may not always be achievable due to the very tight timescale. We would however ensure that the preparation, distribution and agreeing of minutes would be done within the 7 day timescale.

Available dates for Planning Committees for remainder of municipal year

The following dates (all Thursdays) are available for a suggested trial period for two weekly meetings:

- 3 January - already a Planning Committee meeting date
- 17 January - we have licensing booked for this date but could move it if necessary
- 31 January
- 14 February - already a Planning Committee meeting date

Meetings can be scheduled every two weeks during January and February but no options are available for further meetings in March other than the two scheduled Planning Committee meetings on the 6 and 27 March.

In view of this and because it would be inappropriate to have Planning Committee meetings on successive weeks in late February and early March (i.e. 28 February and 6 March) an option is to trial two weekly meetings between 3rd January and 14 February (4 meetings in all) and to consider a report about that pilot scheme at the meeting of 6 March. Ideally a pilot scheme should last longer but existing council commitments would preclude this. The report to March could consider whether in light of the outcome of a trial period, two weekly meetings should be supported by the committee for the next municipal year.

To move permanently to two weekly meetings has implications for the Council's constitution. The constitution states that planning committee shall normally meet once every 3 weeks, or as required to discharge the business of the committee. It would be acceptable under the constitution for planning committee to meet every two weeks for a trial period. If the Committee deemed the trial period successful and sought to make Planning Committee meetings every two weeks a permanent arrangement a formal amendment to the constitution would be necessary. There would also be time then for two weekly meetings to be programmed into other council business for the municipal year 2007 / 8.

Legal Issues

- The constitution issue referred to above.
- The council has a duty of care to elected members and staff. Long and late finishing meetings must call this into question. Working time regulations come into play for staff.
- Concern has been expressed that the council could be challenged about the 'quality of decisions' taken very late in the evening at the end of a long meeting.

Financial Implications

- The costs of staffing and opening the council's building for additional meetings.

Human Rights Issues

- None

Conclusions

There would appear to be merit in running a short pilot to test two weekly planning committees. A permanent change to two weekly committees can not be made without changes to the Council's constitution.

Shorter and more frequent Planning Committees have clear benefits for customers of the Development Control service. Some adjustment of working practices will be required in both the Development Control and Member Support sections. A pilot scheme would enable these adjustments to be tested.

The thoughts of the committee on the effect of such changes for elected members would be welcome.

Recommendations

1. That a trial period of two weekly Planning Committee meetings is put in place between 3 January and 14 February 2008 and a report on the outcome of that pilot is made to the Planning Committee at its meeting of 6 March 2008.
2. A report be made to the Planning Committee at the meeting of 6 March, 2008 to consider the outcome of the trial period for two weekly meetings.