

Title: **Review of Pilot Scheme of Fortnightly Planning Committee Meetings**

Portfolio Holder: **Cllr T Phillips OBE**

Reporting Officer: **David Hubbard – Development Control Manager**

Purpose

This report reviews the pilot of 4 fortnightly planning committees during January and February 2008.

Background

At the meeting of 15 November 2007, the Planning Committee considered a report about the length and late finishes of Planning Committee meetings. A number of steps were proposed which could shorten meetings and allow a reasonable finishing time. These were:

- Limiting the number of non urgent reports
- An earlier start time
- Meetings every two weeks or the use of reserve dates
- Changes to the operation of open forum
- Shorter officer presentations and member contributions
- Changes to the scheme of delegation

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.
- Planning Committee meeting start times will continue to be at 7.00pm.
- A report be made to the next scheduled meeting of Planning Committee to consider the implications of a change to fortnightly meetings
- The Open Forum will remain in its current format.
- 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.
- The Committee seeks not to make changes to the scheme of delegation.

At the meeting of 6 December 2007, the Planning Committee considered a report to consider the implications of a change to fortnightly meetings.

Planning Committee resolved that:

- A trial period of two weekly Planning Committee meetings is put in place between 3 January and 14 February 2008 (there was no scope within the Council's calendar for more than these four fortnightly meetings at this time) and a report on the outcome of that pilot is made to the Planning Committee at its meeting of 6 March 2008.
- 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.
- Planning Committee recommend Council to remove from the Council's constitution any limitation of the frequency of Planning Committee meetings as soon as possible.

The pilot took place with committees on the 3rd, 17th and 31st January and 14th February 2008. This was the maximum number which could be arranged in time for the pilot to be reviewed and next municipal year's programme of meetings decided.

Statistical comparison has been made with 18 planning committees held over the year ending on 25th October 2007 on a three weekly cycle (including additional special meetings and extra meetings).

Factor	Pilot	Yearly
Number of applications considered	48	218
Average per meeting	12.0	12.1
Most applications per meeting	18	20
Least applications per meeting	10	7
Most applications per meeting	18	20
Meetings with 10 or less applications	1	4
Meetings with 11 - 14 applications	2	8
Meetings with 15 or more applications	1	6
Average length of meetings	3hrs 21mins	3hs 30mins
Longest meeting	4hrs 40mins	5hrs 15mins
Shortest meeting	2hrs 5mins	1hr 30mins
Average time per planning application	17mins	17mins
Average finishing time	10.21 pm	10.30 pm
Earliest finishing time	9.05 pm	8.30 pm
Latest finishing time	11.40 pm	12.15 am
Committee failed to complete the agenda	1	6
Open forum contributors	89	304
Average number of open forum contributors per meeting	22	17

Key Issues

The pilot of fortnightly planning committees stemmed from concerns about the length and late finishing times of planning committee meetings. The pilot study has shown that fortnightly meetings alone is not a solution that will solve this problem. Two of the four meetings exceeded 4 hours (4 hours 25minutes and 4 hours 40 minutes) and had finishing times of 11.25pm and 11.40pm respectively. The average length and finishing times of meetings was broadly the same as for three weekly meetings. The percentage of meetings exceeding four hours is broadly similar.

In all respects the averages for the meetings exceeded those estimated in the report to Planning Committee on 6th December as follows

	Actual	Estimate
Average number of planning applications	12	8/9
Average Length of meeting	3hrs 21mins	2hrs 25mins
Average finishing time based on a 7.00pm start	10.21pm	9.25pm
Average number of open forum contributors	22	12

The move to fortnightly meetings has brought with it a number of significant difficulties:

- More meetings but with no benefit from those meetings being shorter.
- Very little opportunity to programme special meetings, member training or additional meetings if agendas are not completed.
- It has proved difficult for senior officers to prepare for one committee and to pick up the outcome of that meeting on the same days when reports etc are being finalised for the next meeting. This has led to some items (the appeals report for example) not being completed in time and for report checking and editing not being done as thoroughly as in the past. This can lead to the late list being longer than previously.
- Similarly the time frame for preparing minutes for the next meeting is much reduced.
- Staffing vacancies in both the Development Control and members support has added to these difficulties.

It is considered therefore that the committee should meet in the future on a three weekly basis but with a 'reserve' date identified for every three meetings which would be available for special meetings or additional meetings if agendas are not completed. Clearly this will not help reduce the length of meetings or prevent late finishes to planning committees.

In this regard members have two options:

- To continue with the status quo and accept that usually planning committee will last for more than three hours ending after 10.00pm and that a quarter of meetings will extend to more than four hours ending after 11.00pm
- To consider again the original proposals aimed at achieving a more reasonable duration and finishing time for committee. In particular, it is considered that the earlier start time for meetings and a revised format for open forum would have a significant effect.

Other things being equal, an earlier start time at 6.30pm would bring forward the committee finishing time by a half hour. It would also reduce the wasted time for officers between their normal finishing time and the start of committee. It could be combined with the provision of refreshments, for both members and officers, between 6 and 6.30pm.

A revised open forum could take the form of:

In normal circumstances:

Three minutes each for the objector/s, the applicant and the town/parish council.

For major, controversial cases:

Ten minutes for a joint presentation from objectors, and three minutes each for the applicant and the town/parish.

Such an arrangement would provide ample opportunity for the points for and against an application to be voiced. The results of public consultation are, of course, already set out in the committee report. It would also be more balanced and fair than the current arrangement, which can see a long succession of speakers rehearsing the same or very similar points, with the applicant limited to one three minute slot. Similar formats are common in other councils.

Legal Issues

The constitution states that 'the Planning Committee shall normally meet once every 3 weeks, or as required to discharge the business of the Committee, on such dates as may be determined by the Committee or by the Proper Officer after consultation with the Chairman. The Proper Officer may, after consultation with the Chairman (or in his absence, the Vice- Chairman), cancel and re –arrange scheduled meetings for lack of business or to facilitate attendance by members of the Committee'.

The Legal Services Manager advises that the frequency of meetings of the planning committee may be varied without changes to the constitution being first sought.

The council has a duty of care to elected members and staff. Long and late finishing meetings must call this into question. Officers and working members have already worked a 7.5 hour day by say 5.30 on a committee day. A committee lasting until 11 o'clock turns this into a 14 hour working day. Officers have to attend early the next day to confirm the details of the resolutions and to advise applicants of the decisions.

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

None

Human Rights Issues

None

Conclusions

The pilot study has shown that fortnightly meetings are not a solution which on their own will address concerns about the length and late finishing times of planning committee meetings. It is considered that the committee should meet in the future on a three weekly basis but with a 'reserve' date identified for every three meetings which would be available for special meetings or additional meetings if agendas are not completed.

In addition, it is considered that the committee should adopt an earlier starting time and a revised format for open forum.

The only other alternative is for the Committee to continue with the status quo and accept that usually planning committee will last for more than three hours ending after 10.00pm and that a quarter of meetings will extend to more than four hours ending after 11.00pm

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

1. The Planning Committee should meet in the future on a three weekly basis but with a 'reserve' date identified for every three meetings which would be available for special meetings or additional meetings if agendas are not completed.
2. The Committee uses the meetings on 27th March 17th April and 8th May to pilot:
 - an earlier start time for Planning Committee meetings and
 - changes to the format of open forum as suggested above, as ways of bringing forward the finishing time of planning committee and to reduce the length of the meeting.