

Title: **Planning Committee Performance 2006.**

Reporting officer: **David Hubbard, Development Control Services Manager**

PLANNING COMMITTEE PERFORMANCE 2006.

In late December, Cllr Sarah Content – Leader of Council, Cllr Jeff Osborn – Planning Portfolio Holder, Cllr Christopher Newbury – Planning Committee Chairman, Yamina Rhouati – Member Support team Leader, David Hubbard – Development Control Service Manager, Peter Westbury – Principal Planning Officer met to discuss the performance of the planning committee

The meeting was called in response to Member and officer concerns about the length of planning committee meetings and late finish of planning committee. Additional concerns included quality of decisions, shorter debates as meeting progresses and fewer members present late in meeting.

Some Statistics

17 Planning Committee meetings in 2006

Planning Applications

211 applications considered – average of 12.4 per meeting

Most applications per meeting - 17

Least applications per meeting - 5

Less than 10 applications per meetings – 4

10 – 14 applications per meetings – 9

More than 15 applications per meetings – 4

Times and Length of meetings

Average time per meeting – 3hrs 17 minutes

Longest meeting – 4hrs 45 mins

Shortest meeting – 1hr 10 mins.

1-2 hrs – 3

2-3 hrs – 3

3 – 4 hrs – 6

More than 4 hours - 5

Average time per planning application – 16mins

Earliest finishing time – 8.10 p.m.
Latest finishing time - 11.45 p.m.

Average finishing time – 10.21 p.m.

The committee agenda was not completed on two occasions

Open Forum

Open Forum contributors – 228

Average number of open forum contributors per meeting – 13.4

Less than 10 open forum contributors per meeting – 3
10 – 14 open forum contributors per meeting – 2
15 – 19 open forum contributors per meeting – 8
More than 20 open forum contributors per meeting – 2

Officer recommendations turned over

Turnovers 28 (13.2%)

Reasons for reference to committee

Town / Parish council – 141 (66.8%)
Ward members – 50 (23.6%)
WWDC officer / member as applicant – 10 (4.7%)
Development Control manager discretion – 6 (2.8%)
WWDC applications – 4 (2.1%)

Issues

- the length of planning committee meetings
- late finish of planning committee.
- quality of decisions,
- shorter debates as meeting progresses
- fewer members present late in meeting.

Matters discussed

- **Starting time**

See statistics on length of meeting above.

Planning Committee starts at 7.00pm. There was some support for an earlier start time but the difficulties for committee members who work was recognised. A situation must not be allowed to arise by which members are excluded from sitting on Planning Committee because of difficulties of making an earlier start time. 7.00pm is considered the most reasonable starting time.

It was accepted that the start time was a matter for the committee itself to debate. This could be an issue for the new planning committee to consider after the May council elections. The committee endorsed this position at its meeting of 15th February.

(Two recent committees have started earlier - at 6.30 - to include debates about planning delegated powers as part of the ongoing review of the Council's constitution. It is not intended at this time that this will become a regular start time)

- **Open Forum**

See statistics on open forum above.

The principle of open forum as a democratic and important element in the planning decision making process was recognised. Open forum is an opportunity for objectors to and supporters of an application or other item and representatives of parish and town councils and the applicant to speak to the committee for up to three minutes.

The key to the success of the open forum is good management of this part of the meeting and should seek -

- to discourage repetition from contributors,
- to strictly limit speakers to three minutes (less time when there is a big agenda) and
- to ask speakers to appoint one spokesman for several people on large agendas

It is considered that at present the process is well managed and works satisfactorily

- **Member Contributions**

Considered that member debates are currently well conducted and of a good quality

Given the length of meetings it was considered useful to remind members to keep their contributions to the point, as brief as possible and that members should avoid repeating comments made previously by others.

- **Officer contribution**

Officers also need to be aware of the need to keep presentations and responses to points and questions made by members to the point and as brief as possible

- **Management of meeting**

The preparation of the committee agenda tries to identify those applications likely to attract several open forum contributors and to place those items early in the agenda. The chairman also seeks to hear items where speakers have registered for open forum before those with no speakers. This practice works well and should continue. It probably underlies the perception that the length of debate on planning applications reduces towards the end of the meeting. Clearly where there are no open forum contributions the time taken to consider an application will be less.

- **Automatic cut off after 3 hours and reserve dates for when committee overruns**

This is not supported. The current system of a vote to continue after 3 hours offers the committee flexibility to conclude meeting before the agenda is completed. The committee exercised this option on two

occasions in 2006. An automatic cut off after 3 hours would have resulted in the agenda not being completed on 11 out of 17 committees. Reserve dates would be difficult to schedule. More frequent meetings would add to members' committee commitments and would have workload implications for both the development control and members support sections. The current system is considered to work satisfactorily and should continue.

Despite some lengthy meetings with very late finishes and occasions when several members of the committee have had to declare a prejudicial interest and withdraw from the room, the committee has always been quorate. Inevitably towards the end of a long meeting some members have left early but usually the numbers leaving early have not prejudiced a proper debate about remaining agenda items.

- **Planning Committee Chairman**

The importance of the role of the Planning Committee chairman emerges in many of the points made above. It was considered that an experienced and trained chairman is key to the success of the Planning Committee.

- **Pre committee member training sessions**

These have pushed back the start time of the committee on four occasions in 2006 to 7.15. The advantage of short training sessions preceding Planning Committee is that it reduces the number of visits members are required to make to Bradley Road. The disadvantage is that a usually lengthy and demanding evening is further extended.

A programme for member development and training following the May council election is being prepared by the human resources and members support sections. The draft package of training for planning committee members includes some short training sessions before planning committee.

- **Constitution issues and ward member call ins**

On two recent occasions, the committee has debated a number of points about how the scheme of delegation works with regard to the planning committee. The views of the committee have been passed to the Standards Committee and are to be considered by Full Council as part of the review of the council's constitution

Conclusions

This report is to be circulated to all members by way of the Members Information Sheet.

The views of members either collectively as Planning Committee or individually are sought. Individual views should be sent in writing or by e mail to David Hubbard, Development Control Manager at Bradley Road by 31st March, 2007.