

APPENDIX K

WAVERLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENT AND LEISURE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

11 NOVEMBER 2008

EXECUTIVE - 2 DECEMBER 2008

Title:

AREA PLANNING COMMITTEES - REVIEW

[Portfolio Holder for Planning: Cllr Mrs Carole Cockburn]

[Wards Affected: All]

Summary and purpose:

The Council resolved to implement a new structure for the determination of planning applications from 1 January 2008, creating four Area Planning Committees and retaining a Joint Planning Committee. It was requested that a review of the system be carried out in September 2008 with a view to making recommendations on any further improvements to the Council.

How this report relates to the Council's Corporate Priorities:

The Planning Committee has an important role in managing development which meets Council priorities of protecting the environment, delivering affordable housing and enhancing leisure provision. The structure which has been put in place is designed to give greater community confidence in the decision making process.

Equality and Diversity Implications:

There are no direct implications for equality and diversity arising from the recommendations in this report.

Resource/Value for Money implications:

The cost of supporting four area committees can be provided from within existing resources.

Legal Implications:

There are no legal implications arising from this report.

Background

1. From January 2008, four Area Planning Committees were set up to meet in two Groups, the Eastern Group (Central and Eastern Area Planning Committees) and the Western Group (Southern and Western Area Planning Committees). The Council wished, in forming these Area Committees, to

involve a large number of Members in planning matters and to create a structure where decisions are taken locally. The Council further wished to ensure that all Members sitting on the Area Planning Committees had completed planning training before taking their place on a Committee.

2. It was suggested at the time that counter-arguments to the proposed changes were that this structure would require the participation of a greater number of Members than is the norm for an authority the size of Waverley; that locally-based decision making would present challenges to the Council in ensuring consistent interpretation of its Development Plan policies; and that the democratic costs would be increased as a function of the increased number of meetings. It was also noted that the number of Members participating in the four Committees is uneven, but reflects the size and population of each area and the anticipated workload. For these reasons it was agreed that an early review of the working and effectiveness of the new Area Committees should take place.
3. Members will know that a restructuring of the planning service has taken place during 2008. The Development Control teams have been strengthened by the appointment of a Development Control Manager, whose role is to ensure that the service is responsive to change and provides consistent professional recommendations for development proposals in all parts of the Borough. Her role is also to drive up improvements in the speed of making decisions on planning applications to meet the Council's targets. The development control officers have been regrouped into two Area Teams, whose boundaries coincide with the Eastern and Western member Groups, in order to develop local knowledge and to form teamworking relationships between officers and members on an area basis. Planning support officers have also been brought into the two area teams in order to relieve the professional staff as far as possible of administrative duties.
4. This reorganisation at officer level has supported the new committee structure with the result that, while the four Area Committees retain a local "feel", they are able to receive consistent reports and recommendations to enable them to reach appropriate decisions based on Council-wide policy. Close attention has been paid by the Development Control Manager to perceived differences between the Committees and she has been in a position to address these, with the willing co-operation of the Group Committee Chairs.
5. To date, the workload of the Area Committees has not been onerous, and all members have been given good opportunities to participate fully in debate. The protocols for delegation of planning decisions to officers and for call-in to committee by Members have worked well. The additional resources in the Democratic Services team have enabled it to cope well with the increase number of meetings.
6. As the first nine months have been relatively problem-free it is considered that there is no compelling case for making changes to the structure or levels of membership of the four Area Planning Committees.

Training

7. Training for Planning Committee members has been largely welcomed and a number of members have expressed the desire for further training opportunities, including:
 - The role and purpose of the Development Plan and its policies
 - Sustainability issues in determining planning applications
 - Planning enforcement
 - Planning obligations (S106 agreements)
8. It is also suggested that there should be occasional refresher sessions for all Planning Committee members, as policies and processes are subject to continual change and the principles need to be understood by decision makers (for example the changes to the General Permitted Development Order from 1st October 2008). Members will also continue to be involved in the preparation of the Local Development Framework and a recent all Members briefing on this was well attended.

Performance

9. Members will be aware that the performance in determining planning applications to target deadlines is currently poor. The underlying reasons for this have been largely addressed through the restructuring mentioned above. There is no evidence that the introduction of Area Committees will hold back the drive to increase the speed of decision making. However Officers consider that some minor refinements of the scheme of delegation will ensure that applications are not unnecessarily brought to Committee. This will allow Members to focus on applications where there is significant local concern or raise issues of policy interpretation. These are proposed on the Annexe 1.

Other issues

10. Discussions between the Area Planning Committee Chairs and Vice-Chairs together with senior officers have also led to some agreed changes and improvements. These relate to the structure of written reports to committee, arranging briefing meetings close to the Committee date (in lieu of draft agenda meetings) and the provision of information to Members including regular reporting of planning appeal decisions and enforcement investigations. Both the Officers and Chair and Vice Chairs are keen to continue these regular discussions with the aim of improving the effectiveness of the Committees and ensuring that Officer and Member time is used efficiently.
11. One further suggested change relates to the timing of the second of the two Committee meetings. Currently the second meeting is scheduled to start at 7.15 pm or when the first meeting ends. The first meeting usually finishes later than 7.15pm with the result that Members of the second Committee and any members of the public arriving at 7.15 pm have to wait outside the Council Chamber. A later time of 7.30pm for the second meeting would help.

Conclusion

12. Overall it is considered that the introduction of Area Planning Committees has met the Council's aspirations to improve local Member involvement in decision-making. There is no need to revise the structure at this time and to allow the changes to be fully embedded it is suggested that a further review should be undertaken, in two years.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee Observations

The Environment and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the review at its meeting on 11 November 2008 and its observations are below:

- That no change be made to the structure or levels of membership of the four area planning Committees but the Committee;
- The Executive considers whether the recession will affect the volume of applications and, therefore, if it needed to review the structure earlier than the proposed two years;
- The Executive considers how to deal with applications which cut across two Committees. However, the Committee recognised that these, in most circumstances, were significantly large applications (such as Dunsfold and Tuesley Farm) which would be considered by the Joint Planning Committee;
- To support the further series of training courses for Members on planning issues be developed for rolling out within the next few months;
- To support the scheme of delegation amendments as noted in Annexe 1 to the agenda report;
- That the start time of the second Area Planning Committee remain at 7.15pm, or at the conclusion at the first Area Planning Committee, if later.

Recommendation

It is recommended that:

1. no change be made to the structure or levels of membership of the four Area Planning Committees, but that a further review should be undertaken, with a report to the Executive within the next two years;
2. a further series of training courses for Members on planning issues be developed for rolling-out within the next few months;
3. Members agree to recommend the minor changes to the Scheme of Delegation to the Council, as set out in Annexe 1 to the report; and
4. the start time of the second Committee meeting be amended to 7.30pm or at the conclusion of the first meeting, if later.

Background Papers (CSP)

There are no background papers (as defined by Section 100D(5) of the Local Government Act 1972) relating to this report.

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