

# **Report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

**Date of meeting: 13 December 2007**

**Report of :** Constitutional Affairs and Members' Services  
Standing Scrutiny Panel

**Subject:** Area Plans Sub Committee - Three Week Cycle

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## **Recommendations:**

**That a report be submitted to the Council recommending that with effect from 2008/9, provision be made in the Council calendar of meetings for a meeting of each Area Plans Sub Committee every three weeks.**

## **Report:**

1. We were asked by the Director of Planning and Economic Development to review arrangements for Area Plans Sub Committee meetings. We noted that it was his view that changes in the frequency of meetings would assist the Council in achieving top quartile performance in development control against the Government targets.

## **Current Situation**

2. The Council currently has three Area Sub Committees, having reduced from four about a year ago. When the reduction was made, the Council decided to retain the four week cycle. This had the effect of leaving one week in every four free. It is in this area that it was suggested that the processing of planning applications can be improved.

## **Performance Data**

3. Over the past five years the Government required local authorities to improve their performance in the speed of determining planning applications. They did this by setting targets, 'naming and shaming' those authorities that were 'failing' and by providing incentives in the form of additional grants to those authorities that were 'succeeding'.

4. The Government began separating the planning application performance into three categories and set a target for each:

(a) **Major applications** (large commercial schemes and residential schemes over ten units) - 60% in 13 weeks;

(b) **Minor applications** (smaller commercial and residential schemes) - 65% in eight weeks;

(c) **Other applications** (mostly householder applications for extensions, etc., changes of use, adverts and other minor applications) - 80% in eight weeks.

5. Five years ago (2002/03) this Council's performance was:

Major	26%
Minor	55%
Other	78% .....all three below the Government's targets.

Last year (2006/07), the performance had improved to:

Major	67%
Minor	73%
Other	90% ..... all three exceeding the Government's targets.

6. However, bearing in mind the investment the Council has made in Planning in recent years and a desire to provide a first class service to its residents, the Council's objective is to achieve top quartile performance for these three key indicators, and has thus adopted the following targets:

Major	74.75%
Minor	80.39%
Other	91.61%

### **Current Performance**

7. An Improvement Plan for these Indicators was adopted at the beginning of the year and for the first six months (April-September 2007) the performance has been:

Major	80%
Minor	79.1%
Other	88.6%

8. Of the 1,111 planning decisions taken during this period, 964 were within the target periods and 147 exceeding targets. These comprised four out of 20 Major applications, 41 out of 196 Minor applications and 102 out of 895 Other applications.

9. Of the 147 that exceeded the targets, 101 were applications determined by committee rather than under delegated powers.

### **Proposal**

10. We are recommending that Area Sub Committees should meet on a three-weekly basis. This would remove the vacant week and provide more meetings. The principle of more Area sub Committees has, we feel, already been established because extra meetings are being arranged for April and early May 2008 in order to speed up the process.

### **Conclusions on Three or Four Week Cycles**

11. Without altering the delegation agreement or the time available for consultation and reply and thus without any impact upon local democracy in planning decisions, assistance in improving performance can be made by holding each Area Sub Committee on a more regular basis, i.e., every three weeks rather than every four weeks as at present.

12. It can be appreciated that losing one week in the committee cycle, at its very simplest, would save one week in the time taken to determine applications.

13. An analysis of the decisions during April-September 2007 reveals that a number of applications missed their target because of the lack of any committees through April/May around the election period and members will have noted that this has been addressed with an additional meeting being arranged for next April and May for each Sub Committee. However, in addition, it is noted that one Major application, three Minor applications and five

Other applications determined by committee slipped over target by less than 7 days. These would have been in target had the committees operated on a three week cycle and would have resulted in performance of:

Major	85%
Minor	80.6%
Other	89.2%

14. However, it is anticipated that an unknown, though small, number of additional applications might have met their target if the case officer were confident that a more regular meeting of the appropriate committee would have enabled the target to be met.

### **Other Options**

15. We considered a suggestion that the 'fallow' week in the current cycle could be used only for Area South. It is true that the highest number of applications originate in that area. However, this would not deal with 'waiting times' in the other areas. We also think that it will be clearer for the public if the cycle is the same for all three Sub Committees.

16. We have not considered officer delegation as part of this review. However, we have been informed that in the New Year there will be some minor changes brought forward which could assist further.

### **Consultation**

17. We have consulted all members of the Council via the Council Information Bulletin. A summary of performance data was included. The Local Councils' Liaison Committee is also being consulted at its meeting on 28 November 2007. Any views expressed will be reported at the meeting.

### **Resources**

18. We have been assured that support for the increased frequency of meetings can be met from existing resources in Planning and Economic Development. Additional costs will however be incurred in booking the external venue for Area Plans South and officer attendance allowances and Councillor travel/subsistence costs. The printing requirement for agenda will also increase.