

Report to Policy Working Group 3

Date of meeting: 20 September 2004

Portfolio: Planning and Economic Development

Subject: Area Plans Sub-Committees - Review

Officer contact for further information: Chris Overend, ext. 4247.

Committee Secretary: A Hendry, ext.4246



Recommendations:

1. **To review the current structure of Area Plans Sub-Committees as follows:**
 - (a) **to adopt a three Sub-Committee structure on grounds of accessibility, workload and improving the throughput of planning applications;**
 - (b) **to combine Area Plans Sub-Committees 'B' (Epping) and 'C' (Ongar Area) to achieve (a) above;**
 - (c) **to hold Area Plans Sub-Committees 'A', 'B' and 'C' on a three week cycle so as to speed up the process of handling planning applications;**
 - (d) **to determine the number of members to serve on the new combined Sub-Committee.**
2. **To consider introducing occasional meetings between Area Plans Sub-Committee Chairmen, the Chairman of the District Development Control Committee, Lead Planning Officers and the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economic Development to discuss any common issues which may arise; and**
3. **to consider the frequency of meetings under (2) above.**

Report:

1. (Head of Planning and Economic Development/Head of Research and Democratic Services) Following changes to the area boundaries implemented in May 2002 and increased officer delegation implemented in December 2002, it is felt that it is now appropriate to review the operation of the Council's four Area Plans Sub-Committees. Such a review was promised in the Development Control Service Improvement Plan adopted in November 2002 and the 2003/4 Service Plan. Issues which arise are geographical cohesion, workload, venues and access as well as operational improvements.

Geographical Cohesion

2. Area 'A' (Buckhurst Hill, Chigwell and Loughton) and Area 'D' (Epping Upland, Nazeing, Roydon and Waltham Abbey) are relatively compact and discrete geographical areas. Area 'B' (Epping, Theydon Bois, Lambourne and the southern part of North Weald) is a grouping of more diverse parishes but covers a relatively

compact area. Area 'C' (Ongar and all the parishes east of Harlow and Area 'B') has little geographical cohesion since it includes Parishes as far apart as Stapleford Abbots in the south and Sheering in the north.

Workload

3. In the 12 months from January-December 2003:
 - (i) Area Sub 'A' considered 178 applications (average of 14.8 per meeting) with a maximum of 23 and a minimum of 8;
 - (ii) Area Sub 'B' considered 61 applications (average of 5.1 per meeting) with a maximum of 8 and a minimum of 2;
 - (iii) Area Sub 'C' considered 67 applications (average of 5.6 per meeting) with a maximum of 9 and a minimum of 2; and
 - (iv) Area Sub 'D' considered 74 applications (average of 6.2 per meeting) with a maximum of 12 and a minimum of 3.
4. It can be seen that the number of applications considered at Area Sub-Committee 'A' exceeded the other committee workloads, almost amounting to the total for the other three combined.

Venues

5. Area Sub 'A' meets in the Dining Hall at Roding Valley School. It is a large room but since it is a large Committee with 15 members and significant public interest from large agenda, the venue is not over big. The acoustics suffer from refrigeration equipment which operates in the vicinity.
6. Area Sub 'B' meets in the Council Chamber at the Civic Offices.
7. Area Sub 'C' meets at Shelley Primary School, where furniture is undersized and the location is deep within a residential estate. There is no bus route to the school.
8. Area Sub 'D' used to meet at Waltham Abbey Town Hall in a large hall with very poor acoustics although another venue in Roydon was used from time to time. The Committee now regularly meets at Saxon Way Community Centre in a room better suited.
9. Access for disabled people is satisfactory at all four venues.

Issues and Options

10. Despite the high number of applications considered each month by Area Plans Sub 'A', this operates as an efficient committee serving a traditional grouping of local areas in a central venue, well served by public transport. Members should however consider whether the other groupings need to be altered in order to balance the workload to some degree, perhaps combining two of the areas to form three area committees in total. Three Area Sub-Committees on a three week cycle would assist with meeting statutory targets for processing planning applications by shortening the period an application would need to wait for a meeting.
11. In terms of geography, it would be logical to divide areas 'B' and 'C' more evenly but

that would reduce the workload for Area 'C' to an unsustainable level. Thus, the most effective option appears to be to combine Areas 'B' and 'C' and centre these on Epping which is well served by public transport, eliminating the access problems and other issues associated with Shelley School. The area would remain a rather disparate geographical area but could be said to comprise most of the former Epping and Ongar Rural District. Furthermore, the elimination of Shelley School from the schedule of venues would result in a saving of £500 per annum.

Membership of Combined Sub-Committee

12. Currently Area Plans Sub 'B' and 'C' comprise all members in the relevant areas as follows:

Committee	Number of Members
Plans 'B'	9 members
Plans 'C'	10 members
Total	19 members

13. Combining the two Sub-Committees together would create a new body of 19 Councillors. To be exempt from pro rata requirements (i.e. a proportional representation for every political group on the Council irrespective of the area which they represent), an Area Plans Sub-Committee has to be an "Area Committee" under Government legislation. The tests for Area Committee status are as follows:

- (i) the Committee established solely of members elected to wards in the areas concerned;
- (ii) the Committee is concerned with discharging the functions of the authority;
- (iii) the area concerned does not exceed 2/5ths of the total area of the District or 2/5ths of the total population of the District.

14. The combined areas constitute 32.6% of the District's population and 63.2% of the area of the District. In establishing a Committee with area status either the population or the area criteria should be met. With this in mind, a combined Sub-Committee 'B' and 'C' can be treated as a local committee.

15. If members feel that a Sub-Committee of 19 members is too large, membership could be set at a lower figure and allocated pro rata between the political groups represented in the wards covered. This is the procedure adopted in relation to Area Plans Sub 'A', which comprises 15 members.

16. Within the area covered by the combined 'B' and 'C' Sub-Committees the pro rata between the political groups concerned is as follows:

Conservative: 11 (57.894%)
 Lib Dem: 6 (31.578%)
 Independent: 1 (5.263%)
 Labour: 1 (5.263%)

These percentages would be applied to the total number of seats for the Committee which members prefer.

17. These various changes would require amendments to the Council's Constitution.

Liaison on Common Issues

18. In order to achieve consistency between the Area Committees members may also wish to consider the value of regular (say twice a year) meetings, between Chairmen of Sub-Committees, lead planning officers, the Chairman of District Development Control Committee and the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economic Development. This group could discuss common issues or topics which have arisen at meetings or elsewhere. The discussion should avoid individual planning applications etc due for consideration as the Portfolio Holder would not be able to be involved in those matters.

G:\C\POLICY WORKING GROUPS\PWG (3)\AREA PLANS SUB-COMMITTEES - REVIEW REPORT.doc