

Report to the Council

Committee: Overview and Scrutiny

Date: 19 December 2006

Chairman: Councillor R Morgan

Item: 13

1. REVIEW OF AREA PLANS SUB-COMMITTEES

Recommending:

- (1) That the principle of all members of the Council being members of an Area Plans Sub-Committee be adopted;
- (2) That Area Sub-Committee 'A' remain as at present except that the membership be increased to 25 members;
- (3) That Area Plans Sub-Committee 'D' remain unchanged;
- (4) That the present Area Sub-Committees 'B' and 'C' be combined;
- (5) That these changes take effect from the next Council Year; and
- (6) That, subject to Council approval, the relevant changes be made to the Council's Constitution.

(The Chairman of the Council has determined in accordance with Section 100B(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 and paragraphs (6) and (24) of the Council Procedure Rules that this report be considered at this meeting in order that the question of Area Plans Sub-Committees can be resolved in time for the next Council year.)

- 1.1 The review of possible changes to the pattern of Area Plans Sub-Committees in the District has been in progress for some time. The Standing Scrutiny Panel on Constitutional Affairs and Member Services has consulted Parish and Town Councils and many members of the Council have attended their meetings to express views.
- 1.2 The main issues which we asked the Panel to address were as follows:
 - (a) the workload and membership of Area Plans 'C';
 - (b) the principle of all members of the Council having a seat on their local Area Sub-Committee;
 - (c) whether the number of Area Sub-Committees should be changed; and
 - (d) whether it would be beneficial to change the areas covered by each Sub-Committee.

- 1.3 At our last meeting, we considered a report from the Panel setting out the final four options which they had identified for changing the structure. These were:
- (a) changing to a three Sub-Committee structure option (Area 'A' plus two new Sub-Committees reflecting a rural/urban split in the rest of the District);
 - (b) adjusting the present four Sub-Committee structure by changing the areas of 'B' and 'C';
 - (c) changing to a three Sub-Committee structure by combining Areas 'B' and 'C', leaving Areas 'A' and 'D' unaltered; and
 - (d) making no change.
- 1.4 We are clear that the many views expressed to the Panel were often in conflict and that the Panel has found it very difficult to achieve a consensus on whether changes should occur and what those changes should be. However, the Panel's review clarified the fact that a reduced number of Sub-Committees may speed processing planning applications but that the improvement may not be noticeable, as performance had been improving anyway. The question of planning delivery grant also arose during the review and it is now clear that this Government grant was already being secured based on improved turnaround times for planning applications. Performance to meet top quartile targets could be achieved only within the context of other improvements in the Planning Service and not solely speeding up of the throughput of planning applications.
- 1.5 In terms of the workload of Area 'C', the Panel established that this was definitely lower than the other Sub-Committees. The Panel looked at concerns which had been expressed from time to time about Area Plans Sub-Committee 'C' being inquorate but they established that this was not a regular occurrence. However the real arguments concerning Area 'C' (and about all of the Area Sub-Committees) were about the local consideration of planning applications as against the economics of holding meetings for a relatively small number of applications. The Panel had established that the principle of local sub-committees was generally supported. Another concern expressed in relation to Area Plans Sub 'C' was about travelling distances both by members (to view sites) and the public (to attend meetings). The Panel acknowledged this argument but felt that it would not be possible to base a structure on convenient travelling arrangements, because of the nature of the District.
- 1.6 The Panel reported to us at our last meeting. The Panel referred to the difficulties they were having in achieving a consensus for change and informed us that they had decided to resolve the question of whether change was supported or not before detailed discussion of the options outlined above took place. A majority voted for no change in the pattern of Area Plans Sub-Committee. The Panel therefore ceased consideration of the remaining options and recommended the 'no change' option to us.
- 1.7 The Panel also recommended that Area Plans Sub 'A' should discuss the question of its membership. This is a point which arose during the review in relation to the principle that every member of the Council should have a seat on an Area Plans Sub-Committee. Although this situation applies in Areas 'B', 'C' and 'D', it is not the case in Area 'A' where only 15 out of the 25 Councillors representing wards in that part of the District have seats on the Sub-Committee. This was the result of a previous decision of the Council to limit the Sub-Committee's membership. The Panel pointed out to us that several Area Plans Sub 'A' members had indicated that

they sought no change whatsoever in any aspect of that Committee. The Panel therefore recommended that the best way forward would be for that Sub-Committee to consider this question and recommend if they wished to move to a total of 25 members.

- 1.8 In considering the report of the Panel, we concluded that the review had been in progress for many months and should be completed as soon as possible. We did not accept the recommendation of the Panel for 'no change' because we did not feel that this outcome met the initial terms of reference of the review. For instance, a 'no change' option neither addresses the relatively low caseloads for Area Subs 'B' and 'C' and nor the original brief that the question of all members being on Area Plans Sub-Committees should be achieved in some way.
- 1.9 We thus rejected the recommendations of the Panel and are now recommending as set out at the commencement of this report including the proposal to increase the number of Area Plans Sub 'A' members. If this recommendation were adopted, we have been advised that a review of the meeting venue may be required. Our proposals involve changes to the Constitution and we recommend that these be written into the Constitution once these have been approved.