

Extract from Planning Peer Review Report

6. Planning Committee

The Planning Committee demonstrates an effective understanding of planning matters. Our observation showed that members of the committee were at ease in their role; they had a good understanding and application of their planning policies and conducted a high quality debate. However, the nature and length of debates should be reviewed to balance the airing of the issues with timely decision making. The Chairman of Planning Committee is experienced and committed to the task and has an in-depth knowledge of planning policies and the old Local Plan. He chaired the meeting in a confident and open manner.

Public speaking is effective with an open and generous process for speaker and clear visual displays. The large screen in the Council Chamber makes it easy for the Public to see presentations and the Committee were presented with plans and photographs to illustrate the sites they were discussing. Public speakers were put at ease before their presentations and the Chairman used his discretion to allow speakers to finish their key representations. This will provide supporters and opponents with a feeling of being listened to which is crucial at a committee which for many people is the only contact they will have with the Council.

Individual members of the Committee and the Committee as a whole are aware of their over-riding duty to the whole community and not to people in their wards and the need to make decisions impartially and on clear planning grounds. Members have a clear understanding and appreciation of the role of Planning Committee as a quasi-judicial Committee, the public facing nature of Planning Committee in particular and the reputational and financial risks this brings for the council as a whole. This is an essential basis for the effective functioning of this high profile committee.

Members of the Planning Committee regard planning officers as competent and are keen to develop relationships further. During our workshop with members of the planning committee we heard many positive comments about officers being knowledgeable, having a good track record on planning and being forthcoming with information, guidance and advice. Members felt comfortable asking what they called 'silly questions' which is a good indication of trusted and reliable relationships. However, there was a general view that there is not sufficient contact with officers and that this was not formalised. Members were aware of workloads and pressures on officers and sometimes felt they did not want to add to this.

Areas for consideration

The lay-out and audibility of the Council Chamber needs re-designing to improve the customer experience. In particular the peer challenge team felt that the room layout could change to accommodate more members of the public into the main council chamber, rather than confining them to the Gallery with poor acoustics and a sense

of 'them and us'. Similarly the challenge team questions the purpose for the seating arrangements of planning committee members with a front row for the ruling group and a back row for other members. It not only introduces a sense of party politics where this is not appropriate but also means that people talk to colleagues' backs which makes it difficult to hear and to have a dialogue. Seating arrangements need to support the purpose of the Committee which is for a group of members to determine planning decisions through careful and considered dialogue. In order to achieve this we feel that members need to see each other.

Debates at Planning Committee are lengthy and do not necessarily relate to the complexity of the proposal. In observing the Planning Committee, the peer challenge team felt that at times the committee seemed to cherish the intellectual exercise of debate for its own sake. Debate for debates sake is not the purpose of the planning committee and has financial and time implications for applicants and stakeholders who may have to spend a whole evening at the committee and not be heard, and then return on another occasion.

Reports by officers follow a clear structure and format. However, the challenge team felt that they would benefit from the inclusion of plans as well as a description of the wider material considerations. This is particularly important for larger developments where we strongly felt that reports need to include references to the Council's growth strategy and emerging policies of the Local Plan which can be used as material evidence by the committee. This is a crucial point which follows from some of our challenge above. For example in the Gateway report there were mixed messages about whether the gateway was part of the vision for the district that was supported by the Council. The report lacked clarity in terms of the vision and its importance as another material consideration.

As referred to earlier in this letter, the Council's position with regard to its draft Local Plan and in particular the absence of a five year land supply and with this the likelihood of applications for major sites will require regular briefings for all elected members of the Council on planning, as well as additional training for members and substitutes of Planning Committee. These briefings and training are crucial for the Council to be 'Fleet of foot' and for it to be in charge of the application process as much as possible.

While experience of Planning Committee in dealing with major applications has been relatively low over the last years, its exposure to major applications has recently increased, for example the Gateway and Clarendon Arcade schemes. None withstanding the outcome of the decision making process, both applications provide a good opportunity for the Planning Committee to review whether it has the right expertise, skill and confidence in determining such significant applications and identifying any gaps in skills or expertise it might need to fill, and the content and format of advice and support it requires from Planning officers. The peer challenge team felt that, in particular it needs to consider deliverability and implementation.

Planning officers will benefit from more exposure to elected Members in order to understand their perspectives, motivations and constraints. The peer challenge team felt that there is a need for officers to develop a better political skills set to appreciate the role of elected members (whether on planning committee or not) in planning.

Likewise, it is important for elected members to understand the constraints and pressures of planning officers. A better appreciation of 'each other's perspectives' is key to building a trusted relationship.

The Council and its Planning Committee must improve their relationship and develop trust. The peer challenge team concludes that this is a significant issue that needs resolving for the benefit of the local community. We heard from Planning Committee that there is too much interference among the Executive and CMT, while CMT and the Executive feel that Planning Committee do not understand the wider considerations and strategies that guide the development of the District. While the statutory role of Planning Committee is independent it also needs to act on behalf of the community as a whole and needs to consider wider strategic evidence in making decisions. This is and will be a balancing act but the wider and more concerning issue is the lack of trust. Trust is a function of two aspects: Competence (do I have the skills, capabilities and track record to do a job well?) and Character (do I have integrity and the right intent?). While the peer challenge team experienced general trust in the capability and skills of the Planning Committee, it is the intent (are we promoting or restricting growth at any cost?) which appears to be the key issue. The challenge team consider that this issue needs informal discussion and debate to achieve accommodation and consensus which will be crucial in going forward.

While the peer challenge team were left in no doubt about the genuine trust of planning committee members in officers' skills and competence, we observed and were told of incidents where the tone and communication between officers and members at Planning Committee was less professional than it might be required. We would recommend the introduction of more formality (ie the use of surnames) as this acts as a reminder to both officers and members that they are enacting key roles as advisors and decision makers on this committee. More formality will also help to reduce the use of personal observations or emotions that can make their way into Committees because of the highly controversial and sometimes emotive matters the Committee has to deal with.