



Planning Committee Development Group – Minutes of the meeting held 21 January 2021

Present: Cllr Richard Williams (RW), Cllr Anna Bradnam (AB), Cllr John Batchelor (JB), Cllr Pippa Heylings (PH) and Cllr Judith Rippeth (JR), Chris Carter (CC), Sharon Brown (SB) and Jeff Membery (JM).

Apologies: Cllr Nick Wright

Agenda Item 1 – Housekeeping and Terms of Reference (TOR)

Following discussions, the group agreed the following standing agenda items and terms of reference. **Action – JM to revise TOR and produce minutes.**

Standing Agenda Items- the following items were agreed as standard:

- 1) Apologies for absence
- 2) Minutes of the previous meeting
- 3) Report of input from other members (survey responses etc)
- 4) Review of outstanding action points
- 5) Main body of the meeting
- 6) AOB
- 7) Date and time of next meeting

Draft Terms of Reference - Background

As part of an ongoing service improvement programme, South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) and Cambridge City Council jointly commissioned the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) to undertake a review of the SCDC and City Council Planning Committees.



On completion of this review PAS issued a report which made a number of recommendations and suggested a Member/Officer working group be set up to on a task and finish model to consider if and how these recommendations should be taken forward.

This approach was supported by the Council's Scrutiny and Overview Committee on 17 December 2020 who set up the group and this was noted by the Planning Committee on 13 January 2021.

Scope

The Planning Committee Development Group is accountable to Scrutiny and Overview Committee and will.

1. *“Oversee the implementation of the Planning Advisory Service recommendations arising from its Planning Committee Review report.”*
2. Consider each recommendation contained within the PAS report - considering the views and opinions of members of the Planning Committee and:
 - Make recommendations to officers to implement procedural changes where appropriate.
 - Make recommendations to the appropriate committee of the Council to make changes where such authorisation is required
 - Direct or provide guidance and training to Members and/or Officers on planning matters, the workings of the Planning Committee or such closely associated topics as the group may see as appropriate.
 - To report on any recommendations contained in the PAS report that the group believes should not be implemented.
 - Ensure that the activities of the group - and any changes that are implemented because of the group's recommendations – are clearly communicated to all stakeholders including the reasons for the recommendations/changes and their likely impact.



Group membership

The group will consist of three Members of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee, Three Members of the Planning Committee and Three Officers.

Other Scrutiny and Overview Committee members or Planning Committee members and non-executive members may be invited input as needed. Executive members and other officers may be invited to contribute in an advisory capacity.

Frequency of meetings

The group will initially meet on a fortnightly basis but avoiding weeks in which there is a planning committee meeting.

Reporting

The group will report its progress to the Scrutiny and Overview Committee, the Planning Committee and Cabinet.

Agenda Item 2 – Survey feedback

Only 2 survey responses had been received so far so it was agreed that JM would bring the feedback to the next meeting by when it was hoped more responses would be received.

Agenda Item 3 – Workshops

Strengthening Member / Officer working at Committee

Common themes that emerged from this discussion were:

- Officer recommendations were respected by committee members, but the nature of planning is such that judgement plays an important role. Members reaching a different decision than was recommended was therefore not a criticism of officers.



- The role of officers at committee is to support and advise members and it is welcomed when officers clearly help members articulate their reasons for decisions.
- Conversely it was sometimes unhelpful when officers were unclear or unreasonably passive in supporting members in making and explaining their decisions.
- It is very helpful to members when they receive clear, early briefings on major developments which then allows discussions at committee to focus on the merits of the application rather than on understanding the details of the scheme.
- The language of both the reports brought to committee and of the questions raised by members was important. The language should reflect mutual respect and seek to elicit clear information
- Reports to committee should be clearer on those elements of the scheme that were matters of judgement where members and officers might legitimately hold different views.
- Members would welcome shorter more focussed reports allowing officers to spend more time instead ensuring they are accurate and error free. This would help rebuild confidence in the service.
- Members recognised that it must sometime be challenging for officers who work very hard and diligently on a report but then find that members disagree with the recommendation. As in the first point above, members saw this not as a criticism of officers but just a legitimate difference in judgement.
- Members found site visits very helpful and believe that the significant reduction in these due to covid along with the requirement to hold meetings virtually does put barriers in the way of normal member/officer interaction and can lead to longer meetings where members and officers can get tired.

Overall, group members did have a high level of confidence in the professionalism of officers and believe that recent actions - such as a move to “patches” is starting to make a positive difference in further strengthening confidence and building a relationship with Parish Councils. However these positive moves need to continue particularly in regard to the points noted above.

Maximising the efficiency of Planning Committee (Recommendation R6 from the report)

Common themes that emerged from this discussion were:



Points of clarification

- Generally agreed that the points of clarification process in advance of the main debate takes up too much time and needs to be reduced. There were some differences of opinion as to whether the whole points of clarification process should be removed or whether the points of clarification process to the case officer only should be removed. Highlighted that it is the points of clarification process to agents/applicants and parishes that takes up most of the time. Noted also that City Planning Committee, the JDCC and other Councils Planning Committees operate without a points of clarification section in the meetings.
- Agreed that Members should contact case officers ahead of the Committee meeting on matters of clarification as this would remove the need to ask many of the questions at Committee.

Committee reports

- Officer reports need to be shorter, more strategic and more focused. Often they can be quite repetitious currently. They also need to have a consistent structure, sequencing of issues and better signposting.
- There was a suggestion that the officer reports need to set out/articulate the main issues raised by applications more clearly early on and then go into these in more detail in the assessment section.
- Officer reports can sometimes be quite defensive in tone -agreed that this is partly reflects a reaction to the number of challenges that have arisen over the last couple of years. Suggested that the reports should be neutral in terms of introducing the main issues/material planning considerations but highlight where there are balanced considerations or directly relevant representations, particularly where these are contrary to the officer recommendation or there are differing opinions.
- Planning judgement issues -should set out the evidence from experts and be clear about the weight to be accorded to these.
- There needs to be a standardisation of the Committee report templates.

Quality assurance -report checking

Noted that Strategic Sites Delivery Manager who supports the SDCD Planning Committee has a separate role and does not manage the DM service so does not check the officer reports. This responsibility lies with the DM team leaders. The shortage of principal planners in DM /number of vacancies/less experienced staff at this level has also contributed to problems with the checking of reports. Further work



needs to be done with the team leaders and principals to improve this. Noted that further recruitment is being progressed in DM currently for principals and senior planners.

Conditions

There was a suggestion that it would be useful if conditions could be preceded by headings given that there are often a lot of conditions and some conditions are long, particularly technical ones. So simple headings like Highways Access, Details of Plant etc would highlight the focus of the condition.

Officer Presentations

Generally agreed that officer presentations could be shorter -there was a discussion that the long length of these currently has a relationship with the points of clarification process and the challenges associated with the case officers ability to engage further in the debate post presentation. This needs to be considered further so that officers feel that they are better able to do this.

Legal issues

Legal issues and implications need to be considered ahead of the Committee meeting where possible. Sometimes these are identifiable before Committee and if necessary, members having a briefing on any significant legal issues ahead of Committee would enable them to be better prepared and reduce the need for debate on legal issues within the Committee.

Overtaken recommendations

Agreed that the role of the senior officer supporting the Chair/Committee was particularly important in terms of formulation of reasons for refusal, for overturned recommendations. Noted that this process has improved in the last 12 months.

Public speaking

- Generally agreed that the rules regarding public speaking need tightening up. There was a discussion about some public speakers raising issues at the last minute and the need to eliminate this.



- Noted that the current public speaking protocol allows people to speak at Committee who have not made representations on the application at an earlier stage. Consideration should be given to removing this facility.

Relationship with Parish Councils

Would be good to have a single officer/ main point of contact for parish councils with most enquiries. The DM area teams were gradually starting to improve relationships but further progress still needs to be made and the main officer contact would contribute to this.