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Foreword

Following a referral from Northampton Borough Council, our Overview and Scrutiny committee was asked to review the effectiveness of our Planning committee meetings. In particular we were asked to look at the length of the meetings, length of the Agenda, the frequency of the meetings and how citizens engage with us.

Northampton Borough Council Meetings were lasting over 4 hours starting at 6.00pm and meet on a 4 weekly cycle, also we had recently introduced public speaking and wanted to review this.

Northampton Borough Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee set up a Task and Finish group consisting of Cllr Richard Church and myself.

We observed Northampton Borough and Colchester Council's as well as interviewing witnesses, cold calling other authorities and carrying out desktop research using the internet.

Work started in late November 2005 and concluded in February 2006.

I would like to thank those involved in producing this report.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jamie Lane', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Councillor Jamie Lane

Executive Summary

Following a referral from Northampton Borough Council, our Overview and Scrutiny committee were asked to review the effectiveness of our Planning committee meetings. In particular we were asked to look at the length of the meetings, length of the Agenda, the frequency of the meetings and how citizens engage with us.

Northampton Borough Council Meetings were lasting over four hours starting at 6.00pm and meet on a 4 weekly cycle, also we had recently introduced public speaking and wanted to review this.

Upon examining the facts around Northampton Borough Council's Planning Committee Meetings our research shows that we in fact compare favourably to the other Councils we have spoken to; with our last five committee meetings averaging three hours twenty minutes compared to a minimum of four hours from the best practice Councils questioned - whilst allowing the public to speak for the greatest length of time.

The recommendations the group are proposing are aimed at increasing public satisfaction with the both the Planning committee and the Council's website.

To form the recommendations we observed Northampton Borough and Colchester Council's as well as interviewing witnesses, cold calling other authorities and carrying out desktop research using the internet.

Task and Finish Group: Planning

1.0 Purpose

To submit a report to Overview and Scrutiny detailing the groups findings following extensive research into our own and other Councils' planning committee meetings

2.0 Context

This Task and Finish was set by the Overview and Scrutiny committee following a referral from Full Council to 'review the effectiveness of Planning Committee Meetings for Councillors and the public'. In particular we looked at the following issues:

- Long meetings 4 hours +
- Long Agenda
- Public Speaking
- Frequency of meetings.

Cllr's Jamie Lane and Richard Church were given this task and report the following findings based on their research which included observations, witness statements, internet research and cold calling other authorities.

- Witnesses were interviewed for their experience in planning matters
- Councillor Lane observed Northampton Borough Council's Planning meeting
- Councillor Church visited Colchester Council's planning meeting
- Lewis Young Cold called other authorities and reviewed Northampton Borough Council's last 5 Planning Committee Meetings
- Councillor Lane and Lewis Young carried out Desktop research

3.0 Evidence

3.1 Witness interviews

Two meetings were held where witnesses were asked for their views on planning meetings and how they felt the meetings could be made shorter and more effective. Statements were heard from:

- Christine Stevenson (Corporate Manager Planning, Environmental Health & Leisure NBC)
- Jennifer Chance (Team Leader Development Control NBC)

- Stacey Rawlings and David Bainbridge (Senior Planning Associates, Bidwells Planning Team)
- Cllr Boss (Chairman of Planning)
- Cllr's Flavell and Caswell (Local Environment & Economy & Infrastructure Portfolio Holders respectively).
- Cllr Glynane also attended in his role as Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny.

It was felt that having spoken to all our witnesses (see appendices A and B) and from the results of the cold calling exercise (see appendix C) that the length of our meetings are satisfactory.

All the information received actually showed that our meetings are shorter than average rather than the perceived longer than average - some authorities take all day with site visits, pre-meetings and then the meeting. It was also noted from our witnesses that the frequency of meetings couldn't be shortened, as it would not give officers and councillors' time to prepare for the following meeting. The research also showed that 4 weekly meetings are the norm.

It was felt that strong Chairmanship and a good Solicitor were the key to keeping to the agenda and staying to the issues that matter. It was also felt that allowing the public to speak for 3 minutes gave them the opportunity to be heard and even if the decision didn't go their way they felt that they had made their case.

3.2 Observation of Northampton Borough Council's Planning Committee

See appendix D

3.3 Observation of Colchester Borough Council's Planning Committee

See appendix E

3.4 Cold Calling Research

Three best practice Councils were contacted (for results see Appendix C). The results showed that we allow the longest speaking time, but had the shortest meetings and deal with on average the greatest number of applications.

3.5 Desktop Research

We tried to find a planning application from the planning lists on our Internet home page. To find the planning pages is relatively straight forward (from home page click planning then once on planning click on planning applications), however the planning application lists are in date order; so finding a particular application in your street may take a while unless you know the date the application was received. The planning portal was not easy to use, as you need to register to use it

and then forward plans to the Guildhall so people with little computer skills would find it hard to use.

3.6 Review of Northampton Borough Councils' last 5 Planning Committee Meetings

The minutes from the last 5 Planning Committee Meetings were analysed (for full list of results please see Appendix E). The results show that on average the last 5 meetings took 3 hours 20 minutes. On average 14 applications were approved, 1.4 applications were approved in principal and 3.4 applications were refused.

3.7 Other Information

With more planning decisions going before WNDC and the Government target of 90% of planning decisions being made by officers we felt that planning meetings may get shorter in time anyway (see appendix G).

4.0 Conclusion

Our conclusions are that the lengths of Northampton Borough Councils Planning Meetings are in fact no longer than other authorities. Given the possible changes highlighted in section 2.7 to the way planning decisions may be made, meetings would become shorter as less agenda items would be brought to the meetings.

We also felt that allowing the public to speak at meetings had been adopted well and should continue.

Given the amount of time and work involved in setting up each Planning Meeting, we agreed that the current 4 weekly cycles should continue.

We feel that Northampton Borough Councils Planning meetings are well chaired and well organised however; we would like to make the following recommendations to build upon their success.

5.0 Recommendations

Our recommendations are that Northampton Borough Council adopts the following in its planning meetings.

- Councillors should be allowed to speak without giving a for or against reason when registering to speak (they may wish to just make a comment).
- MP's and County Councillors given the same right to speak as Ward Councillors.

- Items on the Agenda where no one wishes to speak or make a comment and where officers do not have an update be taken on block at the start of the meeting.
- Chairperson to sum up each item on the agenda once a decision has been reached so that the members of the public are clear as to what has been agreed.
- An officer to be employed to work as an 'Usher' to help the public know what's happening and to assist them during the meeting and to advise them if items are withdrawn at short notice.
- Microphones are available to the public so that all members of the committee can hear what they are saying as well as the public who sit behind them.
- Agenda to be bound in a more professional manner with advertising on the back cover of forthcoming meetings.
- Protocol of the meeting to be on the inside front page, outlining who can speak and for how long and how business is conducted.
- Protocol for the meeting to be sent out to those registering to speak so that they are aware of what to expect. The Protocol should also be published on the website.
- NBC website be updated so that public speaking is no longer a 6 month trial.
- NBC Website to index applications in alphabetical order by street name so that finding an application is easier.
- The letter that is issued to consultees to include information that planning applications are now available on NBC website.
- Phone numbers on NBC website be changed so that the numbers are for departments rather than individuals to ensure good customer service.
- It is re-iterated to Councillors that they can ask for any planning application to be presented to the committee if they feel that the committee should look at it.
- Following its submission to Full Council, this report be submitted to the West Northants Development Corporation

Please find attached minutes from all meetings held, Cllr Church's report on Colchester Council together with the Agenda of Colchester's meeting. Cllr Lane's Report on NBC's planning meeting, Lewis Young's Desktop research together with Cold Calling results.

Overview and Scrutiny Task and Finish Group – Planning

5 December 2005

Present:

Councillors Lane (Chair)

Councillor Church

Councillor Glynane

Jennifer Chance

-Development Control Team Leader

Christine Stevenson

-Corporate Manager Planning, Environmental
Health & Leisure

Margaret Martin

-Consortium

Councillor Lane reminded those present that the purpose of the Group was to review the effectiveness of Planning Committee, with a view to creating shorter meetings and agreeing certain protocols. As such, the Group needed to gather certain information and baseline data, which was the purpose of this meeting.

Members asked a number of questions of the Development Control Team Leader and the Corporate Manager and ascertained the following information:

- Applications were delegated or went to Committee depending on their size and/or how contentious.
- NBC receives around 1800 planning applications per year
- Government BVPI for applications to be considered under delegated powers is 90%
- c.85% of applications were dealt with by delegated powers
- Being a growth area, it was likely that NBC received a higher percentage of applications than other, similar authorities.
- BVPI for determining applications:
8 weeks – minor applications
13 weeks – major applications
- Planning Committee agenda items are split into 2 – Principal items:
Principal Items – large applications of 10 Units/1000m², 5 or 6 every committee
Schedule of applications – smaller applications, 20-30 every committee
- Principal items are placed on the agenda first, in order of date of receipt of application

- Public speaking at Committee is 3 minutes per person.; 5 minutes for ward councillors
- No. of speakers per item is 2 people for and 2 against plus ward councillors
- Speaking was timed by the solicitor
- Speakers had to register by 12 noon on the day of the meeting to be eligible to speak
- The agenda could be re-ordered to bring forward items where people had registered to speak
- Length of debate will depend on how contentious the application is
- Planning officers gauge whether an application needs good deliberation and will draw attention to this at the meeting
- A Chair's briefing is held before the meeting
- Committee meetings used to be held every 3 weeks, but this became logistically very difficult in terms of deferred items because of the statutory consultation period

Councillor Church asked whether changing the meetings to a 2-week cycle could work. J Chance responded that the time made up at the meetings would not be outweighed by the extra time it would take to process the necessary paperwork and for the background work to be carried out.

Councillor Glynane commented that he had received positive feedback from people about being given the opportunity to speak, even if the decision had not been what they wished for, as they had at least been able to have a say.

In terms of manageability, it was felt that public speaking was not a problem but the length of debate after the public speakers could be very lengthy. However, it was important to strike a balance between the speed of proceedings at the meeting and allowing people the opportunity to speak. It was also noted that the Authority would be open to criticism if it did not permit public speaking

Councillor Church questioned whether West Northants Development Corporation would take on a significant proportion of Planning Committee business. J Chance responded that this remained to be seen, but part of the service level agreement was that WNDC sought the views of the Committee in making their decisions. C Stevenson pointed out that this could in fact increase the length of the committee as it would have no power of determination so may want to influence the decision by debate.

Councillor Church asked what the implications of splitting the Committee in two to consider applications e.g. by north/south divide. J Chance felt that the aggregate time of the two committees would be longer than a single one and would also have some logistical difficulties.

Councillor Glynane felt that it was important to ascertain more information about how WNDC would determine applications. I.e. would the Board make decisions; will the public be able to speak at the meetings. M Martin agreed that it was imperative to know exactly how WNDC would operate. Councillor Church added that he was of the understanding that 2 members of NBC Planning Committee would be co-opted onto their decision making body.

M Martin asked how public levels of satisfaction with the planning process were checked. J Chance advised that a satisfaction survey was periodically given out and C Stevenson added that there was a satisfaction BVPI. This was a statutory survey, with questions set by Government. M Martin suggested that it might be pertinent to look at the last survey and reconvene the task group in a year to assess levels of satisfaction, as the WNDC would be up and running.

Councillor Church commented on the start time of meetings, being 6:00pm, and asked what impact an earlier start or daytime meeting would have. J Chance responded that meetings were held in the evenings as a lot of councillors had full-time jobs, and it also enabled more members of public to attend. The Group discussed various ways of organising the agenda, such as hearing items that did not have speakers to them earlier, with a break for councillors to have something to eat, followed by the items with speakers commencing at 6:00pm. It was also suggested that a break could be included on the agenda, or time slots specified on the agenda for each item.

In terms of what went into the agenda reports, J Chance advised that the reports included as much information as possible, as the whole process was very much open to scrutiny by the Ombudsmen.

Once an application was received, it went out for a 21-day consultation, during which time, the reports were written. However, some responses from the consultation may not be received until after the report was written and those responses would be included in an addendum, which was circulated to councillors on the night of the meeting. This meant that time was taken for councillors to assimilate this added information. However, the timeframe could not be changed as this was set by government and therefore had to be adhered to.

J Chance commented that ward members could ask for an application to go to Planning Committee if they did not want it determined by officers. Similarly, applications went to Committee as an automatic reaction to someone objecting to a ward councillor. Councillor Church questioned how often this happened. J Chance responded that over the past couple of years 2-3 of these had gone to each committee and were very time consuming. It was commented that when this happened, the ward councillor should also speak

at the committee. A suggestion was made that this should be included in the planning protocol.

- Agreed:**
- (1) That C Stevenson would suggest names of relevant officers and/or external persons who would be best placed to provide more details about the WNDC operational process.
 - (2) That J Chance would circulate copies of the planning BVPIs; the BVPI on satisfaction; NBC Scheme of Delegations; the WNDC Service Level Agreement and consultation papers for information.
 - (3) That J Chance would seek examples of Beacon/good practice councils and report back to the Group.
 - (4) That a meeting be organised to assess the baseline data.
 - (5) That a meeting be held on Tuesday 10 January to meet with further witnesses, including a representative from WNDC; NBC's planning solicitor; Planning Committee members and the relevant portfolio holder.

Overview and Scrutiny Task and Finish Group – Planning

10 January 2006

Present:

Councillor Lane (Chair)
Councillor Church
Councillor Glynane

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| Jennifer Chance | -Development Control Team Leader |
| Christine Stevenson | -Corporate Manager Planning, Environmental Health & Leisure |
| Margaret Martin | -Consortium consultant |
| Lewis Young | -Minutes |

Witnesses:

| | |
|--------------------|---------------------------------|
| Councillor Boss | |
| Councillor Caswell | |
| Councillor Flavell | |
| Jennie Jahina | - Legal services |
| David Bainbridge | - Bidwells planning consultants |
| Stacey Rawlings | - Bidwells planning consultants |

1. Apologies

None

2. Minutes of the previous meeting

The chair with agreement from all present at the meeting 5th December agreed that the minutes were a true reflection of the previous meeting

3. Witness interviews

Councillor Lane asked the two representatives from Bidwells to speak first

Stacey Rawlings stated:

- Her background was from the private sector
- Attends meetings throughout area for clients
- 3 Councils to her knowledge split their area in two creating two shorter planning committee meetings, if anything contentious arose it could be sent to the other committee
- Southend Council ensure that people have to register 1 week in advance if they wish to speak at the meeting rather than our 6 hours

David Bainbridge stated:

- His background was from the public sector – ex NBC employee of 5 years also worked for Milton Keynes Council
- Attends meetings throughout the area for clients
- Stated that the length of our meetings was not always the problem; format, access and quality of reports were also issues
- Milton Keynes meetings start at 17:30 and have gone on until 00:00, Bedford Councils meetings generally go on for 4 hours, South Cambridgeshire start at 10:00 and usually end at 18:00
- Site visits before the meeting seemed to help with regards to ensuring there are no deferments at the meeting
- Common themes coming from all Councils planning meetings: Public speaking – amounts and lengths vary, in the afternoon/evening, 3 – 4 hours is normal

Councillor Lane then asked Stacey and David where they perceived our Planning meeting could improve

- Framework and procedures need to be clearer – the logistics are not clear
- Think about 2 halves to the agenda for major and minor applications
- Make the deadline for allowing people to speak tighter
- Only allow people to speak if they have something to say – stop people speaking for speaking sake
- 90% of applications should be delegated
- Site visits before meetings
- They use the fact that there hasn't been a site visit as a tactic for there clients to get cases deferred
- Clearer rules for public speaking
- The Chair needs to be strong – it was recognised that the current Chair is a good Chair
- Meeting frequency needs to be every 3 weeks instead of every 4
- A procedure manual should be introduced

J Chance commented that usually they try and give all information to Councillors in writing however if information comes in at the last minute there might be the need to give verbal updates

J Jahina advised that the constitution is currently being reviewed and updated and following on from a point raised by Bidwells the deadline time could be changed as it is currently open to interpretation

Cllr Boss stated that he feels that the meetings recently have been shorter; he felt that the solicitor did a very good job by behaving consistently and being well disciplined

Cllr Church mentioned that he observed a planning meeting at Colchester Council last week and he felt that the pre-meeting was particularly useful to discuss any potential issues with a representative from each Political party (4)

Cllr Boss stated that a pre meeting is currently held involving the Chair and Deputy Chair, he felt that the meeting was not and has never been political and so it did not need to change. Cllr Flavell agreed on this point

Cllr Church also mentioned that at Colchester members of the public and councillors are asked to give notification if they wish to speak about a certain application before the start of the meeting. All of the applications where no-one wishes to speak are dealt with in one block at the start of the meeting at the meeting he attended 7 out of 22 applications were dealt with in this matter.

Initially Cllr Boss, J Jahina and J Chance were sceptical wondering whether the publics' perception would be that we were not giving the application enough thought. J Jahina wondered we would be leaving ourselves open for a judicial review saying that we need to be open and transparent.

Cllr Flavell stated she would like to know how many appeals Colchester received everyone agreed this would be useful to know.

Cllr Glynane thought it sounded like a sensible idea.

Cllr Church re-iterated the fact that the public and councillors were given every opportunity to advise whether they would like to speak or not and only those applications where no-one wanted to say anything were dealt with in this block.

C Stevenson commented that it would stop applications that are towards the end of the meeting not being given the full attention they deserve.

M Martin wondered whether the block agreed applications could be treated as delegated powers and help increase our BVPI performance in this area.

After hearing Cllr Church run through the process again all agreed it could be a very good idea but would like J Jahina to speak to a solicitor at Colchester Council to discuss their appeal record, what happens if someone arrives at the meeting late and wanted to talk about the application but it had been approved within the block at the start of the meeting, how long they been doing this, how successful it is and how much time do they feel it saves.

Cllr Lane commented that at the meeting he observed there was a withdrawn item that caused confusion with some members of the public and wondered what the procedure was. J Chance advised that they always attempt to inform everyone who has registered an interest in the particular application that has been cancelled. However people have the right to remove applications at the last minute and sometimes it is only possible to ask the Chair to inform the public verbally. It was agreed that the P.R. of the meeting could be improved in general not just on this point including creating a fact sheet for members of the public, ensuring that all summing up is clear to all and ensuring they have someone to talk to discuss the outcome of the application.

C Stevenson advised that she would ask someone to check the information we display on our website as well.

J Jahina advised that our constitution is currently being reviewed; any planning amendments could be made in isolation however

Cllr Lane asked whether the cut off for people to register for public speaking could be made closer to the meeting. J Chance advised this would make things worse as it would not give officers enough time to contact everyone.

J Jahina advised that sending things by 2nd class post sometimes causes problems especially when bank holidays are involved.

Cllr Glynane wondered whether an applicant could ring up and give two names to speak against an application so the spots were booked and no one would attend to be against the application. J Chance advised that this was possible but was unaware of it actually happening.

4. Review of the last five planning committees

L Young presented his findings from the research he carried out, it was noted that the length of the meetings has gone down since Cllr Boss took over as Chair of the meeting.

5. Cold calling excellent performing authorities

L Young presented his findings from the research he carried out. It was agreed by all that the length of our meetings was better than those other Councils surveyed. We allowed the longest possible speaking time and two of the authorities meetings were 3 weekly as opposed to our 4 weekly meetings.

6. Colchester visit

Cllr Church re-iterated the main points from his visit. He also advised that the meeting started at 18:00 and when he left at 19:30 there were only two applications. Cllr Church felt this was helped significantly by the fact that 7 out of the 22 applications were dealt with at the start of the meeting.

7. AOB

C. Stevenson advised that there is be a meeting on Friday between herself and Stephen Kelly from the WNDC. L Young has been invited as well to observe and report back to the task and finish group

Agreed:

J Jahina to liaise with Colchester Council as previously stated

L Young to attend WNDC meeting Friday 13th January and report back to the Chair

The Chair and L Young to have a meeting in 2 weeks time to draft final report including recommendations

L Young to report back to the chair re WNDC meeting

Results of cold calling exercise

| Question | NBC | Cheltenham | Uttlesford | Worcester |
|--|--|--|---|---|
| Frequency of meetings | 4 weekly on a Wednesday | 4 weekly on a Thursday | 3 weekly on a Wednesday | 3 weekly on a Thursday |
| Average length of meeting | 3 & ½ – 4 hours | 4 – 4 & ½ hours | 10:00 – 14:00 site visits 14:00 – 17:30 meeting | 13:30 – 18:00 including site visits |
| On average how many applications do you deal with per meeting | 25 | 25 | 8 + planning matters | 15 |
| Public speaking details | 2 for – 3 minutes each 2 against – 3 minutes each Ward councillor – 5 minutes in total Longest possible total – 17 minutes | 1 for – 3 minutes 1 against – 3 minutes 1 ward councillor – 3 minutes Longest possible total – 9 minutes | 1 for – 3 minutes 1 against – 3 minutes Longest possible total – 6 minutes (e-mails will be considered if received before 12:00 on the day) | Applicant – 5 minutes Objectors – 5 minutes Longest possible total – 10 minutes (Applicants can only speak if it is being objected to) |
| Average number of deferrals per meeting | 2 | 0 – couldn't remember the last deferral | 2 | 0 – only had 1 in the last year |
| What do you perceive you do well? | | Keep debate moving – very good chair Delegate as many as possible Major applications are dealt with as a matter of urgency so if deferred they can go back in time They keep a close eye on dates coming up to ensure they are resolved in time | Prior reporting major applications helps to prevent deferrals. Run a tight delegation scheme which is available on their internet having the option to “call them in” These are the two key things they focused on to improve | Write up 106's on the day they arrive “Open door” policy for pre application work 106's are on a fixed timetable if not presented in time it is refused Members are mindful of the implications of refusal against 8/13 week targets |

Observations of Planning Meeting 21st December 2005

Meeting started promptly at 6.00pm

The meeting started with an announcement that an item on the agenda had been withdrawn, as there had been a mix up over timescales. The paperwork relating to this item had been received on 19th October 2005 however it had been stamped received on the 4th November and therefore the 56 days had expired and automatic approval had been given. Although it's not something that this task and finish group need to investigate, systems need to be put into place to make sure that it doesn't happen again. Members of the public who had registered to speak on this item were not informed prior to the start of the meeting of this and this caused some confusion later on in the evening. However at this stage the objections from those members of the public were dealt with well by the Chairman and an explanation given by the planning officer.

I would suggest that in future when an item is withdrawn those registered to speak are told if items are withdrawn prior to the meeting starting.

Principle Items

Reports are given out in plenty of time before the meeting so that members have time to read them, some of the maps aren't very clear as road names and major landmarks are missing making it hard to locate the land the application relates to.

I would suggest that at least the major roads and those affected by the application are on the maps, it was pointed out that this is due to the type of map that we use and sometimes they are not clear.

Excellent presentations by the officers, maps & plans can be clearly seen on the big screen and speaking was very clear. Time limits adhered to in every case and the public made to feel at ease by joining the committee at the table.

Members of the public may not be used to speaking in public and can't always be heard by committee members, also they have their back to the public; I would suggest that they could have access to a microphone.

Comfort breaks taken during the meeting which was well planed.

Around the item that was withdrawn, 2 members of the public thought that they could still speak on that agenda item, when they passed this item by they became very vocal. The Chairman reacted quickly to remain in control of the meeting and the borough Solicitor spoke to the gentlemen concerned. The Chairman then adjourned the meeting for 10 minutes.

I would suggest that a comfort break be put on the agenda so that the public are aware that one is to be taken at some point during the meeting. I realise that some agenda items take more time than others but this can be moved around like any other item.

The meeting ended at 8.45pm

**Visit to Colchester Borough Council Planning Committee
5th January 2005**

Colchester Borough Council serves a population of 160,000 (mostly urban, but with some rural). They have one planning committee of 11 members.

Meetings start at 6pm, and lasts 2-3 hours, but have been longer.

Site visits are held during the day of the meeting (they are a relatively new innovation in Colchester).

A pre-meeting is held at 4.30 pm to which the spokespersons of all 4 groups are invited. Colchester is a 'no overall control' council like ours, with Conservative, Liberal Democrat, Labour and Independent councillors.

During this pre-meeting group spokespeople and planning officers highlight matters of concern on the agenda, and issues which are likely to lead to debate.

Before the main meeting, group spokespeople report back to their members any relevant points and issues that will arise during the meeting.

Members of the public and councillors who do not serve on the committee are asked to give notification of their wish to speak at the beginning of the meeting using a form circulated in the public area. One speaker for and against each application is allowed, with a time limit of 3 minutes. This is timed by a member of council staff who uses a bell when 2 minutes are up, and again after 3 minutes. Councillors have five minutes to speak.

Members of the committee are also asked, using a form, if there are any items on which they wish to speak or ask questions. Any supplementary reports by officers, including additional objections etc, are submitted as written reports at the meeting.

The chair then identifies all of the planning applications on which there are no public representations and no councillor has any comments or questions. All of these items are then taken and voted on as a bloc without comment from councillors or staff. At the meeting I attended 7 out of the 22 applications on the agenda were dealt with in this way.

This enabled the meeting to focus on the items in which there is public interest. It focuses the committee's attention on those items and reduces superfluous comments on uncontroversial items.

I left the meeting at 7.30pm, by which time there were only 3 items left on the agenda. One major and very controversial item had been deferred though, I think that would have taken considerably more time.

Conclusions

Colchester's system did reduce the length of meetings, although probably not by much.

Their system made it easier for members of the public to speak, with notification only having to be made by the beginning of the meeting.

They ensured that uncontroversial items were dealt with swiftly and effectively.

The pre-meeting reduced questions and comments during the meeting, and improved the conduct of the meeting.

The meeting was effectively chaired, and it was clear that the chair was well aware, due to the pre-meeting, where concerns from members were likely to arise and ensured that those points were effectively heard and dealt with.

Richard Church

Appendix F

Average figures from the last five planning committee meetings

| 17 th Aug 2005 - 30 th Nov 2005 | <u>Approval</u> | No of reasons for a decision | <u>Approval in Principle</u> | No of reasons for a decision | <u>Refusal</u> | No of reasons for a decision | Total no of applications | Duration |
|---|-----------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------|
| Average per meeting | 14 | 18.8 | 1.4 | 25 | 3.4 | 2 | 18.8 | 18:00 – 21:20 |

(See overleaf for full listing of figures)

- Approval, approval in principle and refusal are the three possible decisions for each agenda item
- The average duration of the first two meetings 17th August and 14th September was 18:00 – 21:40 (three hours 40 minutes)
- The average duration of the last three meetings 12th October 2nd and 30th November was 18:00 – 21:07 (three hours 7 minutes)
- The total number of applications presented to the planning committee ranges from 14 – 22
- The maximum number of reasons for making a decision ranges from:
 - 12 – 24 for applications that are approved
 - 8 – 38 for applications that are approved in principle
 - 1 – 4 for applications that are refused

Report on WNDC meeting held 13th January 2006

1.0 Introduction & Background

The West Northamptonshire Development Corporations (WNDC) powers will come into effect 1st April 2006. They will have the final say on all major planning decisions made in the area (excluding the town centre) – removing the responsibility for larger applications from our planning committee and the planning committees from South Northants Council and Daventry District Council.

I was asked to attend the meeting in my capacity as support officer to the planning task & finish group, who are reviewing the length and effectiveness of planning committee meetings.

Present at the meeting were:

Christine Stevenson – Corporate Manager Planning, Environmental Health & Leisure

Edward Hanson-Assan – Consultant reviewing the processes within Planning

Stephen Kelly – WNDC Planning & Development Director

The purpose of the meeting was to discuss further how Northampton Borough Council (NBC) and the WNDC will work together and ensure a quality service is provided to citizens.

2.0 Information

Key points:

- The situation we will be in is relatively un-tested as there are only 3 Urban Development Corporations in the Country.
- The reason for introducing the WNDC is to deliver houses, jobs, employment and sustainable communities to the local area.
- As explained by Stephen Kelly it is not the number of planning decisions that has to increase but the quality of the decisions in order to provide better outcomes for all.
- WNDC still intend to allow members of the public to speak for and against applications.
- The introduction of the WNDC will result in the major planning applications not being decided upon by NBC's planning committee – the WNDCs' committee will have final say. Applications will be presented to our committee who will be asked for a judgement whether to:
 - Approve in principle
 - Approve
 - Refuse
- The judgement will be documented and presented to the WNDC when they make their decision however WNDC ultimately will make the final decision.
- Approximately 3 NBC Councillors will be on the WNDC committee.

3.0 Conclusion

The powers that have been granted to WNDC will impact significantly the length of our planning committee meetings. The meetings will become shorter as WNDC will be making decisions on larger applications. Whilst the committee will be asked to comment upon the application WNDC will have the final decision.

These changes are will result in planning committee meetings becoming shorter.