

## 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
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 5<sup>th</sup> 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 deferrals 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 their 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 public's 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 13<sup>th</sup> 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