

## 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  
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 – Principle items:  
Principle Items – large applications of 10 Units/1000m<sup>2</sup>, 5 or 6 every committee  
Schedule of applications – smaller applications, 20-30 every committee
- Principle 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
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- 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.