
REPORT TO:	ENVIRONMENTAL AND DEVELOPMENT SERVICES COMMITTEE	AGENDA ITEM: 9
DATE OF MEETING:	23 January 2020	CATEGORY: DELEGATED
REPORT FROM:	STRATEGIC DIRECTOR (SERVICE DELIVERY)	OPEN
MEMBERS' CONTACT POINT:	TONY SYLVESTER HEAD OF PLANNING AND STRATEGIC HOUSING	DOC:
SUBJECT:	CHANGING THE FREQUENCY OF THE COUNCIL'S PLANNING COMMITTEE	REF:
WARD(S) AFFECTED:	ALL	TERMS OF REFERENCE: FM05

1.0 Recommendations

- 1.1 The Committee endorses the proposed change to the frequency of Planning Committees to every four weeks and the necessary change to the Council's Constitution for a trial period of 12 months to enable the effect of the change on service delivery to be monitored, in particular the impact on customer service.

2.0 Purpose of Report

- 2.1 The purpose of this report is to gain the Committee's approval for a change to the frequency of planning Committees from the current three-week cycle to a four-week cycle.

3.0 Executive Summary

- 3.1 Following the Review of the Planning Service in 2018, one improvement recommended by the consultants yet to be considered was to add capacity into the Planning Service by having an additional week between planning committees to allow more time to be spent on delegated cases. This would be more in line with other planning authorities without having any material impact to the application determination process.

4.0 Detail

- 4.1 In the late 1980s and the early 1990s the Council's Planning Committee sat at four-weekly intervals. However, as a response to ever increasing application volumes in the early 90s, the decision was made to make Planning Committee

meetings more frequent thus moving from four-week to three-week intervals. Typically at this time the number of items on any agenda would be as many as 18-20 cases and waiting for a Committee every four weeks would cause the determination of cases to be unduly delayed. However, in common with all planning authorities in England and as instigated by central government, since the early 90s the Council's Scheme of Delegation has allowed more cases to be determined by the Head of Planning and Strategic Housing (and occasionally other senior staff) to the extent that the operation of the scheme has increased over time with 588 applications being determined under delegation in 1991/1992 (c.50%), 736 in 1996/97 (c.72%) and 648 in 1998/1999 (c.78%). In the quarter up to September 2001 this Council determined 86% of the applications submitted by way of delegated powers. Since that time the number for successive years has been steady at or around 90% of cases. This means that since the late 90s the number of cases being reported to the Planning Committee has diminished; although the frequency of Planning Committees has not been reviewed.

- 4.2 The Committee will be aware that last year saw a wholesale review of the Council's Planning Service by external consultants who made a number of recommendations in order that improvements to the Service are brought about. Among other things, the Review identified that cases to be heard by the Planning Committee tend to absorb a disproportionate amount of staff capacity which exacerbates the pressure on officers to deal with delegated cases in a shorter period of time. Because of the three-week interval and the lead-in to the next committee, there is almost no break from one committee to the next. So the consultants' report recommended that a move to four-week committees was one such area that would alleviate pressure on officers whilst bringing about a general improvement in the decision making process.
- 4.3 Also worthy of consideration is the issue of application determination times and customer service. Most cases have a target for a decision of eight or thirteen weeks and thus less frequent planning committees. So, on the face of it, it might appear such a move could have an adverse impact on this target, although as stated earlier committee cases account for only about 10% of applications. However, given the ever changing detailed legislation and the increasing complexity of most applications, changes to legislation have made it possible to extend the period for determination by way of written consent of the applicant. This facility is being used more often to ensure that applications are properly considered and that legal requirements are not missed. Experience shows that where applicants can see forward to a determination date (e.g. a planning committee date), they are more than willing to agree to a short extension. So moving to a four-week cycle would have no additional impact on meeting determination targets. Indeed, freeing up officer time should ensure that other customers with delegated applications would be given more prompt attention and thus the customer experience for the vast majority would be improved.
- 4.4 It is also important to consider how a reduction in the number of Planning Committees may impact on the duration of the meeting; given that there would

be fewer meetings at which to determine the same number of applications thereby increasing the number of applications per committee. It should be remembered that the number of applications heard at a meeting is not necessarily indicative of the duration of a meeting as the table at Annex A shows. In summary: looking at the last three years, the average number of cases heard per committee was 5.77. If the number of committees had been limited to one per month (i.e. approximately one per four weeks), the average number of cases per committee would have been 7.29; so, approximately between one and two more cases per committee. Taking the committees during the last three years that considered eight cases, they averaged just less than two hours each. The nature of individual cases makes this a very rough approximation but nevertheless some reasoned indication of the likely duration of a committee in a four-week system. Committees which looked at six cases over the same period averaged about one-and-a-quarter hours. Again, this is only a guide as some committees with fewer applications have taken longer on occasion. It can also be seen that in 2019 the numbers of cases per committee has reduced compared to the previous two years.

- 4.5 By way of information, some research comparing this Council with Derbyshire and its nearest neighbours has revealed the following:

Three-week committees (1): Chesterfield BC

Four-week committees (8): East Staffordshire BC, North West Leicester DC, Amber Valley BC, Derbyshire Dales DC, Erewash BC, North East Derbyshire DC, Bolsover DC, High Peak BC.

Six-week committees (1): Derby City.

- 4.6 It should also be borne in mind that the three-week cycle is not only more onerous on the Planning Service but also for staff in Democratic Services.

5.0 Financial Implications

- 5.1 Moving to a four-week cycle would result in savings for mileage claims for members and officer, catering and customer services.

6.0 Employee Implications

- 6.1 It is likely that fewer committees would take pressure off individual officers for their time to be released for more time to be spent on other applications.

7.0 Corporate Implications

- 7.1 The change in arrangement could help to ensure that developments can be delivered more efficiently in alignment with the priority actions within the Council's Corporate Plan. The process will therefore have a direct positive impact on the Council's ability to deliver actions against the key objectives of:

- Progress
- Place
- People

8.0 Community Impact

8.1 **Consultation:** None

8.2 **Equality and Diversity Impact:** The more efficient and economic delivery developments will assist in meeting the diverse needs of all established and future residents and non-residents across the District.

8.3 **Social Value Impact:** Enhancement of the process will assist in securing high quality developments going forward; the provision and enhancement of sustainable developments will enhance public health and well-being.

8.4 **Environmental Sustainability:** Better performance management will contribute toward the achievement of economic, social and environmental objectives.

9.0 **Conclusions**

9.1 No review of the planning committee process has been undertaken since first moving to a three-week cycle in the early 1990s. However, with the establishment of extensive delegated powers for the determination of planning applications has meant that the same imperative for moving to three-week intervals no longer exists. As such moving to four-week intervals would free up capacity for officers in the planning delivery teams to improve service to customers with delegated cases without having any harmful impact on the interests of customers required to seek a decision from the committee.

Annex A – Comparison over last three years

	Jan	Feb		Mar	Apr	May	Jun		Jul	Aug	Sep		Oct	Nov		Dec	Total
2017																	
No. of meetings	1	2		1	1	1	2		1	1	2		1	2		1	16
No. of cases	10	10	10	9	6	7	4	4	2	6	8	4	4	4	9	4	101
Duration	2.35	1.50	1.50	2.40	1.05	1.30	0.45	1.50	0.40	1.20	1.35	1.00	1.15	0.20	2.10	2.00	
2018																	
No. of meetings	1	2		1	1	1	2		1	1	2		1	2		1	16
No. of cases	3	3	7	6	6	5	13	5	5	6	7	3	7	5	4	8	93
Duration	1.20	1.10	1.35	1.00	1.30	2.10	2.45	1.35	1.30	1.10	1.20	1.25	2.30	1.40	0.55	2.25	
2019 (to date*)																	
No. of meetings	1	1		1	1	0	2		1	1	2		1				11
No. of cases	4	3		5	5	0	11	7	8	6	4	2	2				57
Duration	0.55	0.45		1.35	1.55	0	3.00	0.20	1.45	1.40	1.05	1.10	1.20				

	Average no. cases per committee (actual)	Average no. cases per committee (assuming 1 per month)
2017	6.31	8.42
2018	5.81	7.75
2019	5.18*	5.70
Average	5.77	7.29