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<b>REPORT TO:</b>	<b>ENVIRONMENTAL AND DEVELOPMENT SERVICES COMMITTEE</b>	<b>AGENDA ITEM: 10</b>
<b>DATE OF MEETING:</b>	<b>27<sup>th</sup> MAY 2021</b>	<b>CATEGORY: DELEGATED</b>
<b>REPORT FROM:</b>	<b>ALLISON THOMAS - STRATEGIC DIRECTOR (SERVICE DELIVERY)</b>	<b>OPEN</b>
<b>MEMBERS' CONTACT POINT:</b>	<b>STEFFAN SAUNDERS HEAD OF PLANNING AND STRATEGIC HOUSING</b>	<b>DOC:</b>
<b>SUBJECT:</b>	<b>CHANGING THE FREQUENCY OF THE COUNCIL'S PLANNING COMMITTEE</b>	<b>REF:</b>
<b>WARD(S) AFFECTED:</b>	<b>ALL</b>	<b>TERMS OF REFERENCE: FM05</b>

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## **1.0 Recommendations**

- 1.1 That 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.

## **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 a three-week cycle to a four-week cycle.

## **3.0 Executive Summary**

- 3.1 A twelve-month trial period of four-weekly Planning Committees was undertaken following a decision at this Committee on 23 January 2020. This replaced the previous three-weekly Planning Committee cycle and was consistent with a recommendation into the 2018 review into the Planning Service. The trial was intended to allow more time to be spent on delegated cases which make up the majority of Planning decision and test any potential impact on speed of decision making. It is considered that the four-week committee cycle has worked well with no adverse impact on application determination times and it is, therefore, proposed that these arrangements should be implemented on a permanent basis.

## **4.0 Detail**

- 4.1 Historically the Council's Planning Committee sat at four-weekly intervals. This changed in the early 90s 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 have caused the determination of cases to be unduly delayed. During the past year the number of items for decision at Planning Committee has averaged between four and six which is a manageable number and reflects the point that, as opposed to the 1980's, a very significant proportion of planning decisions (over 90%) are delegated to officers.
- 4.2 Also worthy of consideration is the issue of application determination times and customer service. There has been a significant increase in workload in the Planning Service over previous years and this has led to increased pressure on application decision times. Although there are year-on-year fluctuations, the direction of travel is towards a greater number of applications of significant complexity is clear along with expectations both locally and nationally that these are determined within statutory timescales. Applications numbers are approximately 1,400 per year and have been for the last few years. This is an increase of approaching 200 on average from the three years preceding the previous review.
- 4.3 However, these pressures have not led to applications being delayed as a result of having committees every four weeks instead of every three. Performance overall remains at over 90% of applications determined within timescales and there is no evidence that items at committee are more likely to be determined outside of the required timescales when compared to delegated decisions. It remains possible to manage the committee agendas in such a way that committee decisions are still made in line with required timescales. For example, it is normally apparent from early in the consideration of a planning application (and often at pre-application stage) whether a decision will need to be made at Planning Committee and the case officer can plan accordingly. As stated earlier, committee cases account for only about 10% of applications and with an expectation of a favourable decision, which officers always aim for in line with the open for business agenda, applicants are generally willing to agree to an extension of time where this is necessary.
- 4.4 It has not been the case over the previous year that a reduction in the number of Planning Committees has impacted negatively on the duration of the meeting. There was a risk that fewer meetings would result in longer agendas. The length of committee agendas over the past year has been broadly similar to the preceding three years. Although during a period of virtual meetings some caution should be applied in reaching a long-term view, given the overall volume of applications has continued to rise during the Covid pandemic, it is a reasonable conclusion to reach that committee agendas will remain in the region of four to six items as an average for a four-week committee cycle.

4.5 Subject to the Committee agreeing the recommendation in this report it is intended to report to the meeting of Full Council on 24 June with a view to the change to a four-weekly cycle being implemented from July.

## **5.0 Financial Implications**

5.1 Moving to a four-week cycle would result in some savings albeit these would not be significant. These costs would relate to mileage claims for site visits (once these are re-introduced following the Covid restrictions) and the costs of holding the committee meetings in Council buildings.

## **6.0 Employee Implications**

6.1 It is likely that fewer committees would improve the ability of officers to focus on customer expectations, not just on time issues but also on the quality of decisions. In addition, there is often a dialogue between officers and members regarding issues to be addressed that will often remove the need for an application to go to committee. An example would be minor changes to a scheme to remove an overlooking window to address a neighbour's concerns, and therefore remove a committee call in request. A four week cycle has more potential for these issues to be resolved leading to benefits in customer service and committee workload.

## **7.0 Corporate Implications**

7.1 The change in arrangements 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:

- Working to attract inward investment, and
- Maintaining customer focus

## **8.0 Community Impact**

8.1 **Consultation:** None

8.2 **Equality and Diversity Impact:** The more efficient committee arrangements 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 The trial period has demonstrated that a four-week committee cycle works well, in combination with the delegation arrangements that are in place. Although some caution should be applied to a trial period during Covid lockdown arrangements, the very high application case numbers during this time are sufficient to conclude that the four-week cycle will continue to work during the re-opening of the economy over the coming months and beyond. In the very unlikely event that any unexpected adverse implications occur, it is intended to report back to Committee within the next year to review how these arrangements are working.