



<u>Committee and Date</u>
Council
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<u>Item</u>
Public

Proposed Changes to the number of Planning Committees

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1. Summary

A report to consider the number and functions of Planning Committees for Shropshire Council.

2. Recommendations

- (1) **To reduce the number of Area Planning Committees from three to two, one covering Shrewsbury town and the north, the other covering the south of the county to provide an even business split overall between the two area committees.**
- (2) **To implement these changes to take effect from 1st September 2019 and review the performance of a two committee model through scrutiny in 2 years' from the date of implementation.**

REPORT

1. The Council has set a corporate objective to deliver sustainable economic growth and to be a Council that is good to do business with. The planning process is central to achieving this ambition and it is important that its process is perceived as efficient and effective from a customer perspective. An internal review of business processes within the planning department is underway currently supported by an independent team from Wolverhampton City Council. The aim is to shorten the contact time in the system from pre-application to commencement on site – to provide the right development, in the right place and quickly wherever possible.
2. While a Planning Committee will always be the environment where the most controversial and complicated applications are considered, the context has changed since the existing committee structure was established in 2009. Delegation is more effectively and consistently managed by both officers and members and now average agendas are low – with just over four cases per Committee when a Committee meets. In the last year meetings for all three Planning Committees have been cancelled when there has not been enough business to hold one.
3. The number of planning committees has been subject to scrutiny from three member-led task and finish groups in previous years. While Members have accepted recommendations to improve the planning committee process they

have to date resisted proposals to reduce the number of planning committees.

4. The reasons for looking at this again now are for efficiency and consistency. There is always a risk of inconsistency in decision taking when more than one planning committee is operating, observations based on analysis of planning committee performance indicate that there have been differences between the committees in those which defer applications or the number of overturned recommendations.
5. In 2009 prior to the three area committee system being introduced, Shropshire Council had a single interim regulatory committee that considered applications across the county drawn from members countywide. When alternatives to a three committee model have been considered previously some members have expressed concern that this would mean members taking decisions in localities they are unfamiliar with. In practice these concerns are not likely to be founded as the membership would be derived from the geography of the committee area, and a larger committee is more likely to adopt a strategic approach to the application of policy and material planning considerations.
6. The resistance from some members to reducing the number of planning committees is that it is perceived by some as not providing adequate local representation. However, the Constitution provides for a local member speaking in all cases and in any event local members cannot vote on cases in their division.
7. Maintaining three Planning Committees is a resource commitment now that exceeds what is necessary to fulfil the function effectively and efficiently and alternative models offer more consistency and less cost without making any changes to the scheme of delegation. Consequently the same number of applications would be considered by committee as at present.
8. A single committee clearly provides the best model for consistent decision taking. A two committee model carries with it more risk but nevertheless offers less scope for inconsistency than a three committee model.
9. The direct cost savings arising from a reduced committee model are difficult to specify but there would be savings generated from items including bus hire, staff time from planning services, legal & democratic services, member allowances and technical consultees who attend committees from time to time.

Options Considered

10. The alternative delivery models are for either a single planning committee or for two planning committees. Shropshire Council is unusual locally in maintaining three Committees to discharge its planning functions relative to its neighbours.
11. Herefordshire went from four Planning Committees to one in 2009. Herefordshire did so on the basis of advice from the former Audit Commission that its Committee procedures were cumbersome, inconsistent and lacking in transparency to applicants.

- 12 Most neighbouring authorities (Telford & Wrekin, South Staffs, Stafford, Newcastle under Lyme, Wyre Forest and Cheshire West and Chester) discharge their planning functions with one Planning Committee. Powys has one Planning, Taxi Licencing and Rights of Way Committee dealing with planning and other business.
- 13 There are two exceptions in neighbouring areas - Cheshire East still retains three Committees, Malvern Hills has two Committees. Cheshire East has some unique circumstances mostly around the onset of challenges of pressures on its Green Belt following the release of the NPPF. Its members seek to determine 10% of all cases, some four times more (in percentage terms) than Shropshire and its delegation rates are lower than most unitary councils. Birmingham – the largest authority in England by population has one monthly Planning Committee.

Further afield

- 14 This review has also looked at three large rural unitary authorities: Cornwall; Northumberland; and Wiltshire.
- 15 All of these run more than one Planning Committee. Cornwall has four and Wiltshire five. Northumberland has reformed its committee structure on more than one occasion since 2009 and has now reverted to a strategic committee and five area committees.

Next steps

- 16 Evidence has been considered looking back over an 18 month period at the items considered by each committee. Planning committees vary in length depending on the agenda but a manageable time frame should be no more than 4 hours. Within this time frame and based on experience over the last 8 years it is considered that a planning committee could readily deal with up to 6 to 7 agenda items.

Options Considered:

1: Two Area Planning Committees each meeting once a month – 24 meetings a year. (Recommended Option)

- 17 Represents a 33% reduction in committee time and cost, manageable for officers and members in terms of time commitment. Not achieving optimal consistency i.e. with one committee but an improvement on the current number. Unless each committee represents less than two fifths of the total area or population of the County, they will need to be politically balanced across the whole authority. The Committees will be politically balanced in accordance with the political balance of the Council as a whole.
- 18 With two monthly committees there would be capacity to consider up to 14 items a month or around 168 items a year. Over the 18 month survey period 145 planning applications were considered by the three existing Area Planning Committees in the last 12 months, there is therefore sufficient “head room” if two committees are held a month.
- 19 The proposal would be to hold two monthly committees, one covering Shrewsbury town and the north, the other covering the south of the county

with a geographic area larger than that currently covered by the South committee to provide an even business split overall between the two area committees. It may require site visits to be undertaken on a separate day where the sites are widely dispersed given the broad Geography of Shropshire. Alternatives to site visits have been considered (GoogleEarth) but there are risks with this approach and nothing is more impactful for members to have seen the site and walked it in context.

2: One Area Planning Committee meeting twice a month

- 20 Provides the best opportunity to develop a focussed group of members through training and support to achieve quality decisions. Political balance across the county. Officer resource commitment as Option 1 but member resource demands would be significant for the members involved as they would be dealing and preparing for a planning a committee every two weeks, assimilating all the resources, officer reports, stakeholder feedback and site visits. This would place significant time demands on committee members.

3 – One Area Planning Committee meeting every 3 weeks.

- 21 This would have the same consistency benefits as Option 2 but provides a greater interval between committees to reduce the impact on the members involved. Around 17 meetings a year would be achievable through this model (rather than 24 with the other two options), however agenda lengths would be a minimum of 10 items rather than 7 (the current suggested maximum) and more than double the current average agenda length. This means that unless the scheme of delegation is further revised to reduce the number of items going to committee meetings would be much longer (up to 8 hours) requiring an earlier start with site visits on a different day or shorter debates. Delegation is high and consistent with near neighbours at around 97%.

Assessment

- 22 The table below clearly illustrates that without making any changes to the scheme of delegation the business being referred to committee for consideration could be handled by two committee meetings a month with agenda lengths in the order of 6 or 7 items. This could be dealt with by a single committee or two committees handling up to 14 items a month – the former optimal from a consistency perspective, the latter likely to be more attractive to members from a commitment/resource perspective.
- 23 In a two committee scenario Shrewsbury town would be placed in the north and additional central rural parishes added to the south to balance the number of planning applications.
- 24 This is entirely consistent with the upper limits of agendas currently considered. It will avoid the need to cancel committees and allow for more focussed and consistent officer and member support for committee items under consideration.

3. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

- 25 Planning Committee decisions are often complicated and can be controversial attracting significant stakeholder and public interest. We are

seeing increasing failure demand with the current system, not due to fault in the process but because increasingly communities and groups seek to challenge planning committee decisions. Any reduction in the number of planning committees is likely to be presented as a reduction in the democratic dividend but this is not the case as there are no plans to change the scheme of delegation.

4. Financial Implications

- 26 It is difficult to quantify specifically the financial savings to the Council that would arise from these alternative options because specific costs are not attributed to committee functions. Furthermore the changes proposed would not alter the number of items considered by planning committee, just the number of planning committees. What the proposals do achieve is to reduce pressure on a number of teams and will assist with their redesign proposals to achieve broader efficiencies to the Council. The cost savings that arise are the staff time involved, members allowances for Chairman/Vice Chairman, bus hire and room hire where appropriate.

5. Background

- 27 As set out in the context above the number of planning committees has been subject to scrutiny from three member – led task and finish groups in previous years. While Members have accepted recommendations to improve the process they have to date not supported proposals to reduce the number of planning committees. Based on the last 12 months evidence and further discussions with the Leader and Portfolio Holder, it is considered timely to review the number of planning committees as the Council continues to implement its transformational programme.

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)
Report and recommendations to Scrutiny
Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder) Gwilym Butler
Local Members - All
Appendices- Appendix 1 – within report body

Appendix 1**Performance of all Committees**

Month	North	Central	South	Total Agenda items
Aug-16	Cancelled	3	Cancelled	3
Sep-16	5	4	4	13
Oct-16	2	5	5	12
Nov-16	Cancelled	8	Cancelled	8
Nov-16	6	-		6
Dec-16	-	6	7	13
Jan-17	3	Cancelled	3	3
Feb-17	4	7	2	13
Mar-17	6	2	2	10
Apr-17	3	5	4	12
May-17	2	6	Cancelled	8
Jun-17	3	5	2	10
Jul-17	Cancelled	5	2	7
Aug-17	3	3	5	11
Aug – 17 (second Committee)			3	3
Sep-17	3	4	3	13
Oct-17	8	6	6	20
Nov-17	3	2	Cancelled	5
Dec-17	6	3	6	15
Jan-18	3	2	6	11
Feb-18	4	5	Cancelled	9
Mar-18	7	2	2	11
	68	83	65	216

Average cases per Committee (when it meets) = 4.15

North Committee

Month	North	OVERTURN	DEFERRAL	Total Agenda items
Aug-16	Cancelled			Cancelled
Sep-16	5			5
Oct-16	2			2
Nov-16	Cancelled			Cancelled
Nov-16	6	1		6
Dec-16	-			-
Jan-17	3			3
Feb-17	4	2	2	4
Mar-17	6			6
Apr-17	3	1		3
May-17	2			2
Jun-17	3	1		3
Jul-17	Cancelled			Cancelled
Aug-17	3	1	1	3
Sep-17	3			3
Oct-17	8			8
Nov-17	3			3
Dec-17	6			6
Jan-18	6			6
Feb-18	Cancelled			Cancelled
Mar-18	2			2
	65	6	3	65

Central Committee

Month	CENTRAL	OVERTURN	DEFERRED	Total Agenda items
Aug-16	3			3
Sep-16	4			4
Oct-16	5		3	5
Nov-16	8		3	8
Dec-16	6	1		6
Jan-17	Cancelled			Cancelled
Feb-17	7	1	2	7
Mar-17	2			2
Apr-17	5			5
May-17	6		1	6
Jun-17	5	1		5
Jul-17	5		2	5
Aug-17	3		1	3
Sep-17	4			4
Oct-17	6			6
Nov-17	2		1	2
Dec-17	3			3
Jan-18	2		1	2
Feb-18	5			5
Mar-18	2			2
	83	3	14	83

South Committee

Month	SOUTH	OVERTURN	DEFERRAL	Total Agenda items
Aug-16	Cancelled			Cancelled
Sep-16	4			4
Oct-16	4	1		4
Nov-16	Cancelled			Cancelled
Dec-16	7		2	7
Jan-17	3	1	1	3
Feb-17	2			2
Mar-17	2			2
Apr-17	5			5
May-17	Cancelled			Cancelled
Jun-17	2	1		2
Jul-17	2			2
Aug-17	5	1		5
Aug-17 (2)	3	2		3
Sep-17	3	1		3
Oct-17	6		3	6
Nov-17	Cancelled			Cancelled
Dec-17	6	2	2	6
Jan-18	3	1		3
Feb-18	4			4
Mar-18	7	2	1	7
	68	11	9	68