

REPORT OF DIRECTOR OF PLANNING

SUBJECT:

EVALUATION OF THE TRIAL OF DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE MEETINGS BEING HELD ON A 6 WEEKLY CYCLE AS OPPOSED TO MONTHLY

Purpose of Report: To report the findings of the trial period of development management committee meetings being held on a 6 weekly cycle as opposed to a monthly cycle. To conclude that the trial has been successful and therefore to recommend to permanently continue to schedule Development Management Committee (DM) meetings on a 6 weekly cycle.

Background

On 2 April 2014 Members resolved to pilot a 6-weekly cycle for DM for one year. The arguments put forward at the time for the trial are summarised below:

Committee work

Moving to a 6 weekly cycle will result in 8 or occasionally 9 meetings a year rather than 12.

Development Management Time saving

There will be a saving in staff time in the DM section estimated as up to 40 man-days of Development Management planning and administrative staff being saved throughout a year (8 rather than 12 meetings).

There is also a saving (both time and financial) in the legal representation at these meetings, together with a timesaving for other officers' attendance e.g. the Democratic Services team, Monitoring Officer.

8-week target

The Authority is currently on average determining over 75% of planning applications within 8 weeks. We would aim to continue to achieve a high level of performance (officers appreciate that this is achieved to a great extent by having a delegation of authority scheme which allows about 80% to be dealt with by officers and not coming through the Committee process. We estimate that by utilising some of the released staff time the overall performance should improve by between 2 and 5% over the year.

Pre-application work

Planning advice and information is disseminated to applicants prior to the formal commencement of their planning application. We provide a pre-application service and are at present seeking to improve and harmonise this with Pembrokeshire County Council (PCC) to enhance the applicant's experience.

Currently 428 pre-apps were closed during the year 2013 with 60% answered within 30 working days, although 34 (8%) were overdue by less than a week. We would like to improve this service.

Duty officer

Welsh Government is also seeking to achieve a duty officer rota for all local planning authorities. We are seeking to introduce a duty officer scheme this year.

Monitoring

Further monitoring to be undertaken, thus addressing an area of work that at present is more reactive than proactive.

On 25 March 2015 Members agreed to continue with the 6-weekly cycle:

Introduction/Background

As Members will be aware, the current calendar of meetings comes to an end in June 2015 following the Annual General Meeting, and it is customary at this time of year to present a calendar for the forthcoming year.

You will recall that last year the calendar was based on a 6-weekly cycle of Development Management Committee meetings; this was agreed as a pilot scheme for twelve months with a review at the end of this period. As the full cycle of those meetings is not yet complete, a review has not been undertaken, although there have been no indications that the current arrangements are not proving satisfactory. It is therefore recommended that the calendar for the forthcoming year be again based on a 6-weekly cycle of Development Management Committee meetings, and that a report on the review be presented to the Authority upon completion of a full cycle of meetings.

Committee work

With regard to any impact that this 6 weekly cycle has on committee duration the following should be noted:

Development Management Committee meeting date	No. of planning applications considered (exc. enforcement cases)	Length of meeting (hours)
18.6.14	7	2.25
30.7.14	8	2
10.9.14	4	2
22.10.14	2	1.15
3.12.14	8	2.20
21.1.15	12	4.15
4.3.15	4	1.05
15.4.15	8	2
27.5.15	6	3.20
8.7.15	6	
12.8.15	4	

Comparison

In 2014, Snowdonia National Park Authority (SNPA) officers also took a similar request to reduce the number of meetings from 10 to 8 per annum. Snowdonia's delegation rate is approximately 90% and therefore resulted in a limited number of planning applications being determined by committee. In 2014 Snowdonia's Planning Access Committee determined a total of 47 planning applications – an average of 3.9 per meeting. Each meeting sat for less than 2 hours on average.

SNPA Planning and Access Committee Number of Planning Applications (2014)

Jan	3
Feb	3
March	0
April	4
May	6
June	5
July	6
August	0
Sept	9
Oct	2
Nov	2
Dec	7

In comparison, Pembrokeshire County Council's Planning and Rights of Way committee meet every month with the following evidenced:

PCC Planning and Rights of Way Committee meeting date	No. of planning applications considered (exc. enforcement)	Length of meeting (hours)
20.1.15	8	4.30
24.2.15	4	5.35
24.3.15	21	5.55
21.4.15	5	1.50
19.5.15	3	1.15
23.6.15	6	1.50
28.7.15.	10	Not available

Development Management time saving

8 week target

It was suggested that the DM team would be able to increase its % of planning applications determined in 8 weeks-or-less by between 2-5%. At the time the % was 75%. This Welsh Government target has been achieved thus:

Quarter	% determined in 8 weeks or less	Ranking out of 25 LPAs	Wales' average percentage
April – June 2014	88	3	74
July – Sept 2014	85	3	71
Oct – Dec 2014	88	3	73
Jan – Mar 2015	80	=5	71
April-June 2015	75	=15	76

The April-June 2015 quarter has shown a dip. This indicates that the % has improved in some quarters more than the 2-5% anticipated. The last quarter did not achieve this. However, during the month of July 2015 78% of applications were determined within 8 weeks. During the month of August 2015 84% of applications were determined within 8 weeks.

Pre-application advice

The trend in the numbers of pre-application requests is fluctuating. This is normally the case when the economy is improving (more building work is evident). It could also be the fact that at present PCNPA does not charge for this service. (Ceredigion County Council does, Pembrokeshire County Council (PCC) does not).

Quarter	Number of pre-applications submitted	Number of pre-applications determined	% of pre applications determined with target of 30 days
April – June 2014	125	125	54%
July – Sept 2014	120	148	63%
Oct – Dec 2014	110	92	86%
Jan – Mar 2015	150	146	62%
April-June 2015	106	123	53%

No further work has been undertaken on harmonising the pre-application system with Pembrokeshire County Council. This has been due to staffing changes at PCC.

The Welsh Government has been consulting on the proposals for a comprehensive scheme of pre-application charging through all Wales' planning authorities. We have been advised that the response to the consultation and the methods by which LPAs should charge will be published in the Autumn 2015. It would appear sensible to await these, and adopt a common charging policy with other LPAs and introduce charges along a similar timescale. PCNPA Officers will work closely with surrounding LPAs on this matter in the future in accord with any WG directives on this matter.

Duty Officer

We have established a duty officer rota. This is mainly targeted at householder applications and those wanting further advice following a written pre-application response. This 'surgery' is held every Thursday at Llanion. Applicants are requested to provide site details and proposal information prior to the meeting to enable officers

to be as helpful as possible and provide any relevant files and planning history at the meeting.

There has been a fairly consistent take up of the half hour slots as shown below:

April 2015	½ hour slots
Week one	5
Week two	4
Week three	7
Week four	7
Week five	4
May 2015	
Week one	9
Week two	5
Week three	0
Week four	2
June 2015	
Week one	5
Week two	7
Week three	6
Week four	5

In the April-June 2015 quarter a total of 33 hours was taken seeing potential applicants with a possible additional one hour per session putting together histories and written responses (66 hours) before and after the meeting. This equates to 2.6 weeks' worktime during this quarter. This is considered by Welsh Government to be a necessary and important service; officers would agree that the benefit of a face to face meeting on pre-applications is considered worthwhile by officers and also the customer. We have yet to formally evaluate this part of the service, although initial feedback is that customers appreciate this offer.

Opportunistic Benefit- Development Management Site Visits

With the six weekly cycle, officers have been mindful that there is the chance, should Members wish to undertake a site visit prior to determining an application that applicants will be waiting for a decision for a further six to eight weeks. Taking this into consideration, officers have instead proactively sought Member site visits on applications which they have foreseen as being major, controversial, complex or being unusual in form or design. These site visits are to allow Members to gain a further insight into a proposal, asking questions of officers or requesting further information prior to having a full officer report with recommendations before coming to a decision. This also allows further time for consultation responses to be received and reported in full.

Opportunistic Benefit- Development Management Officers

Officers are anecdotally reporting that this slightly longer Committee cycle is less stressful for them. They are able to more effectively programme their work and advise applicants of timescales with more realism.

The sickness records confirm that recent sickness levels are substantially down for DM officers. However, there are obviously other contributory factors and variants to consider and with such small staff numbers and the potential to identify individual staff, statistics have not been published here.

Financial considerations

As reported previously, there is a financial saving for this, with fewer meetings resulting in fewer expenses and also a time saving.

Risk considerations

The risk to the Authority's reputation has not been increased. The risk of not determining planning applications within the 8 week target or within a reasonable timeframe has also not been prejudiced – in fact the Authority has been able to increase throughput of applications within the 8 week target thereby reducing this risk.

Equality considerations

We have been able to provide a face to face meeting service which will be of benefit to a wider variety of applicants.

Conclusion

- That the current system of 6 weekly cycle for Development Management Committee appears to be working well in the context of allowing additional time to be spent of other planning objectives e.g. Duty officer.
- That it does not overly burden individual Committee meetings with excessive planning applications for consideration.
- That the benefits of this 6 weekly cycle outweigh the disadvantages.

Recommendation

That the trial of a 6 weekly cycle for Development Management Committee has been successful and should therefore be operated on a permanent basis.

Background Documents

Reports to meetings of the National Park Authority held on the 2 April 2014 and 25 March 2015

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