

Proposed Revision to Frequency of Planning Committee Meetings (Ashley Smith-CHDMBC)

Synopsis of report:

The report recommends amending the frequency of Planning Committee meetings.

It is considered that amending this would provide a number of operational benefits, in time and resource for the planning service, reduce meeting numbers for elected Members and produce more consistent length agendas.

This would also free up time and resource for policy briefings with the Committee particularly with regards the Local Plan update as well as training sessions, which could be undertaken remotely. Members of the Committee have previously indicated that these sessions would be something the Committee would welcome.

There are also some environmental and sustainability benefits from reducing the number of physical Planning Committee meetings.

Recommendation(s):

- That the frequency of Planning Committee Meetings be amended to monthly with effect from September 2022.
- That the calendar of Planning Committee meetings for the current municipal year be amended from September 2022 onwards as set out in section 3 of this report.

1. Context of report

- 1.1. The Authority currently holds a Planning Committee meeting once every three weeks on a Wednesday (with the exception of a break in August), to determine the most significant or contentious applications as well as consider Planning Policy items. The Planning Committee sits in two capacities, an application determination capacity and a policy setting capacity.
- 1.2. Meetings of the Committee involve the attendance of at least 15 Councillors and around 6 officers as well as members of the public. Agendas can be of varying length dependent on the amount of business available as a result of planning application cycles.
- 1.3. During the 2021/2022 Municipal Year the Committee expressed interest in having policy briefings, workshops and training sessions during the year in order to provide Members the information they require to make key decisions on the direction of policy, particularly the Local Plan update and related matters. As these do not constitute formal Committee meetings they can be arranged at shorter notice, at the convenience of Members and Officers and can be held remotely. Amending the frequency of meetings by reducing Planning Committee meeting numbers would free up time to help meet this objective as well as achieve a number of other benefits.

1.4. It is recommended for the reasons set out in the report that meetings are amended to be on a monthly basis.

2. Report and, where applicable, options considered

2.1. The options available are:

- Alter the calendar of meetings and frequency of meetings (**recommended option**)
- Do not alter the calendar of meetings (not the recommended option)

Option 1: Alter the calendar of meetings.

2.2. The process of producing a Planning Committee agenda, and organising and running a meeting, requires a considerable amount of resources involving about 10 individual officers. In addition to writing the reports, this includes: compiling/printing/publishing the agenda; notifying interested parties; producing late comments; arranging public speakers; preparing presentations; briefing the Chairman/Vice-Chairman; and, attending the meeting itself.

2.3. There are a number of issues with the current cycle. These include:

- little time between meetings to allow productive work on cases, due to the short cycle, every week there is either a committee meeting, or draft or final reports are due each week, this detracts from Officer ability to focus on other work;
- Inconsistent meeting lengths/agenda sizes;
- When they arise, short agendas are not time/cost efficient.

2.4. The advantages of changing it to monthly include:

- more consistent agenda sizes;
- more time to make meaningful progress on cases between meetings;
- a need for physical fewer meetings, reduced cost and time;
- More cost efficient;
- More environmentally friendly/sustainable in line with the Council's draft Climate Change Strategy which in action CBP 1.0 states that elected Members should seek to reduce transport through car shares, public transport, and online meetings
- More predictability when meetings will be (i.e. always a certain part of the month)
- Report preparation periods less likely to clash with Xmas and other events.
- More time available for member policy briefing sessions and training sessions (can be held remotely).

2.5. It is considered that removing a number of meetings would give more consistent length agendas , but would still give sufficient time and ability to consider items fully without meetings being excessively long.

2.6. In periods where there was significant business arising, extraordinary/special meetings of the Committee could be convened if necessary, though this is considered to be a relatively rare possible occurrence. This is considered significantly more preferable than having meetings with limited business or that need to be cancelled. Extraordinary meetings if they were to be required would be agreed with the Chairman and would be notified as far in advance as possible.

Option 2: Do not alter the calendar of meetings

2.7. This would not secure the above benefits listed above and as such is not the recommended option. It has however run this way for at least a decade and as such it is potentially feasible to retain the status quo.

3. Recommended schedule of meetings 2022/2023

3.1. It is recommended that if the Committee moves to monthly meetings from September 2022 that as many of the pre-existing dates are used as possible. Only 4 new dates would need to be arranged, and 7 dates would be cancelled. All meetings up to the August 2022 break would remain unaltered.

3.2. The revised calendar of meetings from September onward is proposed to look like the table below (Existing meetings shaded grey):

Meeting Date
September 7 th 2022
October 5 th 2022
November 9 th 2022
December 14 th 2022
January 18 th 2023
February 15 th 2023
March 22 nd 2023
April 19 th 2023

3.3. This schedule has been compiled in conjunction with Democratic Services in order to avoid clashes with other meetings in the Corporate calendar.

3.4. In future years, Democratic Services would seek a relatively consistent time in each month to hold meetings. Though of course this would need a degree of flexibility to suit the Council calendar of meetings and avoid dates such as Christmas.

4. Resource implications (where applicable)

4.1. The proposed changes will make savings in time and actual costs. The time savings would be advantageous to members and officers, and would free up capacity to focus on other business of the Council and the planning service area in particular policy briefings, workshops and training.

4.2. Financial savings would be provided in not having to produce additional agendas, from not having to keep the building open as many evenings a year and there would be some other savings in the form of reduction in other costs including overtime/evening meeting allowance and with the Council's external agenda production company.

5. Legal implications

5.1. The Committee has the authority to set its own committee frequency and meeting dates.

6. Equality implications

6.1. The Equality Act 2010 identifies 9 'Protected Characteristics' (being age, disability, race / ethnicity, pregnancy and maternity, religion, sexual orientation, sex, gender

reassignment and marriage / civil partnership). Section 149 of this Act provides that a public authority must, when exercising a public function, have due regard to the need to:

- a) eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment or victimisation;
- b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a ProtectedCharacteristic and persons who do not share it;
- c) foster good relations between those who share a relevant ProtectedCharacteristic and persons who do not share it.

6.2. Changing the frequency of planning meetings is not considered to cause any issues relating to equality implications.

7. Environmental/Sustainability/Biodiversity implications

7.1. Fewer meetings are considered to have environmental and sustainability benefits in that it will significantly reduce the number of car journeys to the Council by virtue of the decreased number of meetings. Other lesser benefits are likely to include environmental benefits caused by energy savings from electricity and heating.

7.2. There are no likely negative implications in these areas as a result of this proposal.

8. Conclusions

8.1. It is recommended that with effect from September 2022 that meetings move to a monthly basis and that the calendar of meetings for the municipal year is amended as per the table in part 3 of this report.

(To resolve)

Background papers-none