

DEVELOPMENT CONTROL COMMITTEE IMPROVEMENT PLAN WORKSHOP

This Member training event was held on the 16 July 2015 and comprised of a general discussion centred around some areas of concern followed by a presentation on the LDP and a workshop session on two specific topic areas. The Chair opened and closed the training event.

The Planning Officer provided a verbal summary of the main issues discussed at the last Committee. The following provides a more detailed account of the discussion and the actions proposed.

Session 1: What's going wrong?

The Planning Officer made a short presentation on the current performance and position of Bridgend as a local planning authority. Bridgend has a good record with regard to speed of determining planning applications, it has an up to date development plan, has a five year supply of housing land, has scored well on customer satisfaction surveys and costs less than neighbouring authorities. Further to this Bridgend was one of the first planning authorities to introduce a chargeable preliminary enquiry service, public speaking at planning committee, a comprehensive scheme of delegation and a smaller specialised planning committee (all of which have been identified by Welsh Government as signs of a good planning authority). This would suggest that the service provided is very good and well above average.

However, a number of key areas of concern raised from various sources were identified:

- For the committee to work effectively and provide certainty for both residents and the development industry, it needs to 'own' the LDP and SPGs that it has approved.
- Difficulty in separating role on DCC with Ward Member role
- Decisions are being deferred due to additional information being requested during Committee proceedings
- Ensure that all officers are sufficiently skilled and experienced in how to advise the Committee to ensure its decisions are sound, without appearing to 'force' decisions upon it.
- Impact of budget cuts, and the low cost of planning decisions compared to other authorities. Restructure and loss of capacity and experience in DC Team
- Lack of clear protocol on what is and is not published in the planning report
- Inconsistency in report writing
- Applicants unable to speak at Committee if there is no objector speaking

There was a general feeling amongst Members that the DC Committee was working well although it is accepted that there have been one or two issues that have caused concern. The system was not however, 'broken'.

There was agreement to a proposal for Members to be involved with shaping future SPGs and that different individuals should sit on each group thus allowing more involvement from Members. There was support for the suggestion for topic based SPG focus groups comprising specialist officers and two or three Members.

There were some identified issues with separating Ward and DCC Members' roles although Members were now aware of the Planning Code of Conduct and are sufficiently confident to manage these issues.

One comment suggested that officers should be more trusting of Members [in local matters] and that Members need to take responsibility for their actions. The Planning Officer suggested that the same could also apply to Members regarding officer advice but acknowledged that some controversial planning decisions may place pressure on Ward Members. Nevertheless any planning decision must be made on sound planning grounds.

A request for further information during the Committee is sometimes necessary although there is some logic in raising issues beforehand, where possible. There was the suggestion that officers need to be prepared for challenge and there was the inevitability that questions will be raised as a result of debate. If issues could be raised beforehand then it would be helpful.

This discussion led on to the length of agendas and the perception that meetings every 6 weeks are now resulting on longer agendas, longer meetings and longer Committee site visits. There was some preference to revert back to four weekly meetings or additional meetings specifically for SPGs etc. The Planning Officer indicated that the six weekly 'cycle' was relatively new and it may be worth persevering with the format for a few more meetings before any change is proposed.

Of more concern is that some Members indicated that they felt bullied by officers into making a decision although there was also acceptance that the same could be said of Members. The Planning Officer indicated that this was not an appropriate culture and that a degree of mutual understanding of each other's roles was essential for a good planning service. There is a fine line between being firm and being over forceful. It is the Officer's duty to advise Members as professionally as possible and occasionally the advice given may not be popular.

There was an overwhelming consensus that criticism of an officer's professional integrity during Committee is not acceptable. If a Member has an issue with an officer then it should be addressed via the Planning Officer or relevant Head of Service.

There was considerable concern about the level of cuts to the planning service as a result of budgetary pressures and the ability of the authority to enforce its conditions. There is an acceptance that performance is likely to drop in the coming months. The Planning Officer indicated that a further workshop session will be held on the future of the level of service provision later in the year.

There were no overriding issues with the officer reports or with inconsistency. There was agreement that reports should be balanced and be sufficiently detailed to allow Members to make an informed decision. The Planning Officer indicated that the report format is under review and that in future it may be possible to include photographs and plans embedded within the text.

There was support for allowing applicants to address Committee in the absence of any objectors wishing to speak. It was also suggested that members be allowed to ask questions of the speakers. This would however, require an amendment to the Public Speaking Protocol.

Other matters raised to improve efficiency included the need to provide post codes for site visit information and whether it was necessary to include full copies of appeal decisions in the DC Committee report if it was possible to simply provide a link to the relevant document online.

Session 2: Whose LDP is it Anyway?

The Planning Officer made a presentation outlining the steps necessary for adopting an LDP, which is a primary statutory requirement. This included data gathering, rigorous assessment, a sound evidence base, significant consultation and public examination. The importance of delivering the LDP and the consequences of failure were also discussed.

Session 3: Developing Solutions

This session comprised of two discussion topics:

- DC Committee Member 'v' Ward Member
- Advance notification of questions and additional information requested at DC Committee.

Members felt that ward matters were an issue as they have to manage constituent's expectations as well as representing the planning authority. Members were prepared to actively campaign for people in their wards but would not be able to promise anything and were aware of the 'legal' position and would declare if necessary. There was some discussion around the issue of keeping an 'open mind' and most Members felt they were able to reach the right balance

The Planning Officer pointed out that was a recent article in the press which quoted a DC Member who in committee indicated that Members were there to serve the people of their ward. There was concern that this was not the correct message as it may raise expectations from constituents and could put off potential developers. The matter is covered in the Planning Code of Conduct. If Members required any further advice or clarification on this matter then the Planning Officer or Legal Officer would be able to help.

There was considerable discussion on the subject of requesting additional information at Committee. Members considered it was important to read the DC report papers beforehand although the longer agendas was making this difficult. There was some recognition that deferring decisions to allow for the provision additional information led to delays in decision making and bringing development forward. The Planning Officer indicated that some changes to procedure may ease this pressure. Members could also email Officers for further clarification before the meeting. It may not be possible to make an officer available for questions before Committee to answer queries due to staffing resources issues however, officers will assist where possible.

Actions:

- DC Committee Members to be involved in SPG preparation,

- Send out DC Reports earlier.
- Prepare Amendment Sheet the day before Committee with a further update presented at Committee if necessary.
- Members to raise any issue in advance where possible
- DC report format to be reviewed in order to make sections clearer and investigate the potential to include plans and photographs and links within the text.
- Investigate the potential to amend the public speaking protocol to allow applicants to speak where there is no objector.

FOR INFORMATION

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Background Papers
None.