

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MONDAY, 29TH JANUARY, 2007

PRESENT: Councillor G Driver in the Chair
Councillors B Anderson, J Bale, B Cleasby,
P Grahame, B Lancaster and T Leadley
Apologies Councillors Mrs A Carter, R Pryke

72 Declaration of Interests

Councillor Leadley declared a personal interest in respect of Agenda Item 7, Issues Around Planning (Minute No.74 refers) in his capacity as a Member of Plans Panel West and the Development Plan Panel.

Councillor Cleasby also declared a personal interest in respect of Agenda Item 7 (Minute No.74 refers) in his capacity as a Member of the Development Plan Panel.

73 Minutes - 8th January 2007

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held on 8th January 2007 be confirmed as a correct record

74 Quarter 2 Performance Highlight Report - City Development Corporate Priority Board - Issues Around Planning

Further to Minute No 65, 8th January 2007, the Chair welcomed to the meeting Councillors Fox and Campbell, Chairs of the Plans Panel East and West respectively, together with Jean Dent, Director of Development, and Phil Crabtree, Chief Planning and Development Services Officer. Apologies were submitted on behalf of Councillor Mrs A Carter, Chair of the City Centre Plans Panel.

The Head of Scrutiny and Member Development submitted a report summarising the current main causes for concern in terms of Planning Services performance, and the Plans Panel Chairs and Development Department officers responded to Members queries and comments. In brief summary, the main areas of discussion were:-

Support for Initiatives already Underway

- Arrangements had been put in place for the three Plans Panel Chairs to meet monthly with Mr Crabtree to provide support regarding key issues and the matter of consistency of decisions;

- Greater attention was to be paid to pre-application discussions, especially in respect of major developments, in order to inform applicants of Leeds' expectations and to improve the quality of application and materials;
- Alongside this, it was aimed to reduce the time taken to deal with minor applications, and the number of times these were referred back;
- Meeting arrangements and site visit arrangements would be tightened up, and there would be an item on each agenda relating to targets, and the timetable for dealing with major applications;

Ward-based Issues

- Whether all Ward Member referrals to Plans Panels were justified, or just used as a means of deflecting local opinion;
- Whether objections to applications were sometimes based on unrealistic aspirational expectations;
- Whether there was sufficient liaison pre-application between planning officers and local Members, and whether officer reports adequately reflected local public feeling;
- The role which Ward Members might adopt as mediator between local people and the applicants to achieve satisfactory outcomes.

Training

- Whether there was justification for compulsory training in planning matters for all Councillors, not just Plans Panel Members, and whether Members who had not undergone such training should be allowed to refer matters to the Panels, and whether Plans Panel Members should be able to refer and/ or vote on applications in their Wards. The Panel Chairs were not in favour of Plans Panel Members being disbarred from referring matters, or voting, stating that Panels should be professional and unbiased enough to judge each case on its planning merits, regardless of the source of the referral. Predetermination was an issue which Plans Panel Members needed to be very aware of;
- Whether Plans Panels took sufficient notice of professional officer recommendations in reaching their decisions;

General Observations

- It was inevitable that the three parties with an interest in planning decisions- applicants, Members and the public – would all have different expectations of the system. It was important to achieve a balance between the need for a level of local democracy and the requirement for Panels to operate in an efficient, unbiased and consistent manner.

Transparency of decision making was also important, and the public and applicants had a right to expect that they could understand the reasons why applications were either approved or refused;

- That there was a need for Panels to give more carefully reasoned arguments for refusing applications, or to make alternative suggestions, in an effort to reduce the number of refusals being overturned at appeal;

RESOLVED –

- (a) That the Panel Chairs and the officers be thanked for their attendance and the manner in which they have responded to the Committee's enquiries
- (b) That the Head of Scrutiny and Member Development prepare a summary of the Committee's deliberations on this subject, for referral in a report to the March meeting of the Committee