



Report of the Chief Planning Officer

Panel: Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date: 8th April 2008

Subject: Update on the Review of the Plans Panels

Electoral Wards Affected:

Specific Implications For:

Equality and Diversity

Community Cohesion

Narrowing the Gap

1.0 Purpose of the report

- 1.1 To provide an update to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the implementation of the actions highlighted through the Review of the Plans Panel, at this point, mid-way through the implementation phase.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 A report was considered by to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in October 2007 describing the process and progress so far on the Review of the Plans Panels. Additionally, a number of areas for improvement were identified and were subsequently turned into an action plan for implementation.
- 2.2 The OSC made a number of comments and specific recommendations about progressing with the implementation of the review, which were subsequently shared with the Joint Plans Panel and were fed into the process.
- 2.3 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee resolved to support the formation of a Joint Member-Officer Working group to oversee the implementation of the action plan subject to regular updates to this Committee. This report is the first of such updates.

3.0 Joint Member-Officer Working Group

- Following consultation and involvement with the Party Whips and Councillors Andrew Carter and Keith Wakefield, the composition of the Member-Officer working group has been finalised. There are representative from each of the parties as well as the three Panel Chairs and a non-Plans Panel Member. A number of Officers also sit on the group, with additional Officers being invited depending on the content of the agenda. The names of the nominated Members and Officers are included as appendix 1.
- 3.1 Terms of Reference have been agreed by the working group. The comments and

ideas from the working group will form the basis of future changes and improvements.

3.2 The working group will ratify the improvements or suggest changes to the proposed improvements in order to make them workable from all stakeholder perspectives.

4.0 **Implementation**

A number of meetings have been organised, each with a theme taken from the action plan and appendix 2, the meeting schedule, is attached. The format of the meetings is through discussion of briefing papers and reports and then the agreement of possible solutions. Meeting topics such as officer reports and presentations, public consultation, appeals, pre-application discussions and presentations, site visits and venue are all to be covered.

4.1 After each meeting, Officers are charged with the working up of the solutions to report back to the following working group meeting. This way, actions are dealt with swiftly and can be implemented as soon as final agreement is reached.

4.2 Any improvements should be seen with reference to the original objectives of the Plans Panel Review:

- A better decision-making process
- Ensuring high quality decisions are achieved in a consistent way across the city
- Ensuring the decision-making process is both cost effective and fit for purpose
- Creating capacity for Members and Officers to engage in more pre-application discussions including for example more position statements and become more involved in shaping planning policies
- Better experience for all those involved in the Plans Panel process.

4.3 At the time of this report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee there has been two meetings of the working group and work is well underway with progressing and implementing the agreed service improvements.

4.4 Specific changes and proposed improvements, which have been agreed, are described briefly below.

4.5 **Timing of items**

4.5.1 Evidence from the customer satisfaction survey carried out in summer 2007, showed there was considerable discontent about the length of time the public had to wait for the application to be heard. Whilst it is almost impossible to provide an exact time for the applications a pilot will be run on timing of items coming to Panel, in terms of applications scheduled for “before the break” and “after the break”. This will mean there will be greater certainty for members of the public when their item is heard, increasing customer satisfaction. This hypothesis will be tested after the pilot with a repeat of the customer questionnaire

4.6 **Public Speaking**

4.6.1 There are proposals to make minor changes to the public speaking protocol to. Two main changes are a decision to confine public speaking to one occasion only

where an application has been deferred and the proposal of moving the deadline for the public to let us know if they wish to speak to 2pm on the Tuesday or Wednesday prior to Panel and to adhere to that deadline. The changes are to provide clarity and to increase capacity for other things at the Panel meetings.

- 4.6.2 The clearer lead in times for public speaking will make the process more efficient allowing the agenda to be organized so they are easier to follow and more importantly more equitable for all the parties involved.
- 4.6.3 Feedback from the customer satisfaction survey indicated that there was some room for improvement with the information provided to speakers prior to the meeting. Therefore a new leaflet will be produced on public speaking which gives clearer guidelines and helpful information about speaking at Panel. The information leaflet will be evaluated through the customer satisfaction questionnaire to assess its effectiveness.
- 4.6.4 Additionally, "Welcome to Plans Panel" leaflets have been produced for each of the Panels to provide clarity on the Panel process and provide useful information to the public and applicants. A copy of the East Panel leaflet is attached as appendix 3, along with a leaflet describing the results of a customer satisfaction survey carried out in the Development Enquiry Centre.
- 4.7 **Agenda**
 - 4.7.1 It is proposed to revise the look and layout of the agenda to provide a more user-friendly document. This will require consultation with Democratic Services, but the aim is to produce a concise easily understandable document in one part.
 - 4.7.2 The order of the agenda is also to be managed more effectively. It is the intention that at the Chairs Brief stage the agenda will be ordered in a more customer focussed way. Applications with registered speakers and the more controversial or sensitive applications (and therefore the ones most likely to attract large number of the public) will be placed first on the agenda. This means the public will not have to wait such a long time for the application to be considered by the Panel. Items for information and appeals will come further down the agenda, after the planning applications
 - 4.7.3 In the past applications have been regularly moved around the agenda creating doubt for the public when the application would actually be heard, despite it being published at a certain place on the agenda. The fixing of the agenda and sticking to the published order will hopefully begin to address this issue.
 - 4.7.4 These measures linked with the proposals for use of approximate timings and accepting only registered speakers will help to give more certainty to Members and to the public when the items will be heard, again hopefully resulting in an increase in customer satisfaction. It will also allow time to be spent discussing the larger and more controversial applications, as described in paragraph 4.9 below.
- 4.8 **Referrals to Panel**
 - 4.8.1 On-going work on the referral process means there maybe a reduction in the

numbers of smaller-scale applications called-in by Members. However, it is noted that small, but sensitive applications could still be regarded as “significant” at local level and may still need to come to Panel.

- 4.8.2 The delegation agreement has not been changed, however the criteria for assessing referrals is now being used more effectively, so that only the most significant items come to Panel . It is also recognised that there is a need for greater consultation with Ward Members regarding what was regarded as a significant matter which warrants a referral to Plans Panel.
- 4.8.3 Another measure to help manage the number of applications going to Panel will be to give a higher profile, internally, to the “Householder review”. This enables an Area Planning Manager to review a household application that a Ward Member has requested to go to Panel. A senior planner, not involved in the application, acts as a mediator and will provide a “second opinion” on whether the application merits going to Panel for determination. The recommended decision and the report will be scrutinized by the independent planner to ensure they are robust.
- 4.8.4 This additional level of filter will allow the Plans Panels to concentrate on the most sensitive and/ or large developments. There is still the provision for the application to be escalated and go to Panel if necessary. Or, if it is felt there is no need for it to go there will be continued dialogue between the Senior Planner and the Member who requested it, rather than a fait accompli decision being made.
- 4.9 **Pre-application capacity**
- 4.9.1 The increase in capacity from the above measures will mean there will be time and space for position statements and pre-application presentations. A Charter and protocol for pre-application charging is being prepared and will be introduced later this year. This Charter provides guidance on the most significant applications, helping Leeds reach its ambition of becoming an internationally competitive city with a high quality of life. A copy of the Charter will be circulated at the meeting. A protocol for the involvement of Ward Members and the local community at an earlier stage in the pre-application process is also being prepared.
- 4.9.2 Guidelines for pre-application presentations to Panel are also being produced to provide a consistent format of pre-application presentations at Panel with limits on duration and guide to content. The guidelines will be applied across all three Panels, but will reflect the inherent differences between the City Centre Panel and East and West Panels.
- 4.10 **Performance Management**
- 4.10.1 Members indicated that they would like to receive a wider range of performance information on a regular basis. Currently members see the Best Value planning performance and appeals information.
- 4.10.2 A new report will be produced half-yearly and combines performance information, improvement activity and achievements for the last six months and those proposed for the next six months.

4.10.3 Additional performance information comes from Enforcement activity and the main themes and learning points from appeals.

4.11 **Site Visits**

4.11.1 The principle has been agreed that site visits are a very important part of the planning process and members would not like to see their usage reduced. However, as with the agenda, there is a capacity issue.

4.11.2 Site visits will only be agreed where the information cannot be gleaned from any other methods and will be prioritised. This does not necessarily mean smaller applications will be disadvantaged, but focus will be on where site visits can add the most value to the process.

4.11.3 Members requesting site visits will now be asked for more detail on what particularly should be looked at on the visit and will need to provide robust planning reasons with some degree of detail. Members requesting the visit will also need to come on the site visit. All Plans Panel Members will be strongly encouraged to attend the site visits.

4.12 **Venue**

4.12.1 There is considerable concern about the suitability of Committee rooms 6 and 7 as a venue for the Plans Panel meetings and other important meetings such as Overview and Scrutiny Board meetings. There are problems with audio and visual aspects of the room, making it sometimes difficult for the public and Members alike to follow what is happening. However, there is no appetite corporately to undertake any work on the rooms, but the working group with work with ICT Services to put together a vision for the room that is fit for purpose.

4.12.2 Additionally, alternate layouts, alternate venues (and their cost) and importantly the use of ICT in the form of Members pcs, second screen for the public and so on will be looked at for feasibility.

4.13 **Appeals**

4.13.1 A report has recently been submitted to the City Development Scrutiny Board on appeals. There is still some work to be undertaken in improving appeals performance and the report suggests a number of measures internally. From the Plans Panel perspective learning points for both Officers and Members will be distilled from the appeal decisions in a bid to help future decision making.

4.13.2 Appeals information will also be contained in a ½ yearly performance management report, which will go to Joint Plans Panel meeting.

5.0 **Conclusions and recommendations**

5.1 There is considerable work still to undertake but Members should be reassured that implementation of the action plan is proceeding well.

5.2 So far, there has been anecdotal evidence to show that the changes have been welcomed and this has been from various stakeholders including the private sector and the public as well as Members. However, formal evaluation will be undertaken

towards the end of the implementation phase in summer 2008.

- 5.4 Members are asked to:
- i. Note the report
 - ii. Endorse the work so far and receive a further update report on the implementation of the Plans Panel review in six months time
 - iii. Support measures for the urgent need to upgrade rooms 6 and 7 as a suitable venue for Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Plans Panel meetings, where the public are in attendance.

Membership of the Joint Member-Officer Working Group

Cllr Amanda Carter,
Cllr Graham Latty
Cllr Colin Campbell
Cllr David Blackburn
Cllr Tom Leadley
Cllr Martin Hamilton
Cllr Elizabeth Minkin
Cllr David Congreve
Cllr Clive Fox
Rob Buchan
Phil Crabtree
John Redding
Steve Butler
Martin Sellens
Helen Cerroti

**Review of the Plans Panels
Joint Member-Officer Working Group**

Meeting schedule:

Date and time	Theme	Venue
28 th January 2008 2-4pm	Management of meeting- timing, referrals and call-ins, structure, agenda etc	Arthur Vollans Room Leonardo Building
5 th March 2008 2-4pm	Site Visits, Member involvement in Policy making and Venue	Arthur Vollans Room Leonardo Building
To be re-scheduled	Presentations and reports- officers, applicant and public speaking. Role of workshops- status, recording, format. Performance Management	Room 3 Civic Hall
28 th April 2008 2-4pm	Public Involvement Process	Arthur Vollans Room Leonardo Building
19 th May 2008 2-4pm	Pre-application presentations and protocols- criteria, Member involvement at Panel and Ward level Member training	Room 2 Civic
23 rd June 2008 2-4pm	Any other issues	Arthur Vollans Room Leonardo Building