

CABINET

5 NOVEMBER 2003

PLANNING (COMMITTEE SYSTEMS REVIEW) INFORMAL MEMBER/OFFICER  
WORKING GROUP - CONSIDERATION OF RESEARCH RESULTS

REPORT OF THE PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, ECONOMY AND  
DEVELOPMENT

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RECENT REFERENCES:

EN10 - 12 March 2003

CAB 686 - 16 July 2003

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

This report sets out the results of the research and investigations undertaken by the Informal Member/Officer Working Group into planning delivery systems, including the possibility of establishing area planning committees. The Group also took the opportunity to examine the current administrative procedures that support the Development Control Committee.

From the evidence of its investigations, the Group was not convinced that area planning committees would represent an improvement over the existing system in terms of quality of decision or public involvement. However, the Group did identify a number of administrative areas where changes to procedures would improve the general conduct of business, including an opportunity for parish councils to make representations as part of the public speaking process.

The issues addressed and the conclusions on each are set out in Appendix 1 for Members consideration.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. That, having regard to the evidence studied by the Informal Member/Officer Working Group, a reorganisation of the Development Control function into an Area Local Planning system be not implemented at this time.
2. That amendments to the current Development Control procedures, with improved electronic display equipment, as identified in Appendix A to this report, be agreed and introduced as soon as practicable.

3. That the Development Control Committee arrangement be reviewed, following the full implementation of the recommended procedural and equipment changes and after at least a six month trial period.
4. That the Informal Member/Officer Working Group be re-convened, after the trial period and following consultation with the Winchester District Association of Parish Councils, the Winchester Town Forum and representative clients, to review the changes and recommend if further action is appropriate.

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WORKING GROUP - CONSIDERATION OF RESEARCH RESULTSREPORT OF THE PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, ECONOMY  
AND DEVELOPMENTDETAIL:1 Introduction

1.1 The Group was established as a result of my request to Cabinet on 16 July 2003 (CAB 686 refers). The membership agreed was Councillors Bailey, Baxter, Busher, Davies and myself.

1.2 The intention of the Group has been to review the best means of delivering planning decisions in the light of some concerns which had been evident in the Parish and Town Councils concerning the work of the PDC Committee. These concerns had been brought to the attention of the Council by means of a Notice of Motion on 8 January 2003, which was subsequently considered by the Environment Performance Improvement Committee (now EAPIC), who rejected the concept of the introduction of an Area Local Planning structure. (Report EN 12 refers).

1.3 On being appointed to the Environment, Economy and Development Portfolio, I reviewed the situation, particularly having regard to previous experience as the Chairman of New Alresford Town Council. This Town Council had been the source of the information which formed the basis of the proposals put forward in the Notice of Motion. Also, it was clear to me that while Report EN 12 had dealt with most of the issues, it had not produced any substantive evidence in support of the conclusions. It therefore seemed to be sensible for a cross-party group of Members to review the issue of Planning Delivery with a firm recommendation being made to Cabinet. The proposal was agreed.

2 Summary of Work Undertaken by the Group

2.1 The Group had an initial meeting on 28 July 2003 in order to decide how the task could be accomplished. The decision was to select three sample local authorities who were operating in Area Local Planning Committee mode, preferably with similar characteristics to the City Council. The three local Authorities selected for this practical research were Salisbury DC, Chichester DC and East Hampshire DC.

2.2 The Group was aware that EAPIC had suggested that the Terms of Reference be widened. The reasoning behind this change was because it was considered sensible to use the site visits to identify any information on Best Practice that might be helpful in improving the presentation and general handling of planning applications at committee. Also, at the Cabinet meeting on 30 July 2003, a petition was presented by a representative of the New

Alresford Town Council which made a specific recommendation for the City Council to change to an Area Local Planning Committee system, with the claim of widespread support throughout the Winchester Parish and Town Councils.

- 2.3 During August 2003, Group members attended six Local Area Planning Committees in operation and took notes, based on a questionnaire prepared by the City Secretary and Solicitor. The details recorded at these meetings were considered by the Group at its meeting held on 17 September 2003.
- 2.4 The Group gave final consideration to the results of its research at its meeting on 6 October 2003. Cllrs Beveridge and Bennetts were in attendance to submit their views, as was Mr David Atwell who reported on an Area Local Planning system in operation at Windsor and Maidenhead. Prior to the meeting, I had consulted the Hampshire Association of Parish and Town Councils, and the Winchester District Association of Parish Councils (WDAPC). Neither body had been approached for its comments as part of the research undertaken by New Alresford Town Council referred to in para. 2.2 above.
- 2.5 The WDAPC is meeting with City Council representatives on 12 November 2003 at the Winchester District Joint Consultative Committee and the question of area planning committees and the work of the Group has been placed on the agenda for discussion. I will be in attendance to speak on this item.

### 3 General Conclusions of the Group

- 3.1 The visits to Area Local Planning Committees have been very useful in identifying alternative presentation methods (with supporting equipment) and the accompanying reports and recommendations. Members were satisfied that the City Council compared favourably to the selected local authorities in most respects, particularly with regard to the content and detail of the written committee reports. However, some points were identified which, if adopted, would undoubtedly improve the presentation by officers at committee and speed up the actual process. Members were particularly attracted to the idea of allowing Parish Councils a three minute allocation of speaking time, in addition to that allowed for the general public.
- 3.2 The issue of the adoption of an Area Local Planning Committee system was clearly not proved by an obviously superior performance in dealing with 'local' planning applications, although standards varied. There was, in one Area Committee, a pace in the decision making process which might have been considered as unacceptable in Winchester. In another, the time taken was clearly influenced by the number of objectors present and the enthusiasm demonstrated by Ward Members, apparently keen to be seen as supporting them, rather than having a desire to identify material planning considerations. In yet another area, the Area Local Planning Committee proceedings were considered to have been efficient and highly impressive.
- 3.3 On balance, the Group considered that over-riding evidence had not been forthcoming to demonstrate that area planning committees would improve the quality of decision making or the level of public involvement.

- 3.4 However, it was apparent that there were a number of amendments to existing procedures that could be made, which would produce improvements to the administration of the Committee.
- 3.5 All these matters are considered in more detail in Appendix 1, which sets out the full recommendations of the Group.

#### OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:

##### 4 CORPORATE STRATEGY (RELEVANCE TO):

- 4.1 To be more open and more democratic
- 4.2 To encourage debate and discussion about the future
- 4.3 To deliver Best Value in all our services

##### 5 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

- 5.1 Report EN10 set out a number of issues which should be taken into account when considering the cost of moving to an area planning committee system. The Group noted those issues as part of its work and requested that figures be produced, which provided an estimated costing comparison between holding a meeting of the current PDC Committee and an Area Local Planning Committee.
- 5.2 The comparison estimate showed that to hold one evening area planning committee in a parish venue would be £1,342, as opposed to £501 for one current PDC meeting in the Guildhall, taking into account room hire, transport, setting up time, catering and staff costs. If it were decided to hold the area planning committee during the day, the estimated overall cost would be £952.
- 5.3 For completeness, it should be mentioned that the expenditure required for the proposed upgrade to the amplification and presentation equipment in the Walton Room has yet to be fully costed. Whilst some of the expense may be absorbed by improvements to the Walton Room already planned, there is likely to be additional expenditure necessary to achieve the full presentation solution envisaged by the Group.

#### BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:

1. Terms of Reference of the Group
2. Results of an e-mail survey regarding current practice at a number of local authorities who responded to the question 'Has any Council changed from a central planning committee, to an area planning committee system, and then changed back again to the central system? If so, why?'
3. Information about the East Devon District Council Area Local Planning System (which was the example referred to by Mr Waterworth).
4. Note from Mr P Waterworth (former New Alresford Town Councillor) on which the survey letter to Parish Councils was based.

5. New Alresford Town Council – Results of Survey of Parish Councils regarding Area Planning Committees.
6. Minutes of meeting of PDC (Improvement of Meetings) Group held on 1 April 2003.
7. Document produced by the New Forest Association of Parish Councils entitled 'A Crisis of Confidence' (suggesting, inter alia, that NFDC consider area planning committees).
8. Planning Committee systems operating in the local authorities with an interest in the South Downs National Park. (showing 5 out of 13 have Area Planning Committees).
9. Letter dated 16/8/03 from Mr D Atwell – Planning Consultant and former WCC Planning Committee Chairman (regarding an apparently successful Area Local Planning system in operation at Windsor and Maidenhead DC).
10. Details of the Charter Mark awarded for planning services to Eastleigh BC
11. Estimate prepared by CSS of comparison costs of holding the current PDC Committee and an evening Area Planning Committee in venue away from Winchester Town.
12. Summary of Questionnaires completed by Group Members when visiting other Authorities

#### APPENDICES:

Appendix A Summary and Recommendations based upon the Group's conclusions

## APPENDIX A

### RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE GROUP HAVING TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT PRACTICES SEEN WHEN ATTENDING AREA LOCAL PLANNING COMMITTEES AT SALISBURY, EAST HAMPSHIRE AND CHICHESTER DISTRICT COUNCILS

#### 1 Introduction of Area Planning Committees

- 1.1 The main comments and recommendation of the Group on this key issue are set out in para. 3 of the main report. However, there were a number of other comments as set out below.
- 1.2 The Group noted that Councils which had two sizeable main towns, used those as the basis for the area planning committee (APCs) structure eg. East Hampshire (Alton and Petersfield), Test Valley (Romsey and Andover). Windsor and Maidenhead RBC took that basis further, by sub-dividing into urban and rural for each town and surrounding area, giving four APCs in total. Salisbury DC also had four APCs (City, and three rural areas) and Chichester DC two APCs (South – held in the Town, and North - held in Petworth).
- 1.3 In some areas it is the practice that all Members serve on an APC.
- 1.4 Whilst quoted by Mr Waterworth as an example of good APC practice, it was discovered on investigation that East Devon DC has recently changed back to a single development control committee, apparently and according to the officers because it found the APC format expensive and it did not produce the enhanced quality of decision making anticipated. However, the decision to change back to a single development control committee was not welcomed by some Members, who preferred the area system.
- 1.5 Other points noted at the visited authorities whilst investigating this issue were as follows:-
  - (a) it was stated by one Committee Administrator that obtaining a suitable location for an APC meeting generally presented a problem in booking terms, unless there was a long term booking agreement (as with Petworth).
  - (b) sometimes the location was known to be unsatisfactory, particularly if plans had to be displayed, and/or there were inadequate parking or toilet facilities. Area locations were most satisfactory when there was an available Parish or Town Office where plans were available for public view, with a room for study. A local Library was a help in this respect. The problem was that opening hours in these locations was sometimes limited.
  - (c) local people were more likely to attend an APC held in their location. This had advantages in terms of public participation, but could mean that the APC was subject to more pressure when considering applications, with a tendency for local councillors to be subjected to 'influence', rather than concentrate on the material planning considerations.

- (d) it was difficult to make accurate calculations as to the attendance at APCs in village locations, than in a central location. This meant that the provision of papers for the meeting was sometimes inadequate and there was no immediate way to produce more papers from central sources.
- (e) security was less easy to organise in a village location, should there be a very controversial application.
- (f) the combination of Development Control, with an Area Committee considering other local issues, appeared to work well in some areas.

**1.6 RECOMMENDATION: That area planning committees be not introduced, because the Group did not believe that the research undertaken had provided sufficient evidence that such a restructuring would improve the quality of decision making, nor provide a more meaningful level of public involvement in the planning process, particularly having regard to the additional costs which would be incurred.**

1.7 The Group recalled that Report EN10 explained that political balance did not apply to APCs, provided that the area committee did not cover more than 40% of the Authority (in terms of either area or population), and all voting Members represented Wards wholly or partly within the area of the body.

1.8 The PDC Committee was currently established on a political group ratio of 8:4:2:2. The choice of the actual Members who served on the Committee was left to each group and the names were simply endorsed by full Council. Membership of the Committee could be appointed with no particular regard to overall political balance, using the 'alternative arrangements' provision, but the decision must be agreed 'nem con' (without opposition) by every Member of the Council.

1.9 Whilst the unanimous view of the Group was that there were no 'political' planning decisions taken by PDC Committee (i.e. through political group block voting), Cllr Baxter expressed some concern about the current lack of representation for the northern part of the District. He submitted a paper to the Group to highlight the problem, which included the following information:-

Winchester Town incl. Badger Farm 7 Members 43.75% of the Planning Committee. 20 Members or 35% of Members on the City Council covering a population of approximately 32,000

Southern Parishes 4 Members 25% of the Planning Committee. 14 Members or 24% of Members on the City Council covering a population of approximately 21,700

Bishops Waltham, Colden Common, Owslebury & Curdridge, Compton and Otterbourne 3 Members 18.75% of the Planning Committee. 10 Members or 17.5% of Members on the City Council covering a population of approximately 16,000

Northern Parishes incl. Kings Worthy 2 Members 12.5% of the Planning Committee. 13 Members or 22.5% of Members on the City Council covering a population of approximately 20,800



Cllr Baxter suggested that one way to reduce this imbalance would be to replace a Member representing a Winchester Town Ward, with a Member representing a Ward in the northern part of the district.

- 1.10 The Group noted that, if agreed, the issue could be tackled by altering Committee appointments within the groups, but this would be hard to achieve with the small numbers involved. Alternatively, if the total PDC Committee membership was reviewed and re-appointed on the 'alternative arrangements' basis, it would be possible (through the co-operation of all groups) to achieve a different geographic spread of membership.
- 1.11 It was noted that if there was agreement on this approach, the matter could be considered by full Council on 7 January 2004, under the standard agenda item regarding appointments.
- 1.12 **RECOMMENDATION: That the four political Group Leaders consider the possibility of re-appointing the PDC Committee under 'alternative arrangements', in order that a more geographically representative spread of membership may be achieved.**

## **2 Before the Meeting**

- 2.1 The Group concluded that whilst the standard of report writing for the PDC Committee was generally high, the format in which that information was presented was sometimes confusing and there were examples of better practice in some of the Councils visited (eg Chichester).
- 2.2 In particular, the Group favoured a more 'bullet point' approach and clearer headings, for example when setting out the comments of consultees.
- 2.3 The Group also supported the idea of including site plans within the committee reports, as that gave an immediate appreciation of the locality.
- 2.4 **RECOMMENDATION: That the DDS prepare a revised report template for consideration which provides a clearer format and the opportunity to include site plans.**
- 2.5 It was noted that Windsor & Maidenhead RLB issued a monthly e-mail newsletter covering forthcoming and recently determined planning applications and related planning issues. The Group recognised that introducing such a system would involve resources, but it did appear one way to provide good communication about one of the City Council's key functions.
- 2.6 **RECOMMENDATION: That the DDS investigate the practical and financial implications of introducing a planning e-mail newsletter.**

## **3 At the Meeting**

- 3.1 The PDC Committee public speaking arrangements are similar in most respects to those operated by the visited authorities. One key difference, however, is that all those authorities visited gave parish councils an opportunity to comment on applications within their area, as an established part of the procedure. The Group regarded this as good practice and a positive way of increasing local involvement in the planning process.

- 3.2 The Group considered whether Ward Members should be limited to three (or perhaps five) minutes, but concluded that the current lack of restriction was rarely abused and the Chairman had ultimate control in any event. Therefore, no change was proposed.
- 3.3 It was noted that for those applications where the officers were recommending permission and there were no objectors wishing to speak, the applicant/agent was not able to address the meeting. That practice had caused problems and delay where the Committee had decided to go against officer advice and refuse the application. Therefore, the Group agreed that this practice should be discontinued and applicants/agents should be allowed to address the Committee in such circumstances.
- 3.4 A final point, not raised at the Group meetings but included here for completeness, is the situation where applicants and objectors speak on an application that is subsequently deferred for a Viewing Sub Committee. Those parties have the opportunity to address the Sub Committee on site, but it has been questioned whether they should be allowed to speak (in effect for a third time) when the minutes and recommendation of the Sub Committee are considered at the next meeting. The current practice is that they should only be allowed to speak for a third time where there has been a change in recommendation, or significantly amended plans have been submitted as a result of the Sub Committee visit. It is considered the current practice should be adhered to.
- 3.5 **RECOMMENDATION: That the public speaking arrangements be amended to include a three minute period for a representative of the local Parish Council to make comments on relevant planning applications.**

**To accord with the principles of natural justice, the order of speakers should be:-**

1. **Objector(s)**
2. **Parish Council representative**
3. **Ward Member(s)**
4. **Applicant/Agent**

**Secondly, it is recommended that applicants/agents be allowed to address the Committee, even though the officers are recommending approval of their application and there are no objectors who wish to speak.**

**Thirdly, it is recommended that there is no change to current practice regarding applicants and objectors who have spoken at the Committee and a subsequent Viewing Sub Committee, not being allowed to speak again when the minutes of the Sub Committee are considered, unless there has been a change in recommendation or significantly amended plans have been submitted as a result of the Sub Committee's visit.**

- 3.6 The Group recalled that the current plan presentation system had been in use for about 10 years and whilst generally adequate, the systems used at some of the other authorities (based upon a laptop computer with pre-loaded plans and good projection) appeared more professional. It was also less labour intensive, because the laptop was operated by the officer presenting the

application (ie there was no need for Planning Technicians at the meeting to operate a camera as with current practice).

3.7 The Group was informed that consideration was currently being given to improving both the visual and audio facilities in the Walton Room, possibly to incorporate a ceiling hung projector and an amplification system. The projection system could be linked to a pre-loaded laptop for plans and photograph display, although if Members wished to see other plans of an application which had not been pre-loaded, it would not be possible to project these 'on demand'. Also, it would still be necessary to provide some monitors, unless those at the meeting immediately in front of the screen were prepared to turn their seats to view the plans.

**3.8 RECOMMENDATION: That, as a matter of urgency, the Directors of Development Services and Community Services, in conjunction with the City Secretary and Solicitor, provide upgraded audio and visual facilities in the Walton Room, Guildhall, with regular reports on installation progress being made to the relevant Portfolio Holders.**

**It was also agreed that the Director of Development Services should undertake, as soon as possible, the necessary technical work and staff training to ensure that laptop based plan presentations could begin as soon as the projection equipment was installed.**

3.9 Following on from the above point, the Group commented upon the current amplification system, which involved shared microphones. It was agreed that the performance of that system was generally poor and there were occasions when some speakers were very difficult to hear. It was noted that the lack of a dedicated committee room meant that any new microphone system would still need to be capable of being dismantled at the end of each meeting and, to some extent, that limited the options available. However, officers were currently arranging site visits to inspect relatively new audio installations at some neighbouring authorities, to help assess the best system for the PDC Committee.

**3.10 RECOMMENDATION: That, as part of the investigations referred to in para 3.9 above, it be noted that the Group would wish to see installed an audio system which included a microphone for each Member, with a light on every unit to indicate who is speaking/waiting to speak.**

3.11 Another area of good practice identified by the Group, was the advance notification by Members to the Committee Administrator of any items on which a personal or prejudicial interest would be declared. This enabled the Committee Administrator to read out at the beginning of the meeting a full list of declarations, which was a clearer and more professional approach from the public perspective than the current system. It did not, of course, prevent any Member from declaring further interests during the meeting, if any became apparent during consideration of the applications.

3.12 It should be noted that current practice already encourages Members to discuss declaration queries with the City Secretary and Solicitor well in advance of the meeting, so this suggested approach is welcomed by the officers.

**3.13 RECOMMENDATION: That Members of the PDC Committee be requested to inform the Committee Administrator of any Declarations of Interest they intend to make, not later than 24 hours before the commencement of the meeting. The Committee Administrator will then announce all declarations received as first business at the meeting.**

3.14 The Group gave particular attention to the duration of meetings and noted the time taken by other authorities to get through the business. While performances varied, one practice of note was an assumption made that Members had read all application reports completely. Consequently, officer presentations were limited to updates of material considerations only and perhaps the briefest of introductions. The more lengthy presentations which are fairly standard at the PDC Committee, were not seen at the other authorities. Therefore, provided the current level of written detail was given (but in the clearer format referred to in para 2.4 above) officer introductions generally should be discontinued.

**3.15 RECOMMENDATION: That apart from updating the PDC Committee on material changes which have occurred since the report was written, or other exceptional circumstances, the general practice be that officers will not introduce reports, on the assumption that Members have fully read and understood the content.**

3.16 The Group noted that there were generally fewer planning officers in attendance at meetings in all three authorities visited. The reason was that the general practice was for a senior officer to present the application, rather than the case officer, however junior or inexperienced, as is the case at Winchester. Whilst recognising that there were sound training and job satisfaction reasons for the Winchester practice, Members considered that this matter should be subject to review.

**RECOMMENDATION: That the Director of Development Services review the practice of all case officers presenting planning applications to the Development Services Committee.**

3.17 Another current practice which should be amended to save time was the deferral of applications refused against officer recommendation, to allow reasons for refusal to be considered by the officers and brought back to the next meeting of the Committee. In this situation, other authorities devised reasons for refusal 'on the spot', which avoided the need for a further report and another round of discussion at the next meeting. The Group recalled that the current arrangement originated from advice given by the LGA and the Chief Planning Officers Society, who were seeking to reduce the risk of inappropriate reasons being agreed. However, it was considered that officers would be well aware of those applications recommended for permission which were marginal, and therefore could come to the meeting with possible reasons for refusal already prepared.

3.18 The reverse scenario, of a recommended refusal being changed to a permission by Members, had not caused the same problems of delay, because conditions were either agreed at the meeting or delegated to the DDS to determine, in consultation with the Chairman.

- 3.19 RECOMMENDATION: That, apart from exceptional circumstances, applications refused by the Committee against officer recommendation no longer be deferred for a further report setting out possible reasons for refusal, but now be determined at the meeting, and officers be requested to prepare possible reasons for refusal for those applications which they recommend for approval, but where the issues are finely balanced.**
- 3.20 When the point of decision was reached, most of the meetings determined the application with a show of hands and formal count. The practice at PDC Committee is that applications on which there is a general consensus are usually determined by a chorus of "Agreed". More contentious matters are put to the vote.
- 3.21 The Group commented that the showing of hands on all applications (whether there was general agreement or not) was perhaps a clearer indication to the public of who voted for what, and a visible display of democracy in action. Whilst there was nothing incorrect about accepting "Agreed" when it was clearly the majority view of the meeting, it was commented that sometimes it was a fairly muted response to the Chairman, which might leave the public in some doubt about whether the application had been agreed or not. Similarly, hands which were not clearly raised did not convey proceedings clearly to the public and could lead to miscounts.
- 3.22 RECOMMENDATION: That all applications be determined by a clear show of hands and formal count.**
- 3.23 The Group also discussed how inconvenience to the public could be minimised when meetings went on for several hours and sometimes a whole day. The possibility of moving PDC Committee to an evening start was also considered.
- 3.24 None of the authorities visited made any discernible attempt to reorganise their agendas to take first the items for which the public had attended, including public speaking. The Group considered it a courtesy to the public to continue with the practice of taking such items first, even though it usually meant re-ordering the agenda.
- 3.25 One authority announced at the beginning of its meeting a clear timetable for when refreshment and lunch breaks would be held, which seemed to be accepted by all those in attendance. The Group agreed that if the PDC Committee kept with its preference of two afternoon meetings per month, rather than one all day session, the question of lunch would not arise. Refreshment/comfort breaks were best left to the discretion of the Chairman, having regard to the flow of business on the day.
- 3.26 The PDC Committee had continued to meet during the day for many years, not least to make attendance easier for agents and other professional representatives. For most of the public in attendance, it was probably their first and only visit to a planning committee, and so it was likely that they did not find a one-off attendance at a daytime meeting too inconvenient. It was also pointed out, that with modern working patterns, attending an evening meeting may be equally or more inconvenient for some people. Evening meetings also raised the issue of fatigue and it was at least debatable whether it was good practice to be taking important planning decisions at, say, 10.30pm, which

could well be an average finish time from a 6.30pm start, judging by past experience.

3.27 As meetings could take several hours, the Group did identify a need to keep the public (especially late arrivers) informed about what items on the agenda had been dealt with. It was agreed that some form of public noticeboard be created which showed this information.

**3.28 RECOMMENDATION: That no change be made to the current practices of taking public speaking items first; that refreshment breaks continue to be timed at the discretion of the Chairman; and that PDC Committee meetings continue to be held during the day. However, the officers be requested to display a noticeboard at Committee, which is frequently updated during the meeting, to show the public what agenda items have been dealt with.**

#### **4 The Convening of Viewing Sub Committees**

4.1 The Group noted that, at one of the other authorities, applications deferred for Viewing Sub Committee visits were announced at the beginning of the meeting (i.e. the officers had decided that a site visit was necessary). It was commented that this practice may save on debate at Committee, although it was not being suggested that other visits could not be agreed during the meeting.

4.2 Following discussion the Group agreed that, generally, the PDC Committee did not allow site visits without good reason, and the majority of recent visits undertaken had contributed to a clearer understanding of the applications. The Protocol on Planning Matters set out (in para 8) the factors which needed to be considered before a Viewing Sub Committee was arranged and those factors were always taken into account, namely:-

(a) to gain more knowledge of the proposal, the application site and its relationship to adjacent sites.

(b) the submitted plans were not clear as to the exact nature of the proposal.

(c) there was considerable local concern about a proposal, allied to planning reasons for carrying out a visit (eg. the physical relationship of the site to other sites in the neighbourhood).

4.3 On balance, the Group considered that the current system for convening Viewing Sub Committees was satisfactory, provided that the Chairman continued to apply the above criteria to ensure that such visits were only agreed where the particular circumstances satisfied the Protocol.

4.4 The Group also agreed that the practice of establishing short-life sub committees to consider and recommend upon particularly significant applications appeared to working well, and was not used excessively.

**4.5 RECOMMENDATION: That the current system of determining whether an application should be deferred for a Viewing Sub Committee be continued, together with the practice of establishing short-life sub committees to discuss significant applications.**