

Extract from Standards Committee Minutes October 2010

17. DISCUSSION WITH CHIEF PLANNER

The Council's Chief Planner, Bob McQuillan, attended the meeting. He outlined the scope of the Planning Division's work, the volumes of applications handled, and the procedural guidance and best practice on ethical issues followed by the staff within the service and councillors who served on the Planning sub-committees and Development Control Committee. The Council's own local protocols had last been reviewed in April 2009, and had been followed up by a training session (to which all councillors had been invited) in May 2009.

The Committee had a wide-ranging discussion, which covered issues such as:

- Given sensitivities around the position of councillors sitting on planning sub-committees who might also be approached by local residents in their role as a ward councillor, and the consequent dangers of perceptions of pre-determination, whether this could be reduced by constituting planning sub-committees differently.
- Ways in which planning sub-committees could express their disagreement with planning inspectors' decisions even where they were forced into a position of allowing developments they had previously rejected because of the likelihood and expense of losing an appeal
- Their view that our local planning guidance should be published on our website, along with clear information on the basis on which planning applications were considered, so that our processes are clear and transparent to the public and so that ways to flag up any concerns the public might have about ethical or probity issues in this area can be clearly signposted
- Their request that the Standards Committee should be consulted as part of any future review of our local guidance
- The need for clear summing up by Planning Sub-Committee chairmen on the reasons for planning decisions, to ensure that decision-making was as clear and accountable as possible
- Quality assurance processes to ensure that reports accurately reflected the public representations received; and to flag up more prominently potentially misleading information supplied (e.g. plans not to scale) to allow councillors to more easily identify applications that they might wish to reject or defer pending getting more appropriate information
- A request for the Chief Planner to review the current practice of objectors to an application always speaking first, on the grounds that this could disadvantage 'lay' residents who might be considerably less experienced at handling such situations than professional developers

Bob McQuillan agreed to go away and review a number of the communications and procedural suggestions made by the Committee. The Chairman thanked Bob McQuillan for coming along to discuss these issues with the Committee.

RESOLVED that Mr McQuillan be invited to attend the March 2010 meeting to discuss progress on these issues further