

**BOURNEMOUTH, CHRISTCHURCH AND POOLE COUNCIL**  
**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD**

Minutes of the Meeting held on 15 November 2021 at 6.00 pm

Present:-

Cllr S Bartlett – Chairman

Cllr V Slade – Vice-Chairman

Present: Cllr L Allison, Cllr L Dedman, Cllr B Dion, Cllr M Earl, Cllr J Edwards,  
Cllr S Gabriel, Cllr M Howell, Cllr D Kelsey and Cllr C Rigby

Also in attendance: Councillor Philip Broadhead  
Councillor Michael Brooke  
Councillor Bobbie Dove  
Councillor Beverley Dunlop  
Councillor Andy Hadley

115. Apologies

Apologies were received from Cllr J Butt, Cllr M Howell and Cllr T O'Neil

116. Substitute Members

Cllr A Hadley for Cllr M Howell

117. Declarations of Interests

Cllr L Dedman, declared an interest for the purpose of transparency that she was a member of one of the town councils involved in the report at agenda item 6, Planning Committee Structure.

During consideration of the Board's Forward Plan Cllr S Gabriel declared an interest for the purpose of transparency that he was the manager of two leisure centres as this was referred to in the Forward Plan.

118. Public Speaking

There were no public questions, statements or petitions received.

119. Planning Service Improvement Update

The Portfolio Holder for Development, Growth and Regeneration presented a report, a copy of which had been circulated to each member of the Board and a copy of which appears as Appendix 'A' to these minutes in the Minute Book. The Portfolio Holder and officers addressed a number of points raised by the Board including:

- It was observed that since this issue was last discussed by the Board the work appeared to have been identifying issues rather than finding

resolutions. The Board was advised that the service had become more decisive in decision making and staff dealt more promptly with customer enquiries. The protocol for handling applications had been reviewed and customers would feel the effects of the measures being put in place.

- A Board member asked whether there was a list and timeframe of actions and a project improvement plan. It was noted that part of this was set out within the report but there was a more detailed version which had been approved by the Planning Improvement Board (PIB).
- A number of timescales had been extended by agreement. It was suggested that therefore the table did not accurately reflect the timescales for applications. A Councillor asked whether the improvement in completions was from timescale extensions agreed. The statistics were reported in the same way as other planning authorities and extensions were agreed by the applicant in order to work towards a solution. However, it was hoped to get to a point where extensions were used infrequently. The Board noted that it was difficult for O&S to address this as it had not seen the data.
- There were concerns raised in the use of extensions and how these were handled. A Member requested that for future reports the Board receive information on the number of reports dealt with within the original timescale and the number of applicants who had asked for a redetermination.
- Concern was raised about the level of support being given to the development of neighbourhood plans which were supposed to have a dedicated support officer.
- There was no mention within the report of improved communications with residents. For example, there appeared to be no ambition for providing automatic alerts to members of the public on a postcode basis.
- The Board asked about the Planning Authority's relationship with the Urban Regeneration Company (URC). The Portfolio Holder advised that Future Places (the URC) was a wing of the Council and they would want to see that the planning service could react to the level of Council aspirations in this area, whether through the URC or through other external bodies.
- In relation to the delegation recommendation in the report it was noted that an opportunity was needed to review the current situation to find a way to meet the needs of the community. Further work was required to come to a resolution, the Portfolio Holder decision was one way of doing this. It was confirmed that this was not intended to downgrade or make financial savings but to find an approach which worked for all parties.
- There was a timeframe to complete on some issues in January and it was suggested to place an update item on Board's Forward Plan for early next year. It was confirmed that data could be brought to a future meeting in a more cogent way for the Board to get a feel of the improvements it was looking for.
- It was noted that non-determination appeals were very low as was the case nationally. This was generally cause of last resort for an applicant. The Board were advised that there were also significant delays with the planning inspectorate.

- Neighbourhood plans were a challenge to resource at both a local and national level. There was an intention to look at how this area was delivered and resourced. It was an important process but there was a balancing act with the resources needed to move forward with the Local Plan.
- The Board enquired how complaints were monitored. The Portfolio Holder advised that there was a robust process in place with the PIB. The Chief Executive as Chair of the PIB advised that they wanted to see the sort of information the O&S Board had referred to. However this had been more difficult than expected due to working with three different systems but they were beginning to see improvements.
- A Councillor questioned how the outlined level of funding was required this late in the year. It was noted that this was the expected spend and included short-term transitional costs partly due to the restructure process.
- Issues were raised with the Pre-Application Service. Applications were unwilling to use it. Not necessarily as a result of the fee but of the outcome from the service. This was currently under review and would come back to the PIB.
- It was noted that there were a number of approaches to addressing changes needed to applications. Some Councils offered a one chance approach, some councils on majors went straight to refusal if pre-application services had not been used or the advice provided not followed. There was a need to consider all options.
- There was no information in the report on enforcement. It was noted that this was because enforcement had been the quickest in terms of adding staff and was performing relatively well compared to other areas of the service.
- It was noted that recruitment was the most urgent part of any improvement plan. It was noted that the review of the planning structure was due to be completed by the end of 2021
- There were concerns raised about any reduction in the current notification service, particularly in relation to equality implications. There were communication improvements internally and with agents but this needed to be extended to the local parish and town councils.
- A Member raised concerns about ‘twin tracking’, when applicants submit duplicate applications to force the planning authority into a determination. It was noted that this wasn’t a frequent occurrence but there was nothing which could be done to prevent it if this is how an applicant chose to proceed.

The Chairman acknowledged the report and noted that the work officers were doing was appreciated. The Board agreed to consider an update report on this issue at its meeting in February. The Chairman thanked the Portfolio Holder and Officers for attending.

120. Planning Committee Structure

Following a request by a member of the public for an item of scrutiny to be placed on the Board’s agenda in relation to the Planning Committee

Structure the Board agreed to place this on the Boards Forward Plan and the Chairman had agreed to add this to the agenda for this meeting.

The Chairman of the Board invited, the parish Councils' representative Chairman of Highcliffe & Walkford Parish Council, who was acting at the request of, Christchurch Town Council, Hurn Parish Council, Burton Parish Council and Throop & Holdenhurst Parish Council, to address the Board and outline the issues which they wanted the Board to consider.

The representative explained that they felt that BCP Council should operate the Planning function as three separate area-based committees rather than one single committee. It was outlined that there was a lack of confidence in the system by many which was why the local parish councils had become involved in the situation. There was no confidence that the Councillors on the Planning Committee would appreciate and understand the nuances of planning in the different areas of the conurbation. They believed that public confidence would increase if the Council operated with three, area-based committees as opposed to the single committee model.

The Chairman invited the Head of Planning to respond to the points raised. The Board was advised that they understood the concerns and issues raised by the parish councils within the report but from their perspective the current planning committee was operating very effectively and that there hadn't been any issues of the wrong decisions being made. Councillors applied the appropriate policies within the different areas. It was no considered that this was the most appropriate time to raise this as there were many other issues in the service at present. This was also previously considered less than 12 months ago but was potentially something to monitor

There was a need to approach this in an evidenced based way. The statement in the report that there was a democratic deficit in the current planning system was not evidenced. However, the Planning Committee shouldn't stand still but should consider opportunities. The current operations were efficient and cost effective. Multiple committees were in the minority across the country and were generally in Council's which covered a large geographical area. A key risk in moving to a multiple committee model would be a need to ensure consistency. Servicing a committee was time and resource intensive. There was nothing within the report which indicated that a shared or multiple committee system would be more efficient or engaging than the current arrangement.

The Chairman also invited a Ward Councillor for the Commons Ward to address the Committee who advised that public confidence was the absolute key to effective town planning. Making decisions which the public had faith in required local knowledge. Many local residents did not have this confidence in this current system. Councillors needed to use local knowledge to understand that what may be acceptable in one area of the conurbation would not be in another area. It was also suggested that the Committee of 15 members was too big and this impaired its effectiveness. Individual local committees could include just 7 members. It was also noted

that the current committee had a significant workload and needed to start early and sit for a whole day.

Following this the Chairman opened the issues for debate by the Board, the issues raised by the Board included:

- There was huge sympathy for the idea suggested by the parishes
  - That there was only 13 miles from one side of the conurbation to the other.
  - Members on the planning committee should familiarise themselves with what was going on in different areas of the conurbation.
  - It wasn't possible to have people from every ward on the planning committee - how far was it preferable to go in terms of breaking down geographically.
  - Christchurch only had five wards which would allow someone from every ward to sit on an area-based committee.
  - That it was important for Planning Committee to be doing site visits and ensure appropriate training was in place.
  - It was important to take into account the parish Councils views and this may help with public confidence.
  - Parish Councils and neighbourhood forums had the statutory right to speak at the Planning Committee.
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- The Christchurch Planning Committee had been running very well pre-merger.
  - Dorset Council ran two area-based boards and an overall committee for major applications and most large unitary Council's had separate area committees.
  - Even if it was not something which could be addressed now it could be something which was considered and revisited in the future.
  - The majority of planning decisions were made by officers not by committees.
  - There was currently a level playing field with the same planning committee for all applications
  - The Planning Committee followed national planning conditions, the local plan and neighbourhood plans. There should be more work going into putting together more neighbourhood plans with more detail for local areas.
  - Currently the Planning Committee thoroughly considered applications including visiting sites and finding out what was going on in a particular area.
  - Each application should be dealt with on its own merits and in accordance with the correct policies
  - The Planning committee was doing a good job but there could be further training provided for members and anyone who substituted.
  - A formal report on this issue was considered by the Audit and Governance Committee on 26 November 2020. The Committee concluded that the current system should remain in place and this was agreed by full Council in January 2021.

- That this should be reconsidered in future but time was needed to make appropriate changes within the Planning Service first.
- Most Councillors knew the different areas of the conurbation well.

The Chairman suggested that the Board should not take any further action on this matter at this stage but that it had been useful to hear the comments from senior planning officers and the Portfolio Holder earlier in the meeting, which indicated that it would create further issues if the Planning Committee structure was looked at further at present.

However, there were indications from a number of Board members that this should be considered again in the future.

It was suggested that there should be a public communications campaign on planning. It seemed like a lack of information and misunderstandings fuelled certain issues and people made assumptions which were incorrect. It was important to ensure that the public was fully engaged. It was also important that ward Councillors were engaged in the process.

The Chairman thanked Mr Hutchings for representing the Parish Councils this evening and gave him an opportunity to have a final say on the matters discussed by the Board. The Chairman noted that whilst it was not presently the right time to look at this issue due to the development of the local plan for the BCP area and the changes underway in the Planning service it was something which should be kept under consideration for the future as it was important to ensure the confidence of local residents in the planning process.

**RESOLVED: That no further action be taken at this stage.**

121. Forward Plan

Following a request by a member of the public for an item of scrutiny to be placed on the Board's agenda in relation to the Planning Committee Structure the Board agreed to place this on the Boards Forward Plan and the Chairman had agreed to add this to the agenda for this meeting.

The Chairman of the Board invited, the parish Councils' representative Chairman of Highcliffe & Walkford Parish Council, who was acting at the request of, Christchurch Town Council, Hurn Parish Council, Burton Parish Council and Throop & Holdenhurst Parish Council, to address the Board and outline the issues which they wanted the Board to consider.

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The Chairman invited the Head of Planning to respond to the points raised. The Head of Planning advised the Board that they understood the concerns and issues raised by the parish councils within the report but from their perspective the current planning committee was operating very effectively and that there had not been any issues of the wrong decisions being made. Councillors applied the appropriate policies within the different areas. It was not considered that this an appropriate time to raise this as there were many other issues in the service to address. The issue was also previously considered less than 12 months ago but was potentially something to monitor.

The statement in the report that there was a democratic deficit in the current planning system was not evidenced. The current operations were efficient and cost effective. Multiple committees were in the minority across the country and were generally in Councils which covered a large geographical area. A key risk in moving to a multiple committee model would be a need to ensure consistency. Servicing a committee was time and resource intensive. There was nothing within the report which indicated that a shared or multiple committee system would be more efficient or engaging than the current arrangement.

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**RESOLVED: That no further action be taken at this stage.**

122. Future Meeting Dates 2021/22 and 2022/23

The dates for the current and next municipal year were noted.

The meeting ended at 8.41 pm

CHAIRMAN