

Review of the BCP Planning Committee Structure

Report commissioned by:

Burton and Winkton Parish Council, Christchurch Town Council, Highcliffe and Walkford Parish Council and Hurn Parish Council

July 2021

1. INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the report

1.1 The purpose of this report, commissioned and funded by Christchurch Town Council, Highcliffe and Walkford Parish Council, Hurn Parish Council and Burton Parish Council, is to investigate the functioning of the current BCP Planning Committee and the potential advantages of an area based arrangement, one planning board for each town.

1.2 The decision to seek the review was based on a growing concern in each of the four parish councils (together covering the whole of Christchurch Borough) that a democratic deficit exists in the current planning system which in turn means a lack of confidence among residents about the quality of decision making.

1.3 This report followed the decision made by BCP at Full Council on 5 January 2021, to retain the single planning committee structure. It was based upon the associated working group's recommendations (set up to advise the Audit and Governance Committee in November 2020)¹. It is noted that the working group were presented with some comparative information about the organisation of the planning function in other Councils based on a sample of 12 Councils of similar population size (ranging from 331,000 – 463,000 population). For comparison purposes, this data is given in Appendix A.

About the author

1.4 The report has been researched and written by Jo Witherden BSc(Hons) DipTP DipUD MRTPI. Jo Witherden is a chartered town planner and a full member of the Royal Town Planning Institute, with an upper second-class honours degree in City & Regional Planning from Cardiff University, a distinction in the Diploma in Town Planning from Cardiff University, and a distinction in the Diploma in Urban Design from Oxford Brookes. Jo has worked in planning policy roles in local authorities across Dorset for nearly 20 years, last employed as Head of Spatial Policy and Implementation for Weymouth & Portland Borough Council and West Dorset District Councils, leading a multi-disciplinary team of more than 10 officers dealing with planning policy, environmental assessment, planning obligations, urban and landscape design for the two council areas. Since November 2014 Jo has been working as an independent planning consultant, advising a wide range of clients on planning applications, appeals and policy matters, including working with Town and Parish Councils on Neighbourhood Plans.

How the review was undertaken

1.5 The review has been undertaken in three parts:

- a) Identification of similar Councils (in terms of unitary function and population size / geographic area / volume of applications) for comparison purposes;

¹ <https://democracy.bcpCouncil.gov.uk/documents/s21378/Changes%20to%20the%20Councils%20Constitution.pdf>

- b) Review of sample of these local planning authorities, identifying variation in committee set-up and how they function – including any peer review and community engagement / representation information available;
- c) Identify key learning points of best practice.

Principal Conclusions

The main conclusions arising from this research can be summarised below:

- The research shows that Planning Committee structures are varied and there is no one favoured method. If anything there is a slight partiality towards using area-based committees in comparable Councils, and geography is not a determining factor.
- There appear to be more factors in favour of an area-based committee structure than a single committee structure. An area-based structure would enable meetings to be held closer to the main population affected and would enable committee members to have greater familiarity with that area, and this is reinforced by the introduction of Neighbourhood Plans as a local layer of planning policy.
- It is clear that area based committees can and do work effectively in other local authority areas, can benefit from more local knowledge and expertise and are more likely to be accessible to the local community, therefore increasing public faith and confidence in the process.
- There is no evidence that they result in 'parochial' decision making. Nor is there any evidence to suggest that an area-based committee structure would increase the costs of the planning service.

2. IDENTIFICATION OF COMPARISON COUNCILS

Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP) Council

2.1 BCP Council was established on 1 April 2019, following local government reorganisation in the former county of Dorset. This saw the county's nine councils replaced by two new councils: Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council (comprising Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Borough Councils and the constituent element of Dorset County Council that covered the Christchurch area); and Dorset Council (comprising the remaining Dorset authorities).

– Population size:	– 395,331 (2019 mid year estimate)
– Council type:	– Unitary
– Geographic area:	– 17,393 hectares (total extent, not accounting for topography)
– Annual planning applications:	– 2,378 (all application types)

Comparison Councils by Population and Type

2.2 Table 4 in Appendix B identifies Local Planning Authorities (i.e. excluding County Councils) within England by type and population size similar to the BCP population (of approximately 395,000). Those with a similar populations ($\pm 75,000$ people) were highlighted for further consideration, but as this only identified 3 Councils with larger populations, the upper limit was extended to +150,000.

Comparison Councils by Geographic area

2.3 Table 5 in Appendix B identifies Local Planning Authorities (i.e. excluding County Councils) within England by geographic area similar to the BCP area (of approximately 17,000 hectares). The spread of Councils was broadly similar looking $\pm 3,000$ hectares either side of the BCP figure (13 more, and 9 less than BCP in area size).

Comparison Councils by number of planning applications

2.4 And finally, Table 6 in Appendix B identifies Local Planning Authorities (i.e. excluding County Councils) within England by the number of planning applications (all types) received in the last 12 months (approximately 2,400 applications). Those with a similar volume (± 500 applications) were highlighted for further consideration (9 Councils with more, and 23 with fewer, applications).

Suggested comparison Councils

2.5 Based on an appraisal of all three factors, the following 15 Councils were then identified as reasonably close comparators to BCP for further evaluation, based on at least 2 of the 3 comparison factors (population size, area size and number of applications processed) with a ranking-based weighting applied to identify those most comparable to BCP².

Table 1. Suggested Councils for further research as comparators to BCP Council

Barnet *	Cheshire West and Chester	East Riding of Yorkshire *	St Albans
Bristol City *	County Durham	Hillingdon	Shropshire
Bromley *	Croydon *	Kirklees *	Wandsworth
Cheshire East *	Dorset *	Manchester	Wigan

* these nine Councils plus Newham, Enfield and Nottingham were also considered in the comparison report undertaken by the BCP working party.

3. OVERVIEW OF COMMITTEE ARRANGEMENT BY COMPARATORS

Table 2. Overview of Committee Arrangement by Comparators³

Authority	Type	Area	App's	Pop'n	Committee Structure
Barnet	London	8,677	2,705	395,869	M Three planning committees ⁴
BCP Council	Unitary	17,393	2,378	395,331	S Single planning committee
Bristol City	Unitary	23,544	2,463	463,377	M Two committees
Bromley	London	15,013	2,517	332,336	M Four sub + planning committee
Cheshire E	Unitary	116,636	2,896	384,152	A Two area + strategic board
Cheshire W	Unitary	94,121	2,542	343,071	S Single planning committee
Co. Durham	Unitary	223,261	2,267	530,094	A Three area + county board
Croydon	London	8,649	2,156	386,710	M Single + sub-committee
Dorset	Unitary	252,108	3,412	378,508	A Three area + strategic board
East Riding	Unitary	249,179	2,529	341,173	A Two area + planning board
Hillingdon	London	11,570	2,361	306,870	A Two area + majors board
Kirklees	Metropolitan	40,855	2,059	439,787	A Two area + strategic board
Manchester	Metropolitan	11,565	2,022	552,858	S Single planning committee
Shropshire	Unitary	319,728	2,682	323,136	A Three area committees
St Albans	District	16,121	1,872	148,452	A Three area + referral committee
Wandsworth	London	3,522	2,305	329,677	S Single planning committee
Wigan	Metropolitan	18,817	1,038	328,662	S Single planning committee

3.1 It is clear from an initial overview that there is no single method by which these comparable Councils operate. There are three main types of set-up: a single planning committee (S), multiple planning committees (M), and area-based planning committees (A) some of which also have an area-wide strategic committee for the most significant applications. The sample suggests that there is a slight partiality towards using area-based committees as the preferred approach (8 of the 17 sampled), with only 5 of the 17 sampled (including BCP) operating a single planning committee structure⁵.

² 7 other authorities were identified as part of this sieving process but were considered less comparable than those in Table 1. These were: Bradford; Brent; Ealing; Lambeth; Liverpool; and Northumberland.

³ See Appendix A for data sources

⁴ The committee system changed from an area-based one system to the current arrangement in January 2021.

⁵ It is noted that the additional 6 authorities discounted in the previous stage (see footnote 2) were fairly evenly split between single planning committee (4) and area-based committee (2) type structures and therefore their omission would not have altered the above conclusions.

3.2 In general, the data suggests that area-based committees tend to be more prevalent in the larger geographic areas (but not exclusively so - Cheshire West and Chester, Hillingdon and St Albans operating in much smaller areas), with no obvious correlation based on either the number of applications or population size. But clearly geography / rurality is not a determining factor, as there are examples of several London Boroughs that operate such a system (including Hillingdon, as well as others such as Kingston upon Thames and Greenwich)⁶.

3.3 Given the purpose of this report, the multiple committee structure can be discounted, particularly given that it was the least favoured form of planning committee structure and it would not appear to have any obvious advantages with regards to addressing the perceived problem that a democratic deficit exists in the current planning system.

4. PERFORMANCE COMPARISONS

4.1 The next step was to check comparable performance between Councils in relation to their Planning and Development Services functions. To do this, the relative performance as reported through the Local Government Association benchmarking tools was used⁷.

Table 3. Overview of Planning Performance Indicators by Comparators (2019/20)

Authority		Revenue / person	Majors % 13wks	Minors % 8wks	% Appeals granted	Appeals (1/4ly)	% appeals dismissed	Complaints / app'n
Barnet ⁸	A	£23.84	86%	93%	71%	22	45%	0.5%
BCP Council	S	£21.59	70%	63%	75%	27	85%	0.7%
Cheshire E	A	£47.42	96%	88%	85%	24	67%	0.9%
Cheshire W	S	£58.17	100%	96%	89%	18	67%	0.4%
Co. Durham	A	£60.54	87%	96%	94%	14	71%	0.6%
Dorset	A	£40.25	71%	71%	82%	32	72%	0.0%
East Riding	A	£50.38	95%	95%	89%	21	76%	0.5%
Hillingdon	A	£23.64	88%	92%	63%	12	75%	0.6%
Kirklees	A	£45.82	100%	94%	87%	14	93%	0.5%
Manchester	S	£54.11	68%	82%	89%	8	63%	0.4%
Shropshire	A	£57.53	76%	88%	87%	19	74%	0.7%
St Albans		£33.20	100%	75%	79%	10	90%	0.3%
Wandsworth	S	£39.62	100%	90%	88%	3	100%	0.2%
Wigan	S	£38.10	100%	93%	89%	4	100%	0.8%
Single	S	£42.32	88%	85%	86%	12	83%	0.5%
Area-based	A	£42.51	89%	88%	82%	19	74%	0.5%

4.2 The analysis of these figures highlights that there is no clear correlation between any of these factors and the type of committee structure used. There is no significant difference between the committee types in terms of the performance indicators with the exception of appeals, with fewer appeals and higher dismissal rates for authorities using the single committee structure. However it is not possible to readily tell whether these were committee 'overturned' decisions that were going against officer recommendations.

Peer Reviews / Challenges

4.3 The various comparator Councils were checked in terms of whether any had undergone recent Peer Review challenges of either their Planning department or Committee arrangements. The search

⁶ It is noted that the London Borough of Barnet recently took the decision to change from an area-based to multiple planning committees (with the new structure in plan from January 2021).

⁷ <https://lginform.local.gov.uk/> and based on latest available quarter data at that time (July to September 2020)

⁸ These results reflect the previous area-based system in Barnet

identified Dorset as the only relevant case study⁹. Given the limited review data, a further search was undertaken to consider any additional evidence on scrutiny of Planning Committee's structures. This highlighted reports with regard to Cornwall, Enfield, Isle of Wight, South Cambridgeshire, South Lakeland, Test Valley, Waverley and Wirral Councils. The report findings are summarised in Appendix C, and common themes / messages are summarised below.

4.4 Planning can be a contentious matter, with concerns typically focused on:

- the transparency of decision-making and trust in the process
- the degree of political influence
- the perception that residents' concerns are not taken into account
- the efficiency of the decision-making process (the number of applications going in front of Committee can vary considerably, and ultimately is a matter for local determination based on delegation arrangements).

4.5 It is important that both the committee process and the legal requirements (i.e. that decisions must be taken in accord with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise) are clearly explained to the public, and the decision-making process is seen to be fair and transparent. There should be adequate opportunity for resident's views to be aired at committee, and a flexible approach may be needed in applying limits on public speaking where (for example) allowing more time would help members to better understand public views.

4.6 Problems are more likely to arise when Member involvement in planning decisions is left to the end of the process, missing opportunities to engage during the 'life' of the application, to potentially ensure any improvements or concerns they have are fully considered (and that these points are covered in the committee report).

4.7 It is important for the Council to learn from their decisions and seek improvements, particularly:

- reviewing decisions in terms of 'successes' and 'failures' where scheme are built, to help inform future considerations. This need not necessarily be limited to just those schemes approved by committee, but could include schemes approved under delegated powers;
- involving planning committee members in the review work on the Local Plan.

4.8 Where recommendations were made by the Planning Advisory Service in terms of restructuring planning committees, this was mainly based on the suggestion that Members involvement should focus more on strategic rather than minor planning applications (as being more important due to their scale). The pro's and con's of the different committee structures were not clearly explained or evidenced in those reports. Where this would result in a single committee structure, there was also clearly a reluctance from members to lose the benefits of area-based committees (as they saw them).

5. CONSIDERATION OF THE REVIEWED MATERIAL

5.1 Looking at comparable Councils of similar size and form, it is clear that the planning committee structure is varied and there is no one favoured method. Whilst area-based committees tend to be more prevalent in the larger geographic areas, there are exceptions to this 'rule of thumb'.

5.2 From a review of high level data, there is no clear correlation between the type of committee structure used and performance. Furthermore there are no clear indicators of customer satisfaction, either in terms of the process or whether decisions have (on hindsight) been good for the area (in terms of what is or isn't built). There is also no readily available data on direct and indirect costs of the planning services which can be broken down in order to be able to compare the cost efficiencies of the different planning committee processes, as well as the wide range of other factors that impact on performance.

5.3 The analysis of Peer Review challenges suggests that, whilst the Planning Advisory Service has made some recommendations in terms of restructuring planning committees, the pro's and con's of the different planning committee models are not clearly explained or evidenced in those reports. Where a

⁹ Kirklees underwent a Corporate Peer Challenge in July 2019 but this did not make any notable comment on the planning committees.

recommendation to move to a single planning committee structure have been made, there is also clearly a reluctance from members to lose the benefits of area-based committees (as they see them) where these are in place, as they were in the individual legacy Councils of Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole.

5.4 Where local representation issues were raised, the main response from the Peer Review challenges was in line with the 1997 report by the Nolan Committee¹⁰, which considered standards of conduct in Local Government, and which stated:

"It is essential for the proper operation of the planning system that local concerns are adequately ventilated. The most effective and suitable way that this can be done is through the local elected representatives, the councillors themselves."

However not all councillors will be able to (or necessarily want to) attend committee regarding decisions for their area (a review of BCP planning committee minutes over the period November 2020 – April 2021 suggests that about a third of applications have no ward member input). As such, some areas may be disadvantaged by relying solely on this remedy. At the current time, BCP Planning Committee is held in Bournemouth, which is not local to Christchurch or Poole, and is therefore likely to deter attendance (on cost / convenience grounds) by not only Councillors from the outlying areas but also local residents and businesses who may find it more difficult / costly to attend (than attending a more local alternative).

5.5 Where cost issues were raised, the main response from the Peer Review challenges was to reduce the amount of planning applications as far as practical to allow just the major strategic decisions to be considered by a single committee. Whilst there is no readily available cost comparison data, it is self-evident that the more applications considered by committee (and their complexity) increases the time spent, and therefore costs (a review of BCP planning committee minutes over the period November 2020 – April 2021 suggests that committees are typically 5 hours long with about 6 applications considered per committee). There is no obvious reason to conclude that the same amount of applications considered under either a single committee or through a number of area-based committees would necessarily be significantly different in cost terms, the main factor potentially being travel time and abortive time 'waiting' for the relevant item on the agenda (which may be reduced for officers but greater for members of the public). The fact that there are area-based planning teams and the potential for greater local representation on the committees (subject to proportionate political representation) further reduces any apparent time-saving benefits of a single planning committee.

5.6 With reference to BCP Council, there are clearly challenges with regard to the how the operation of the planning committee may operate due to:

- The complexity of the current adopted development plan and associated supplementary guidance, as comprised from the constituent parts inherited from the former Councils. This means that there are different policies applied to the different areas, some of which include two sets of policies (such as for Christchurch Council where in addition to the Core Strategy there are also saved policies from the previous Local Plan),

⇒ *Given the extent of knowledge and materials required for each area, this would suggest an area-based committee structure reflecting the former areas may be the more appropriate format at this time. Clear planning officer advice (together with appropriate member training) is also key. The consolidation of the library of planning policy documents and associated maps onto a single webpage relevant to the committee coverage is also important, for all participants.*

¹⁰ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/336864/3rdInquiryReport.pdf

- Emerging Neighbourhood Plans which add an additional layer of local policy to the development plan (when BCP Council formed there were just two made Neighbourhood Plans, both in Poole (Poole Quays and Broadstone) – since that time the Boscombe and Pokesdown Neighbourhood Plan has been made, and 6 more areas are currently designated for Neighbourhood Planning purposes),
 - ⇒ *The increasing complexity of Neighbourhood Plans (which have the same development plan status but cover smaller areas) would suggest an area-based committee structure may be more appropriate for this reason. It would also be advisable for the Neighbourhood Plan Groups to be canvassed to see if they would wish to play an advisory role at committees in the interpretation of policies.*
- Previous public concerns raised about the Council reorganisation that local areas would receive less attention and representation, and
 - ⇒ *Whilst committee decisions need to be made based upon the development plan, an area-based committee structure would enable meetings to be held closer to the main population affected, and would enable committee members to have greater familiarity with that area (and also limit planning officer involvement to the respective area team).*
- Officer and Councillor’s familiarity and knowledge of the area and previous decisions is also likely to be below average due to the re-organisation, and
 - ⇒ *Whilst reducing the number of applications considered by committee may be most effective at reducing direct costs, there are many indirect consequences that also need to be considered, such as the benefits of having greater member involvement that can feed into the review of the Local Plan.*
- Budgetary constraints, recognising the duty to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised (best value), having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Based on the above considerations, there appear to be more factors in favour of an area-based committee structure than a single committee structure. It is clear that area based committees can and do work effectively in other local authority areas, can benefit more from local knowledge and expertise (including that being developed through the preparation of Neighbourhood Plans), and are more likely to be accessible to the local community, therefore increasing public faith and confidence in the process. There is no evidence to suggest that they result in ‘parochial’ decision making. There is no evidence to suggest that this arrangement would increase the costs, particularly if the delegation arrangements (which influence the number of applications called in to committee) remains unchanged.

6.2 An area-based structure should reflect the existing local plans, and the planning team arrangements continue to align to the same areas. Any new Neighbourhood Area designations should be encouraged to fall within the area rather than straddling an area. A strategic overview on consistency in the application of strategic policies can and should be provided by the Head of Planning (or delegated to a single officer).

6.3 The committee membership should avoid political influence / bias. This can be achieved through committee member selection (both in terms of proportionate representation and exclusion of Cabinet / Executive members), seating mix during committee and clarity over the role of the ward councillor at committee. In introducing the committee, the Chairperson should clarify the role of the committee with reference to making decisions based on the development plan and other material considerations.

6.4 To improve performance at, and perceptions of, committee meetings, there should be:

- Good communication between officers and committee members prior to Committee, including informal (non-decision making) briefings / questions where relevant to reduce the length of less relevant discussion;

- Clear and reasonably succinct officer presentations. The presentation should identify the most relevant development plan policies, any other material considerations and any clear technical evidence to take into account. A slide / summary highlighting what weight should be given to the key issues when taking a balanced decision is considered to be good practice in focusing the discussion.
- Some flexibility in how the public can speak in the meetings prior to the committee debate – on rare occasions it may be beneficial to hold a public meeting.
- Consideration of the role of Neighbourhood Plan Groups / Forums to play an advisory role at committees in the interpretation of their policies.

6.5 It would be prudent to monitor customer satisfaction on planning including the views of those attending committee, and also those that choose not to attend (to understand the reasons why).

6.6 Planning committee members should be closely involved in the formation and review of planning policy (and this can be at both BCP Local Plan and Neighbourhood Plan levels). They should also look to learn from past decisions by having an annual tour / review of developments that were decided through committee and those decided under delegated powers.

APPENDICES

Appendix A – Comparison data presented to the BCP working group

Authority	Population (ranking in England)	Committee structure
Bristol	463,000 10th	2
Kirklees	438,000 11th	3 (2 sub committees 1 strategic)
BCP Council	398,000 12th	1
LB Barnet	392,000 13 th	3
LB Croydon	385,000 14th	2
Cheshire East	380,000 15th	3 (2 sub committees 1 strategic)
Dorset	376,000 16th	4 (3 sub committees 1 strategic)
LB Newham	352,000 19th	2
East Riding Yorkshire	339,000 23rd	2
LB Enfield	333,000 24th	1 + Planning Panel
LB Bromley	331,000 25th	2
Nottingham	331,000 26th	2 (1 is strategic)

Appendix B – Comparison Councils Data

Table 4. Population and Council Type comparisons¹¹:

Authority	Council Type	Population Size
Manchester	Metropolitan District	552,858
Buckinghamshire ¹²	Unitary Authority	543,973
Bradford	Metropolitan District	539,776
County Durham	Unitary Authority	530,094
Wiltshire	Unitary Authority	500,024
Liverpool	Metropolitan District	498,042
Bristol City	Unitary Authority	463,377
Kirklees	Metropolitan District	439,787
Barnet	London Borough	395,869
BCP Council	Unitary Authority	395,331
Croydon	London Borough	386,710
Cheshire East	Unitary Authority	384,152
Dorset	Unitary Authority	378,508
Coventry	Metropolitan District	371,521
Leicester	Unitary Authority	354,224
Newham	London Borough	353,134
Wakefield	Metropolitan District	348,312
Cheshire West and Chester	Unitary Authority	343,071
Ealing	London Borough	341,806
East Riding of Yorkshire	Unitary Authority	341,173
Enfield	London Borough	333,794
Nottingham	Unitary Authority	332,900
Bromley	London Borough	332,336
Brent	London Borough	329,771
Wandsworth	London Borough	329,677
Wigan	Metropolitan District	328,662
Sandwell	Metropolitan District	328,450
Lambeth	London Borough	326,034
Tower Hamlets	London Borough	324,745
Wirral	Metropolitan District	324,011
Shropshire	Unitary Authority	323,136
Northumberland	Unitary Authority	322,434
Hillingdon	London Borough	306,870

¹¹ Based on Mid-2019: April 2020 local authority district codes

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/populationestimatesforukenglandandwalesscotlandandnorthernireland>

¹² Former as a new Unitary authority in April 2020

Table 5. Area and Council comparisons¹³:

Authority	Area (ha)	Council Type	Population Size
Chorley	20,291	Shire District	118,216
Sefton	20,276	Metropolitan District	276,410
North East Lincolnshire	20,266	Unitary Authority	159,563
Windsor and Maidenhead	19,843	Unitary Authority	151,422
Darlington	19,748	Unitary Authority	106,803
Wyre Forest	19,540	Shire District	101,291
Wigan	18,817	Metropolitan District	328,662
Thurrock	18,441	Unitary Authority	174,341
Fylde	18,263	Shire District	80,780
Great Yarmouth	18,256	Shire District	99,336
Warrington	18,238	Unitary Authority	210,014
Wokingham	17,897	Unitary Authority	171,119
Solihull	17,828	Metropolitan District	216,374
BCP Council	17,393	Unitary Authority	395,331
Pendle	16,938	Shire District	92,112
Wellingborough	16,304	Shire District	79,707
St Albans	16,121	Shire District	148,452
Bolsover	16,033	Shire District	80,562
Rochdale	15,813	Metropolitan District	222,412
Brentwood	15,312	Shire District	77,021
Bromley	15,013	London Borough	332,336
Gateshead	14,408	Metropolitan District	202,055
Preston	14,294	Shire District	143,135
Liverpool	13,353	Metropolitan District	498,042
Stockport	12,604	Metropolitan District	293,423
Hillingdon	11,570	London Borough	306,870
Manchester	11,565	Metropolitan District	552,858

¹³ Based on Standard Area Measurements (SAM) for the administrative areas in the United Kingdom as at 31 December 2020 <https://geoportal.statistics.gov.uk/datasets/standard-area-measurements-latest-for-administrative-areas-in-the-united-kingdom>

Table 6. Application volume and Council comparisons¹⁴

Authority	Applications	Council Type	Population Size
Dorset	3,412	Unitary Authority	378,508
Cheshire East	2,896	Unitary Authority	384,152
Bradford	2,870	Metropolitan District	539,776
Barnet	2,705	London Borough	395,869
Shropshire	2,682	Unitary Authority	323,136
Cheshire West and Chester	2,542	Unitary Authority	343,071
East Riding of Yorkshire	2,529	Unitary Authority	341,173
Bromley	2,517	London Borough	332,336
Bristol City	2,463	Unitary Authority	463,377
Richmond upon Thames	2,421	London boroughs	198,019
BCP Council	2,378	Unitary Authority	395,331
Hillingdon	2,361	London boroughs	306,870
Wandsworth	2,305	London Borough	329,677
Sheffield	2,282	Metropolitan District	584,853
County Durham	2,267	Unitary Authority	530,094
East Suffolk	2,202	Shire District	249,461
Central Bedfordshire	2,164	Unitary authorities	288,648
Croydon	2,156	London boroughs	386,710
Brighton and Hove	2,153	Unitary authorities	290,885
Ealing	2,130	London Borough	341,806
Kensington and Chelsea	2,097	London boroughs	156,129
Kirklees	2,059	Metropolitan District	439,787
Northumberland	2,059	Unitary Authority	322,434
Manchester	2,022	Metropolitan District	552,858
South Downs National Park	1,991	National parks	117,000
Brent	1,925	London Borough	329,771
Bath and North East Somerset	1,922	Unitary authorities	193,282
Camden	1,922	London boroughs	270,029
St Albans	1,872	Shire District	148,452
Redbridge	1,871	London boroughs	305,222
Lambeth	1,858	London Borough	326,034
Herefordshire, County of	1,848	Unitary authorities	192,801
South Oxfordshire	1,826	Shire District	142,057
South Gloucestershire	1,767	Unitary authorities	285,093

¹⁴ Based on Table P124A: district planning authorities – ALL planning decisions by local planning authority, year ending September 2020 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-planning-application-statistics#district-matter-tables>

Appendix C: Peer Reviews / Challenges – Advice / Issues Summary

Dorset¹⁵

6.7 A Planning Advisory Service Peer Challenge of the Planning Service was undertaken for Dorset Council in 2020. Whilst this did not specifically focus on the committee arrangements, it highlighted that in considering the role of the committee it was important to think about how this could best be focused on decisions where it was possible to add significant value. :

Cornwall¹⁶

6.8 The Peer Review for Cornwall considered the committee approach in the Council in some depth. It recognised that strongly held views about local choice and the importance of protecting the communities and landscape had underpinned the initial decision to create an area-based structure. The poor policy framework (at that time Cornwall did not yet have its own Local Plan; and had a shortfall of housing land supply) and finely balanced coalition politics had all contributed to poor decisions being made and overturned at appeal (at that time this had been around 62% of appeals being allowed).

6.9 The report commended a number of actions:

- The single 'key issue' slide that was used to help Committees to stay focussed on the main planning issues raised by the proposed development and what weight should be given to these when taking a balanced decision
- Good communication between officers and councillors prior to Committee (this was notably better in one of the committees)

6.10 It also suggested disbanding the strategic committee, with these decisions delegated to the relevant area-based committee (this recommendation does not appear to have been taken up by the Council) and eliminating the 'cross-examination' of the public / applicants by the Divisional councillor (which was considered to have gone 'too far').

Enfield¹⁷

6.11 The 2014 Peer Review for Enfield looked specifically at the planning committee, following on from its planning service review. This operated as a single committee (and still does) sitting at least once a month (and sometimes two or even three times). The recommendations and suggestions made were relatively minor in scope, with perhaps the most significant (and relevant) being:

- Measures to reduce the politicising of the agenda, such as in terms of seating and arrangement (avoiding political groupings) and involvement of the lead member of the opposition in the pre-meeting
- Greater engagement of members in pre-application discussions of major applications
- Consider involving committee members in review work on the Local Plan
- Have an annual tour of completed sites in order to provide the Committee with valuable information on the impact of its decisions and inform future considerations.

Isle of Wight¹⁸

6.12 The 2016 Peer Review of the Planning Committee Isle of Wight Council looked at the constitutional and procedural arrangements which were in place for determining planning applications at the single Planning Committee. At that time it was notably underperforming in relation to determining major applications within the statutory period, and a slightly higher than average proportion of overturned

¹⁵ <https://moderngov.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/documents/s21977/APPENDIX%20A%20-%20Dorset%20Peer%20Challenge%20Final%20Report%202020%20Publication%20Version.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://www.cornwall.gov.uk/media/20505029/planning-peer-report-final-070116.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://governance.enfield.gov.uk/documents/s45789/APPENDIX%201%20-%20PAS%20Report%20Recommendations.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://www.iow.gov.uk/Meetings/Committees/Planning%20Committee%20from%202013/13-6-16/Paper%20A%20-%20Appendix%20A.pdf>

appeals. The committee meets about once every six weeks (a very high proportion of applications being decided under delegated powers). The recommendations and suggestions made were relatively minor in scope. In addition to further member training, the most notable recommendations included:

- Continue the commendable practice of holding occasional public meetings prior to the formal planning committee meeting for members of the committee to hear public views (but not debate the merits of a scheme), for relevant major and controversial applications.
- Continue the practice of extending the period for public speaking for reasons of natural justice, fairness, or for other reasons to enable the proper determination of an application
- Continue with the annual review of developments granted permission by the committee.

South Cambridgeshire¹⁹

6.13 South Cambridgeshire similarly has a single planning committee, which was reviewed relatively recently in the summer of 2020. The report notes that the numbers of applications going in front of Committee are low compared against other councils (but that this is a matter for local determination). The main issue identified by officers and members was in terms of a breakdown in trust and confidence, partly due to the lack of a 5 year housing land supply and growing community frustrations that developments were being approved against the general thrust of the local plan. Probably one of the more notable recommendations (in line with those flagged in other reviews) was:

- Re-establish the Chair's briefing with planning managers to support improved communication between members and officers and explore ways to establish opportunities for informal (non-decision making) pre planning briefings for members of the planning committee, district councillors and parish councillors.

South Lakeland²⁰

6.14 South Lakeland District Council's review of its single planning committee in 2015 generally focused on procedural issues such as committee timings, report formats, use of IT in presentations etc.

Test Valley²¹

6.15 The Peer Review of the operation of the Planning Committees for Test Valley Borough Council was undertaken in 2018. At that time the Council was operating two area committees and a Planning Control Committee (dealing with referrals from the area committees where the Head of Planning has identified a possible conflict with policy, public interest or claim for costs against the Council). All Councillors (including cabinet members) sat on one of the area committees. The main issues requiring a review were the poor public and customer experience from those committees (the planning service was otherwise operating effectively in terms of Government targets).

6.16 The report recommended creating one, smaller, Borough wide, committee (no larger than the Planning Control Committee) to make decisions for the whole Borough, or alternatively two smaller area committees (and abolishing the Planning Control Committee). The reasons given were: "to create a more effective and efficient decision making body where the proceedings can be more clearly understood, where all the members are trained to effectively execute the planning decision making function of the Borough and make decisions in the public interest of the whole Borough". The reviewers however did note that the single committee option may be considered 'too radical'. The second (less radical) recommendation appears to have been carried through.

¹⁹ <https://scamb.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s120312/Appendix%20A%20->

²⁰ <https://democracy.southlakeland.gov.uk/documents/s13470/Planning%20Committee%20Peer%20Review%20-%20Appx%201.pdf>

²¹ <https://democracy.testvalley.gov.uk/documents/s2384/Item%2011%20Review%20of%20Area%20Planning%20Committees%20-%20Annex%202.pdf>

Waverley²²

6.17 The Planning Improvement Peer Challenge for Waverley Borough Council took place in 2018. At that time there were four area committees together with a joint planning committee (dealing with the larger, more strategic, and more controversial applications), with the majority of councillors sitting on planning decision making committees. Concerns had been raised that this was an overly complicated and inefficient decision-making processes. The Review Panel also felt that this set-up wrongly gave the impression that Councillors' roles were to represent local community views rather than for decisions to be taken in accord with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise (and with particular focus on the consequences of failing to have a five year housing land supply). They recommended the restructuring of the committee to one strategic planning committee. This recommendation was rejected by members.

Wirral²³

6.18 The Planning Improvement Peer Challenge for Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council in 2019 examined a wider range of issues arising from the planning service, including proposals to create two Planning Committees to separate out major applications. Instead, the Peer Challenge Panel recommended the existing committee refocus on strategic rather than minor planning applications, together with more informal pre-planning briefings for members to better understand the issues (and for officers to consider what further information that could usefully provide). It does not appear that this option has yet been formally considered by the Council.

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²² <https://modgov.waverley.gov.uk/documents/s28577/Item%209%20-%20Peer%20Review%20Final%20Report%20to%20Waverley%20BC%20Sept%203%202018%20Appendix%201.pdf>

²³ <https://www.wirral.gov.uk/sites/default/files/all/planning%20and%20building/Wirral%20Council%20Planning%20Peer%20Review%20Final%20Report%20to%20Council%20July%2029%202019.pdf>