

Agenda Item No: 5

Report To: Selection and Constitutional Review Committee

Date of Meeting: 30th January 2020

Report Title: Planning Committee – Reduction in Size

Report Author & Job Title: Danny Sheppard – Member Services Manager (Operational)

Portfolio Holder Cllr. Clarkson
Portfolio Holder for: Leader of the Council



Summary:	To seek agreement to a reduction in the number of Members appointed to the Planning Committee, following an approach from the Leader of the Labour Group. The report also proposes an increase in the quorum of the Committee. These would be in place for the new Municipal Year (2020/21).
-----------------	--

Key Decision: NO

Significantly Affected Wards: None specifically

Recommendations: That:

- (i) the number of Members appointed to the Planning Committee be reduced from 17 (plus 1 ex-officio) to 14 (plus 1 ex-officio) for the new Municipal Year 2020/21.**
- (ii) A quorum of 50% of the total membership (7 voting Members) be applied for Meetings of the Planning Committee.**
- (iii) the Terms of Reference of the Planning Committee be amended to reflect (i) and (ii) above.**

Policy Overview: The suggested changes to the makeup and quorum of the Planning Committee have no material implications for the operation of the Committee. They are of an administrative nature only but should hopefully make the Committee's processes more efficient.

Equalities Impact Assessment Not Required

Exempt from Publication: NO

Contact: danny.sheppard@ashford.gov.uk – Tel: (01233) 330349

Planning Committee – Reduction in Size

Introduction and Background

1. Following an approach from the Leader of the Labour Group, this report proposes a reduction in the number of Members appointed to the Planning Committee from 17 (plus 1 ex-officio) to 14 (plus 1 ex-officio). It also proposes an increase in the quorum of the Committee. As the changes will have an impact on the overall allocation of seats to all Committees under the Political Balance calculation, it is proposed that these changes come into effect for the new Municipal Year 2020/21.

Proposal/Current Position

2. Earlier this year the Leader of the Labour Group, Councillor Chilton, approached the Leader of the Council regarding proposals to reduce the size of the Planning Committee, with which the Leader was in agreement. The approach recognised that the Planning Committee was one of the Council's most important Committees acting in a quasi-judicial capacity, and its most public facing due to the nature of its work.
3. There was a feeling that the current size of the Committee had led to long and extended debate and that this could be remedied by exploring the option of reducing the size of the Committee.
4. Research has indicated that in terms of both as a proportion of the total Council and the total number of Members, Ashford's Planning Committee was one of the largest in the County. The figures are outlined below and also show that Authorities with the same number of Elected Members as Ashford (Swale and Tunbridge Wells), have a significantly smaller Planning Committee (Ashford 18, Swale 11 and Tunbridge Wells 12).

Local Authority	Total Number of Cllrs	Total number of Cllrs on Planning	Planning Committee as % of Total Council
Dartford	34	17	50
Folkestone and Hythe	30	12	40
Dover	25	10	40
Ashford	47	18	38
Sevenoaks	54	19	35
Canterbury	39	13	33
Thanet	56	14	25
Tunbridge Wells	47	12	25
Swale	47	11	23
Maidstone	55	12	21
Gravesham	45	9	20
Tonbridge and Malling	54	*	*

Kent County Council	81	13	16
---------------------	----	----	----

** Please note that Tonbridge and Malling operate a different system to other Councils in Kent. They have three area Planning Committees and so are not directly comparable.*

5. The Local Government Act 1972 allows Local Authorities to establish Planning Committees and determine the size of those Committees. Whilst respecting that it is up to Local Authorities to judge, Local Government Association (LGA) best practice suggests that Planning Committees should be smaller rather than larger. A smaller Planning Committee would result in improved efficiency, reduced costs for the Council (albeit minimal) and still ensure sound decision making.
6. Having reviewed the issue and the above research, the Leader of the Council is in full agreement with the need for a reduction in size of the Planning Committee.
7. Historically the number of Members on the Planning Committee had been increased to ensure that the smaller Political Groups on the Council had representation. However, given that that May 2019 Election produced a much smaller Administrative Party, that need is now less stark and the Committee should be reduced in size. **The Leader has therefore proposed an overall reduction from 17 Members (plus 1 ex-officio) to 14 Members (plus 1 ex-officio).** The ex-officio Member will continue to be the Leader of the Council.
8. Under the current Political Balance of the Authority, this would result in the following changes to the make-up of the Planning Committee: -

Planning Committee (~~17~~ 14 Members) (plus 1 ex officio)

Conservative (9 8)	Ashford Independent (4 3)	Labour (3 2)	Green (1)
-------------------------------------	--	-------------------------------	----------------------------

This will go to the Selection and Constitutional Review Committee Meeting on the 5th May 2020 as part of the usual Political Balance report ahead of the 2020/21 Municipal Year.

Quorum

9. The present quorum for the Planning Committee is stated in the Council's Constitution. It is one quarter of the total membership. At present this would be five voting Members, but with the proposed reduction in Members this would now be four. Whilst it has never been necessary to call a quorum, it is considered important that the quorum reflects the importance of the Committee.
10. In theory therefore, it would be perfectly possible for four Members of the Ashford Borough Council Planning Committee to be present and determine planning applications. Whilst this scenario is unlikely, the message it would send to the public would be confusing. In Northern Ireland for example the

Planning Department recommends a quorum of 50% of Committee Members. **It was therefore recommended that as part of the move to reduce the overall size of the Committee, the quorum of the Planning Committee be increased from a quarter to half of the voting membership (i.e. seven Members).**

Implications and Risk Assessment

11. The suggested changes to the makeup and quorum of the Planning Committee have no material implications for the operation of the Committee. They are of an administrative nature only but should hopefully make the Committee's processes more efficient.

Next Steps in Process

12. Subject to Council approving the recommendations, these changes will come into effect for the new Municipal Year 2020/21. The Council's Constitution will be amended accordingly.

Consultation/Portfolio Holder Views

13. The Leader of the Council is fully supportive of the proposals. Further comments will be given at the Meeting.
14. Senior Officers in Planning and Legal Services have been consulted and are content with the proposals.

Conclusion

15. **Recommended that:**
 - (i) **the number of Members appointed to the Planning Committee be reduced from 17 (plus 1 ex-officio) to 14 (plus 1 ex-officio) for the new Municipal Year 2020/21.**
 - (ii) **quorum of 50% of the total membership (seven voting Members) be applied for Meetings of the Planning Committee.**
 - (iii) **the Terms of Reference of the Planning Committee be amended to reflect (i) and (ii) above.**

Contact and Email

Danny Sheppard
Member Services Manager (Operational)
Email: danny.sheppard@ashford.gov.uk