



**Planning Committee Peer Challenge  
Bolton Council**

**11th to 13th October 2016**

**Final Report**

**10/01/17**

## 1. Background and scope of the peer challenge

This report is a summary of the findings of a planning peer challenge of the Bolton Council planning committee. It was organised by the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) (part of the Local Government Association (LGA)) and carried out by a team of officer and councillor peers from other local authorities. Peer challenges are managed and delivered by the sector for the sector. They are improvement oriented and are tailored to meet individual councils' needs. Planning peer challenges help councils to review parts of their planning service through a "critical friend" approach to advise and help the authority to improvement.

Bolton Council invited the peer challenge of the planning committee. It followed a motion passed at Bolton Council's full council meeting on 2nd December 2015 for an independent review because of concerns over the public perception of fairness at planning committee meetings. The motion specifically noted issues around:

- issues within an application not being fully discussed in committee
- Committee Members voting "en bloc" by political party.
- decisions appearing to have been taken prior to the meeting
- a lack of engagement with the process by some Members of committee

To focus on these areas of concern the review's findings have been structured around:

- The role and perception of the planning committee
- The structure and processes of the planning committee
- The learning & development of the planning committee

The officer and councillor peers on the review team were:

- Steve Barker: Peer Challenge Manager, Planning Advisory Service, LGA
- Nick Bubalo: Director of Regeneration & Economy, Sandwell MBC
- Councillor Bill Stevens: Labour Group, Plymouth City Council
- Councillor Dale Birch: Conservative Group, Bracknell Forest

The review team gained information on the planning committee through reviewing supporting material received from the council officers, councillors and members of the public and a series of on-site interviews. The findings in this report are based on the evidence received.

The team appreciated the welcome and hospitality provided by Bolton Council and the candour and openness in which discussions were held. The team would like to thank everybody that they met during the process for their time and contribution.

## **2. Executive summary and recommendations**

### **Context & Challenges:**

Bolton, the council, the planning service and the planning committee is entering an interesting and crucial period. There is an increase in the number of planning applications being received, the delivery of key strategic developments, the move towards the Greater Manchester devolution and the emergence of the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework. The planning committee is also moving from its temporary facilities to the newly refurbished council chamber. So this is a pertinent time to make changes and improvements.

Planning committee is a very public window into the council's decision making processes. The outcomes from the committee are seen in the developments that are delivered through the decisions made. Those decisions shape the future of the borough and the lives of communities now and in the future. The aim of the planning committee must be for the public that engage in this complex and often controversial process to be satisfied with and clear about the decision making process, if not always the outcome.

The committee and supporting officers need to re-establish a focus on how the public views and engages with the committee process. This focus appears to have been lost by the planning committee. The high volume of applications being seen by the committee means there is a natural pressure to 'get through' the agenda, which leaves less time to focus on the quality and clarity of the decisions. By explaining the committee process more clearly to the public, maintaining clear procedures, improving the layout of the committee room, improving the information available to committee to base decisions and only spending time on the most important applications, we believe it will be possible to improve how the committee operates and public perception of it.

The review found no direct evidence to support the allegations of block voting and/or predetermination on the planning committee by political groups. The council would, however be better placed to investigate such claims by recording and making public how individual members have voted.

The number of committee members (20) is higher than found on most other local authority planning committees. We suggest that it be reduced to at most 15, preferably 12 members, to allow an improved engagement of committee members in application discussions during committee.

Bolton's planning committee sees 16 to 20 applications per meeting compared to 5 to 10 that most planning committees deal with. Many applications being seen we believe do not require committee attention as they should only be seeing the most strategically important, challenging or controversial applications. The planning committee is also deferring a high number of decisions either due to requiring further information to be received or for a site visit to occur. Reducing the number of deferred decisions will also reduce the number of applications seen at committee. Reducing the number of planning applications seen at committee will allow committee members more time to consider the case reports, more time to be able to explain the decision making process to the public, allow more time for public engagement at committee through an increased public speaking time and more questioning and discussion by committee members.

There is a great opportunity to improve how the committee is laid out when it returns to the refurbished council chamber. This will allow the decision making process to be clearer to the public and allow for better discussions.

It was widely recognised by officers and members the resource for councillor training needs to be increased. The committee needs to build in a regular process of reviewing past outcomes of the decisions that the committee has made, receiving process and performance updates and take the

opportunity to compare itself with other planning committees as part of a learning and improvement culture.

The council should take advantage of the work they are going to have to do to update their local plan documents and with the emerging Greater Manchester Spatial Framework and the new growth agenda to build ownership of the vision and policy framework by officers and members both on and off the planning committee. This understanding and ownership of these key decision making policies by the planning committee will be vital to deliver the council's growth agenda and to ably undertake its decisions making role.

The planning service is facing a big resourcing challenge at this crucial time, particularly with the Head of Development Management recently leaving the council. This position needs to be filled on an interim and long term basis as soon as possible with an experienced individual to work with the planning committee and to help drive the service forward.

### **Recommendations**

To support the Bolton Council planning committee to improve through being more accessible to the public, having clearly understood processes and recorded decisions, the peer challenge team has made the following recommendations:

**R.1** Implement a change of culture so that the activities of committee members and officers are clear to any member of the public whether applicant, objector or casual observer, that they can follow and be satisfied with both how an application has been handled before it gets to committee and with the way a decision has been made within the committee itself.

**R.2** Introduce the recording and public availability of individual votes by planning committee members.

**R.3** Review the scheme of delegation to reduce the number of applications that are getting called to committee.

**R.4** Reduce the number of deferred decisions made at committee.

**R.5** Make sure that relevant specialist officers are available to support the committee to make decisions.

**R.6** Use the agenda meeting of the Chairperson and the Head of Development Management to make sure that the cases to be seen have the relevant information available for the committee to make a decision. The Assistant Director should also undertake a review of the cases that are going to go to committee.

**R.7** Improve the structure and information in the planning committee report.

**R.8** Have a clear and consistently adhered to process for why a site visit is required and how they are undertaken.

**R.9** Start committee meetings by giving members of the public clear information about the committee process, the planning decision making process and introduce the committee members and officers attending through the opening chairperson's address and an information sheet.

**R.10** Have a more structured process for moving and seconding motions before debate can take place.

**R.11** Ensure that each committee member speaks only once on each application during the committee's debate. Allowing one particular member to speak several times could give an impression of favouritism in the discussion.

**R.12** Follow the recommended layout (annex 1) so the committee is public facing when it returns to the council chamber, with all individual committee members and officers having name plates with names and roles on.

**R.13** Introduce webcasting of the committee meetings – this will have a positive impact on focus, transparency and public access.

**R.14** Reduce the number of committee members from 20 to between 15 and 12.

**R.15** Remove the use of councillor substitutes on the planning committee.

**R.16** Change the order of presentations at committee to:

- 1) Case officer
- 2) Ward councillor
- 3) Objector
- 4) Applicant

**R.17** Increase the time limit for public speaking to 3 minutes and also include this limitation on ward councillor presentations.

**R.18** In line with good practice, introduce an ongoing annual compulsory requirement for members of the planning committee to be trained on planning and procedural issues from a recognised trainer.

**R.19** Support officers with training on how to work with members to support planning committee.

**R.20** Officers and members should see other local authority planning committees in operation.

**R.21** Annually review past performance of the committee looking at processes and outcomes.

The peer challenge team has also made the following recommendations with regard to the wider service:

**R.22** Review the planning services' wider processes for handling of major applications.

**R.23** Embed the cultural move from a Development Control to Development Management service across the service including the planning committee.

**R.24** Recognise and respond to the present resourcing constraints the service is facing with the vacant head of Development Management position.

**R.25** Have a clear and published process for the engagement of developers and applicants into the Bolton planning process.

**R.26** Have a clear and owned vision and policy framework that is understood by all planning officers and councillors.

### **3. Detailed findings**

#### **3.1 The role and perception of the planning committee**

The planning committee is one of, if not the most, visible of decision making processes the council has to the public and one of the most important. It is a public window into the council's decision making process and the outcomes are seen in the developments that are delivered through the decisions made, with those decisions shaping the future of the borough and lives of communities now and in the future.

The challenge for all planning committees is that the planning process can be very complex and the planning committee should be seeing only the most strategically important, challenging and controversial applications. The aim of the planning committee must be for the public that engage in the process to be satisfied with and clear about the decision making process if not always the outcome.

The Bolton Council planning committee and supporting officers need to re-establish a focus of how the public views and engages with the committee process and the conduct of those taking part. This focus appears to have been lost by the planning committee. The review team believes this is due in part to the high volume of applications being seen by the committee which means there is a natural pressure to 'get through' the agenda, and the temporary facilities that the committee is using.

Taking the time to explain the decision making process more clearly to the public can go a long way to delivering this.

The committee process and the planning process needs to be clear, open and transparent to public with clear explanations and information about how decisions will be made and the evidence that will be used. The role of the committee needs to be much more clearly explained. The later section of the report will cover this in more detail but clear, accessible and relevant information about the process viewed from the public's perspective will help to create a focus for all councillors and officers involved in the committee to be mindful of how the public will view and understand the decision making process and their particular parts therein.

Throughout the review the team heard messages that previously there has been an outlook of "Bolton 1st: Politics 2nd" in the work of the council but it was felt that this had changed in the recent period. It is imperative that the planning committee should only be balancing relevant planning evidence, planning policy direction and material planning considerations in undertaking the quasi-judicial role at planning committee. To do this all planning committee members must have good knowledge of the planning process and the local, national and sub regional planning policies, professional support of officers and a professional approach by all councillors involved. This is delivered through committee members and officers accessing regular training and giving committee members time to understand and appropriately discuss the cases brought before the committee, which are covered later in the report. Through taking time to explain the committee process clearly to the public, maintaining a clear structure to the committee procedures, improved information for the committee to make decisions and making sure that they are using their time to look at the most important applications we believe it will be possible to improve not just how the committee is viewed but also the quality of the decisions made.

The team received varying statements on the perception of block voting and predetermination in political groups on the planning committee but we found no direct evidence to support these allegations. There is an issue that there is a lack of clear auditable evidence to allow the council to be able to rebut or prove allegations of block voting as individual committee members' votes are not recorded. The committee's decision making process is not always clear to the external observer and

without public records of committee members' votes it is not possible to be able to respond to the reputational challenges that have been made.

The planning service is valued by many of the people we spoke with. The importance of the planning process and the committee is recognised by the senior management of the council as an important driver to deliver the present and future corporate objectives. Through viewing the committee "in action" and through the series of interviews with committee members we have seen some good, well informed committee members from across the political parties.

## **Recommendations**

**R.1** Implement a change of culture so that the activities of committee members and officers are clear to any member of the public whether applicant, objector or casual observer, that they can follow and be satisfied with both how an application has been handled before it gets to committee and with the way a decision has been made within the committee itself.

**R.2** Introduce the recording and public availability of individual votes by planning committee members.

## **3.2 The structure and processes of the planning committee**

Having viewed the planning committee, spoken with committee members, officers supporting the committee and users of the committee it was widely recognised that there are a number of improvements to the committee's processes that would help the clarity of decision making and help improve the public perception.

The overarching issue is that the planning committee is not presenting the decision making process clearly enough to the public so as to avoid any questions of inappropriate conduct or process. Members of the public will often be viewing the committee and the planning process for the first time and it can seem very complex and confusing.

The Bolton Council planning committee is seeing too many applications, many of which we believe do not require committee attention. Reducing the number of planning applications seen at committee will allow more time to explain the decision making process to the public, allow more time for public engagement and more structured discussion and questioning by committee members.

The planning committee is also deferring a high number of decisions either due to requiring further information to be received or for a site visit to occur. Reducing the number of deferred decisions will also reduce the number of applications seen at committee and also improve the public's perception of the committee.

The number of members of the committee is higher than found on most other local authority planning committees and we suggest it should be reduced. We also suggest that the process of having substitute members on the committee is not necessary and should be removed. Removing substitute members will help in removing the perception of block voting. Reducing the number of planning committee members and ceasing the use of substitutes will allow an improved engagement of committee members in discussions; reduce the burden of delivery of an annual compulsory training programme and the cost of resourcing the committee to the council.

There is a great opportunity to improve how the committee is laid out when it returns to the refurbished council chamber.

We have listed below the issues in the order that they occur through the process.

## ***Call-in/Delegation***

The Bolton planning committee is seeing too many applications per session. This is not allowing the committee to take the time to introduce the decision making process to the public and makes it very challenging to engage comprehensively in the discussions on planning applications. The committee has consistently called in 13% of all the planning applications the council has received each year over the last few years; we suggest that this should be closer to 5%. This high number of applications being called to committee is being further increased with the high number of decisions that are deferred. Most planning committees will discuss between 5 & 10 applications at a committee meeting. Bolton planning committee is seeing normally between 16 & 20 per meeting. It is worth noting that a planning application going to committee cost 10 times more to resource than an application decided through delegated powers. This should not be the primary concern when deciding if an application should be taken to committee but with the very challenging resourcing issues that the council and planning service are facing it needs to be a factor.

The reason that too many applications are going to committee is that the councils' requirement for applications to be called to committee is too "loose" and often not being adhered to. The planning committee should only be seeing the most controversial and strategically important planning applications and the council, councillors and the public should have confidence in the decisions that are delegated to officers providing that the scheme of delegation is transparent and properly monitored. It should be clearly understood why an application has been taken to the planning committee. This should include what the significant material planning reason is if an application is called to committee by another councillor. The committee's referral process does include this requirement but it was not apparent that it was being adhered to, perhaps the Chair needs to take a stronger line. Ward councillors have a role to play in explaining to the public what planning matters the committee will make judgements on and what do not form significant material planning considerations. We would suggest increasing the requirement of the number of objections that would be required for an application to be called to committee. The decisions that are delegated can be notified to members regularly and reviewed annually through analysis by members of a random sample of applications to see if there is agreement of the decisions made.

The review team felt that the committee was rushing the decision making process to be able to get through the required number of applications in the 3 hours that the committee is sitting. This does not help to give clarity and confidence to the public in the decision making of the committee. We are not suggesting that the committee should sit for longer or more often as 3 hours every four weeks as is presently the case should be sufficient.

By decreasing the number of applications that the committee is "calling-in" it will allow time for many of the other improvements that are suggested to be undertaken and we believe will go a long way to improving the public perception of decision making at the planning committee.

## **Recommendations**

**R.3** Review the scheme of delegation to reduce the number of applications that are getting called to committee.

### ***Pre committee***

The planning committee reports that each member of the committee receives are regularly over 200 pages long; containing up to and sometimes over 20 applications. The review team consider this to be a lot of information for committee members to go through in the required detail prior to sitting at the planning committee. It should be noted that the council is producing 40-50 hard copies of these 200 plus page committee report for every planning committee meeting. These reports can take upwards of 1.5 days in total officer time to produce. We were informed that Bolton planning officers

had recently moved to a paperless working process. The potential for committee members to also move to paperless working should be looked at. It was commented on by a handful of committee members that they already access and review their committee papers electronically but still receive hard copy papers.

Reducing the number of applications that go to the committee would allow committee members to have more time to become familiar with the important applications that they will be making important decisions on.

It should be remembered that the quasi-judicial role of the planning committee means that party politics should be removed from the planning decision making process. A planning committee member needs to individually weigh up the evidence placed in front of them at committee to make their decision. Supporting committee members to do this through providing the correct training (which is mentioned later in the report) and giving them the time to assimilate information and questions prior to the committee is vital.

One of the issues raised for the review to look at was if there was any predetermination of decisions by members prior to the committee by party political groups. Whilst undertaking the review this assertion was raised but we were not given any hard evidence that committee members were colluding to make party political decisions. All members of the committee want to be able to place themselves above such challenges and should make sure that their conduct or perceived conduct is defensible.

The Bolton planning committee is deferring between two and three decisions per session. This is considered to be a high number of deferrals compared with other authorities. We recognise that deferring some decisions is inevitable and will sometimes be the correct course of action. It should be remembered that the public (applicants and objectors) will be taking time out of their often busy lives to attend a planning committee. The planning service should be doing everything possible to make sure that decisions are made and not deferred to a later date unnecessarily.

Deferrals are often due to requests for site visits (which are covered later in the report) or due to required information or expertise not being available at the committee. It was mentioned that the attendance of specialist officers at the planning committee had been stopped due to resourcing constraints. We think that this should be looked at again as the resource costs of deferring a decision on an application is also very high. Specialist officer engagement at the committee can be managed but the ability for members of the committee to ask specialist advice would be clearly useful.

To reduce the number of deferred decisions all planning application that are to go to the planning committee need to be stringently reviewed beforehand to make sure they have the relevant information and people available for a decision to be made. This should be done by the Head of Development Management and the planning committee Chair at the regularly held agenda meeting. The Assistant Director should also have a role to separately review the applications going to committee to have confidence that a decision can be made at committee.

## **Recommendations**

**R.4** Reduce the number of deferred decisions made at committee.

**R.5** Make sure that relevant specialist officers are available to support the committee to make decisions.

**R.6** Use the agenda meeting of the Chairperson and the Head of Development Management to make sure that the cases to be seen have the relevant information available for the committee to

make a decision. The Assistant Director should also undertake a review of the cases that are going to go to committee.

### **Report structure**

Having reviewed examples of the planning committee papers we believe that the case reports could be more clearly laid out. One specific issue that appears to be absent from Bolton reports structure is the reason why a case has been called to committee. We believe that this is useful information that should be included and may aid the reduction in the number of applications going to committee. The council has recently reviewed case structures for delegated decisions and this should be extended to committee cases. The service should look at some examples of other councils' reports to see how they could be improved and we have included some web links in annex 2 of the report.

Having an improved report structure will aid the prepublication checking of reports to make sure that all the relevant information is included for a balanced decision to take place at committee, reducing the chance of deferral and improving the clarity of decisions making processes.

The committee is receiving a high volume of late information on to the late list. Though it is helpful for this information to be received this needs to be balanced against giving committee members ample time to consider such information to allow a full and balanced decisions to be made.

### **Recommendation:**

**R.7** Improve the structure and information in the planning committee report

### **Site Visits**

We received a lot of comments about issues of how site visits were being used and the requirements of members to attend. The rationale for a site visit needs to be clearly understood and justified. This justification has to be for planning reasons and not an opportunity to delay a decision or gain further representations. This is particularly important when a decision on an application is deferred at committee to accommodate a site visit.

There is guidance in the council's constitution about why site visits should be called:

*10.1 The submitted planning application drawings, the Officers Report to Committee and Members' own local knowledge should, in most circumstances, be sufficient for a sound decision. There may be occasions, however, where a Committee site visit may be justified, for example where the site is not clearly visible from public highways, where a particular site needs viewing from a neighbour's property or where physical circumstances in the area have recently changed.*

*10.2 The purpose of the site visit is for Members to see the application site and surrounding area. Site visits should not be seen primarily as an opportunity to gather representations, listen to submissions, seek opinions from applicants, agents or neighbours, or allow Members the opportunity to share their views with residents.*

### *Constitution of Bolton Borough Council*

#### *Section D. The Bolton Guide To Good Practice For Members And Officers Involved In The Planning Process*

For a site visit to be called, it should be clearly specified what additional information is required from a site visit and why, it should be clear why this information is not accessible from the information, drawings and photos in the application.

It is not common practice to insist that all committee members must attend a formal site visit to be able to vote. Members should attend site visits with the committee and supporting officers, and not

on their own, to aid in consistency of information and strengthening the propriety of members' engagement.

### **Recommendation**

**R.8** Have a clear and consistently adhered to process for why a site visit is required and how they are undertaken.

### ***Committee Processes***

It should be remembered that most members of the public will only ever have to engage in one or two committee meetings. The planning system and the committee process can often appear complex and daunting to someone who does not regularly attend them.

One of the key concerns of the committee should be for the public to have a clear understanding of the process and confidence in the decision making process. Taking the time and giving members of the public the opportunity to understand the process can go a long way to allowing this to happen. The information that the public receives both before and at the start of the committee we believe can be improved. The statement that the committee chair gives at the beginning of the meeting should be done clearly and this should include an introduction to the committee process, the planning decision making process and an introduction to the committee members and officers attending.

It should be made clear to the public that decisions are made using a policy framework and material considerations; what are material planning considerations and what are not, particularly on the point that the volume of local opposition or support for a proposal is not, in itself, a ground for refusing or granting planning permission, unless it is founded upon valid planning reasons.

Other planning authorities produce information sheets that are given to attendees to explain the process which supports or adds detail to the chairs welcome. These are printed to be accessible and reusable.

A change to the structure of debate at the committee will improve the clarity of the decision making process and will also shorten the time taken to decide each application. Once all questions have been answered a motion should be put by the Chair or another member of the committee to either approve the recommendation or a contra-recommendation. Debate cannot take place until there is a motion and it has been seconded. Once the motion is put and seconded the mover has up to 4/5minutes to speak to his/her motion, using material planning reasons only. The seconder is invited to speak and can reserve. Other members may speak for or against the motion and can move amendments, which must be agreed with the mover and seconder or an amendment motion is put and debated. Committee members should speak only once on each application as allowing a committee member to speak several times could give the impression of favouritism in the discussion. Once all members that wish to speak have spoken the Chair puts the motion and the vote is recorded. This process gives structure and clarity to the public viewing a decision and committee members to engage in the decision making process.

The planning committee has been housed in temporary accommodation for an extend period of time whilst the regularly used council chamber has been being refurbished. The refurbishment is due to be completed very soon and the committee will return to its original venue. The library lecture theatre that has been used as temporary accommodation has not lent itself to a structured, clear and accessible layout of committee by the public. There is a great opportunity to take advantage of the return to the council chamber to have a layout that will be allow improved clarity to the public of proceedings. During the review we took the opportunity to view the new committee venue and we have suggested a layout for the committee in annex 1 of the report.

All members of the committee and supporting officers should have clearly labelled name plates including their name and role at the committee. This helps the public considerably to understand the proceedings. The new venue will also bring the opportunity to webcast proceedings of the committee. This is something that many authorities are now doing, improving the public's accessibility to the committee, transparency of the decision making process and can have a positive impact on the focus of committee members. We recommend that the council should take this opportunity.

As noted previously, during the review we received varying statements on the perception of block voting and predetermination in political groups on the planning committee but we found no direct evidence of this type of inappropriate activity. There is an issue that there is a lack of clear auditable evidence to allow the council to be able to rebut or prove allegations of political block voting as individual committee members' votes are not recorded. By introducing recorded voting on committee decisions it will allow audits of decisions to be made to refute or prove such allegations in the future. There is an opportunity with the technology used in the refurbished council chamber to visually show and record individual members' votes on the screens. We believe this should be considered.

Bolton Council has a high number of councillors that sit on the planning committee with 20 committee members and a high number of substitute councillors available. PAS advises that 12 committee members is preferable and the normal number is between 12 and 15 at local authorities across the country. Supporting a large committee uses larger amounts of resource at a time of challenging resource constraints. We suggest that the council should review and reduce the number of committee members for the next municipal year. Reducing the number of councillors that sit on the committee will not only reduced the resourcing requirements to support the committee but will more importantly allow improved opportunity for interaction of all committee members in the discussions, improving the clarity of decision making at committee, increasing the number of councillors to freely represent their communities and engage with applicants across the council and in their wards. The political "make up" of local authority planning committees is always closely aligned to the political "make up" of the council but this could still achieved with a reduced number of councillors on the committee.

We also suggest removing the use of councillor substitutes on the planning committee. If the party politics has been removed the planning decision making process, as it should be, there is no requirement to have substitute councillors replacing full time committee members to maintain the political balance. This allows a consistency of well trained and highly informed members making decisions and can make better use of the limited training budget to support the committee members. It also removes any chance that it could be viewed that members were being substituted on to the committee for particular applications.

The aim of the presentations that planning committee receive should be to give the committee members the best opportunity to collect information to aid them to make a sound decision. With this in mind we believe that the order of presentations should change to:

- 1) Case officer
- 2) Ward councillor
- 3) Objector
- 4) Applicant

This change of order would give the committee members the best opportunity to receive information about any issues and facts about an application that can be raised with the applicant before the committee discussion and decision making occurs.

An effect of having such a high number of applications being discussed at the committee is that there is a limited time for presentations and discussions. The limit of two minutes for public speakers and the applicants at the committee is lower than we have experience of from other local authorities. If the number of applications being taken to committee is reduced it would allow for an increase in the time allowed for each speaker to 3 minutes each, with the chairman continuing to have discretion to increase the allocated time if required. This time limit should also be used for ward councillors presenting to the committee as well. This increase will allow a better opportunity for the public to engage and inform the committee members. This increase in allotted time should only occur if there is a consistent reduction in the number the applications that go to committee.

### **Recommendations**

**R.9** Start committee meetings by giving members of the public clear information about the committee process, the planning decision making process and introduce the committee members and officers attending through the opening chairperson's address and an information sheet.

**R.10** Have a more structured process for moving and seconding motions before debate can take place.

**R.11** Ensure that each committee member speaks only once on each application during the committee's debate. Allowing one particular member to speak several times could give an impression of favouritism in the discussion.

**R.12** Follow the recommended layout (annex 1) so the committee is public facing when it returns to the council chamber, with all individual committee members and officers having name plates with names and roles on.

**R.13** Introduce webcasting of the committee meetings – this will have a positive impact on focus, transparency and public access.

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**R.16** Change the order of presentations at committee to:

- 1) Case officer
- 2) Ward councillor
- 3) Objector
- 4) Applicant

**R.17** Increase the time limit for public speaking to 3 minutes and also include this limitation on ward councillor presentations.

### **3.3 The learning & development of the planning committee and wider planning service**

A good service has processes imbedded to regularly review, learn and improve. This should be the same for a planning committee. Due to necessary resource reductions over previous years the member training programme has reduced. It was widely recognised by officers and members that it

was felt that this had been cut too much and the requirement and opportunity for members on the planning committee to be trained needs to be increased.

It is essential that committee members are regularly kept abreast of changes in national and local policy and as well as updates on procedures. Committee members should have ongoing compulsory annual training before being allowed to sit on the committee. They should also get short training updates throughout the year which can be delivered in the hour before a planning committee. The council is entering an important period with the future growth agenda, the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework and the updating of the council's local plan, along with upcoming national changes to the planning process. All of which means it is vital the members have access to training to be able to make sound well informed important decisions when on committee.

This period of change will also affect the planning officers and they will also need to keep informed of changes. As well as being informed about planning changes, the role that officers have in supporting committee members and other councillors is also very important in delivering a good planning committee and planning service. The understanding by officers of how to work professionally with councillors is often just developed through experience. Officers should get access to training to help develop these skills and understanding to be able to professionally support the planning committee.

Throughout the review it was highlighted that there is very little experience from members of the committee and within the planning service of how other councils' planning committees work. It is a very useful learning exercise to compare and contrast your planning committee with others. This can be done through the many examples of webcast planning committee presently available or through attending neighbouring boroughs committees to view them and compare against their own committee.

The planning committee should regularly review past performance to aid improvement. This should look at the outcomes of the decisions that the committee has made both to allow and refuse applications in the borough and judge the successes and issues to improve in the future. A regular review should also include process and performance updates.

In conducting the review, the peer challenge team inevitably touched on elements of the planning service beyond committee processes and we have taken this opportunity to make some additional recommendations through the "critical friend" approach to advise and help the authority make further improvements.

The council has recently undertaken a review of how it handles its minor applications and a significant increase in the council's recorded performance has occurred with other potential changes still to be agreed. The council should take the opportunity to look at its processes for handling major applications under a similar process.

The planning service changed its name from Development Control to Development Management during the previous reorganisation. The name change is part of a cultural shift towards a progressive planning service. This needs to be continued and embedded across the planning service including the planning committee. This includes having a clear, published and understood engagement strategy for developers and applicants into the Bolton planning process, including a consistent pre application process for which charging should be seriously considered to help deliver a good consistent, professional service.

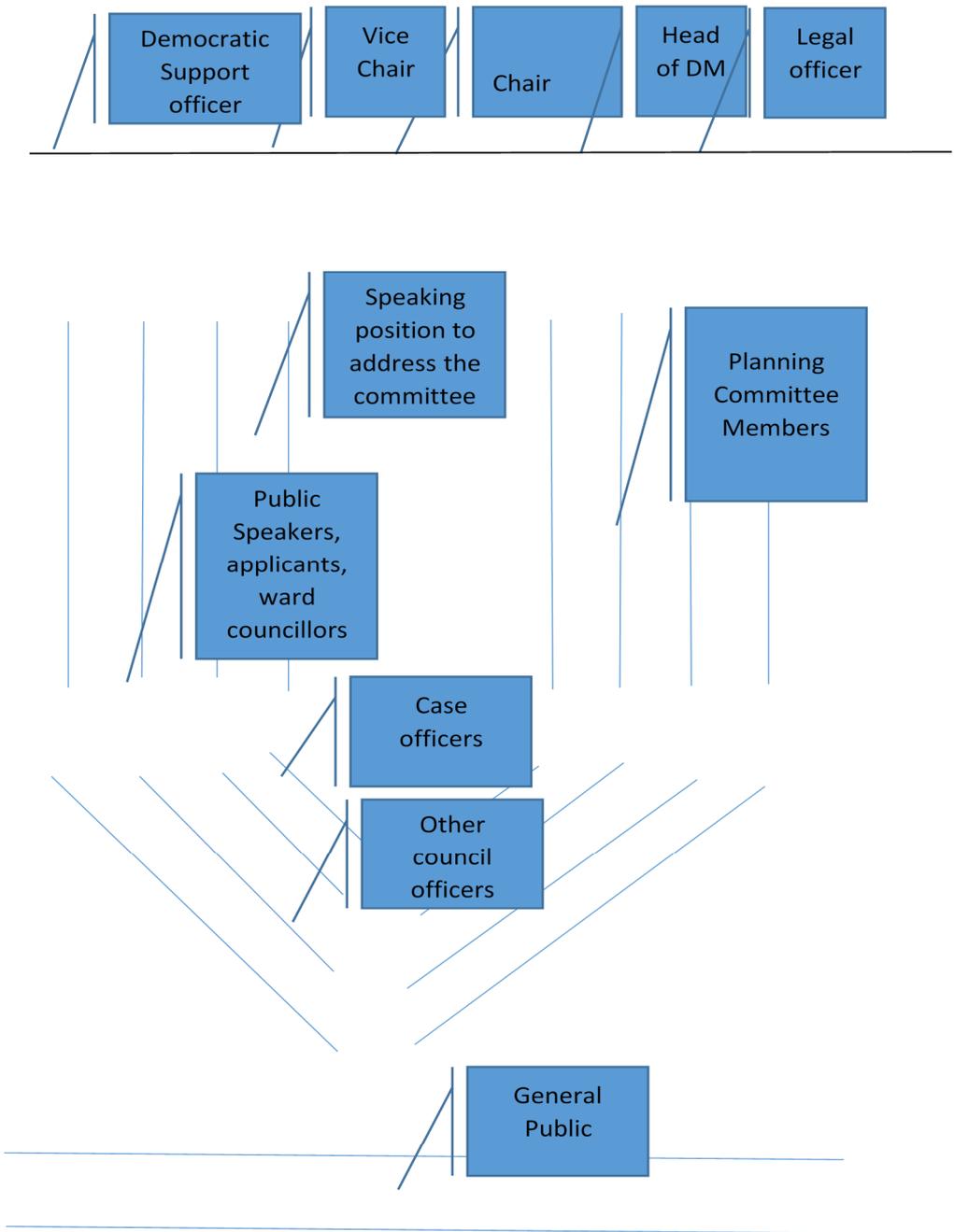
The council should take advantage of the updating of the local plan and emerging Greater Manchester Spatial Framework and new growth agenda to build ownership of the vision and policy framework by officers and members both on and off the planning committee.

With the Head of Development Management recently leaving the council, the planning service is facing a big resourcing challenge at a crucial time. This position needs to be filled on an interim and long term basis as soon as possible with an experienced individual to work with the planning committee and to help drive the service forward.

**Recommendations:**

- R.18** In line with good practice, introduce an ongoing annual compulsory requirement for members of the planning committee to be trained on planning and procedural issues from a recognised trainer.
- R.19** Support officers with training on how to work with members to support planning committee.
- R.20** Officers and members should see other local authority planning committees in operation.
- R.21** Annually review past performance of the committee looking at processes and outcomes.
- R.22** Review the planning services' wider processes for handling of major applications.
- R.23** Embed the cultural move from a Development Control to Development Management service across the service including the planning committee.
- R.24** Recognise and respond to the present resourcing constraints the service is facing with the vacant head of Development Management position.
- R.25** Have a clear and published process for the engagement of developers and applicants into the Bolton planning process.
- R.26** Have a clear and owned vision and policy framework that is understood by all planning officers and councillors.
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**Annex 1 – Proposed layout of the planning committee**



## **Annex 2. Recommended support and advice**

The Planning Advisory Service (PAS) offers a wealth of information, tools and activities. Information is available at: <http://www.pas.gov.uk> .

*Councillor and Committee Briefings*

[http://www.pas.gov.uk/web/pas1/councillors-page/-/journal\\_content/56/332612/15306/ARTICLE](http://www.pas.gov.uk/web/pas1/councillors-page/-/journal_content/56/332612/15306/ARTICLE)

*Planning Committee advice*

<http://www.pas.gov.uk/committees>

*The Pre-application Advice*

[http://www.pas.gov.uk/web/pas1/pre-application/-/journal\\_content/56/332612/6297229/ARTICLE](http://www.pas.gov.uk/web/pas1/pre-application/-/journal_content/56/332612/6297229/ARTICLE)

*PAS Local Plan Support*

<http://www.pas.gov.uk/local-planning>

*Plymouth Council Code of Conduct – Section G*

<http://www.plymouth.gov.uk/sites/default/files/CouncilConstitution.pdf>

*Plymouth committee link*

<http://council.webcast.vualto.com/plymouth-city-council/home>

<http://council.webcast.vualto.com/plymouth-city-council/home/webcast-archives/#>

*Oldham planning application process information*

[http://www.oldham.gov.uk/info/200399/apply\\_for\\_planning\\_permission/748/about\\_the\\_application\\_process](http://www.oldham.gov.uk/info/200399/apply_for_planning_permission/748/about_the_application_process)

*Plymouth planning committee public information.*

<http://www.plymouth.gov.uk/planninganddevelopment/planningapplications/whathappensafteryoumakeaplanningapplication/planningcommittee>

*Examples of Planning Committee Reports:*

*Bury Reports*

<https://councildecisions.bury.gov.uk/ieListMeetings.aspx?CIId=134&Year=0>

*Plymouth reports*

<http://web.plymouth.gov.uk/modgov?modgovlink=http%3A%2F%2Fdemocracy.plymouth.gov.uk%2FieListDocuments.aspx%3FCId%3D251%26amp%3BMId%3D6776%26amp%3BVer%3D4>

*Hastings reports*

<http://hastings.moderngov.co.uk/ieListMeetings.aspx?CIId=129&Year=0>