

Annual Report of the Planning Committee 2023-24



Chair's Foreword

As Chair of the Planning Committee it gives me great pleasure to provide the foreword for this annual report.

My role is to chair, lead and co-ordinate the activities of the Planning Committee. The continued hard work and dedication of our planning officers, ably supported by the Members of the Committee, means we have achieved success throughout 2023 and into the continuing challenging economic times faced in 2024.

We have built on changes to working practices that have improved the swiftness of dealing with applications and responding to customer needs. Our officers now have more freedom to engage, provide guidance and give every assistance to encourage new development within Sandwell.

This progress is largely down to increased delegated powers to officers and the setting of performance targets above and beyond those required (and closely monitored) by Central Government, coupled with a rolling programme of Member training regarding new planning regulations and related matters.

I was extremely pleased with the way Members and officers alike rose to the challenges and dealt with each application in such a professional manner. This has meant the planning process has continued to perform well. Going forward in 2024, the Planning Committee will continue to seek to add value to new development in Sandwell by ensuring the effective and efficient determination of planning applications in a fair, open and transparent manner.



Councillor Kay Millar - Chair of Planning Committee



Introduction to the Planning Committee

The Council establishes the Planning Committee each year to deal with matters relating to the Town and Country Planning Acts and related legislation. This mainly concerns the determination of planning applications which is a statutory function of the local authority.

How Planning Committee Works (At the Meeting)

The aim has always been to ensure that Committee is as open and inclusive as possible. In this respect, both applicant and objectors are invited to the meeting at which the application they have an interest in is to be determined.

One representative from each side is given a maximum of five minutes each to make their particular case. Members may also ask supplementary questions of each side. Senior officers from Planning as well as Democratic Services, Highways, Legal Services and Public Health are present to field questions that Members may have. Plans and photographs are displayed on large screens for all present to see. The public gallery is also managed by planning officers who are at hand to answer any further questions from the public. The public are given a real opportunity to take part in the meeting, see the democratic process in action and have their voice heard.

Membership

From April 2023 to May 2023, the following Members sat on the Planning Committee:-

Councillor Millar (Chair);
Councillor Kaur (Vice-Chair);
Councillors Akhtar, Allcock, Allen, Chapman, Dhallu, Fenton, Gill, Hussain, O. Jones, Mabena, Preece, Singh, Webb and Williams.



At its annual meeting in May 2023, the Council appointed the following Members to the Planning Committee:-



Councillor Millar (Chair);

Councillor Chidley (Vice-Chair);

Councillors Chapman, Fenton, Fisher, Gill, Kaur, Kordala, Loan, Pall, Preece, Singh, Uppal, Webb and Younis.

(Councillors J. Giles and Dunn have also served on Committee during this time).

How does the work of the Committee Contribute to the Corporate Plan?

	<p>The planning decision-making process contributes significantly to a number of elements of the Sandwell Vision. These include the regeneration of Sandwell; helping create homes that meet people’s current and future needs; helping provide the right number of school places; establishing training facilities; and investing in businesses, people and jobs.</p> 
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Legislation Reference

The primary legislation is the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended).



Committee Activity Overview

Work Programme Spotlight

During 2023/24, Planning Committee met on nine occasions. Below is a breakdown of each Committee meeting in terms of numbers of applications determined and whether the decision at the particular meeting was in accordance with the officer's recommendation or not. It should be noted that Members, after considering the facts of a case, can decide to visit to see the application site for themselves or defer in order to seek further information.

The overall number of planning and related applications Sandwell received and determined between 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024 was;

969 planning applications received of which **938** applications were determined.

Of the **938** applications determined, **892** (95%) were dealt with by officers using delegated powers.

Of those applications determined:-

845 were approved (90%)

93 were refused permission (10%)



Applications that were determined at Planning Committee, with the decision made, is as follows;

Date of Committee	No of Applications on Agenda	Decision With Officer Recommendation	Decision Against Officer Recommendation	Application Withdrawn	Visit	Deferred
May	12	5	2	0	4	1
June	9	5	0	0	3	1
July	7	6	0	0	1	0
Sept	7	4	0	0	3	0
Oct	12	9	0	0	3	0
Nov	14	8	2	0	3	1
Jan	7	5	1	0	1	0
Feb	6	1	1	0	3	1
March	6	3	0	0	2	1
Total	80	46	6	0	23	5

The figures above indicate that the overall number of planning applications received during 2023/24 fell slightly compared to those submitted in the previous corresponding year. Notwithstanding this, these numbers are also affected by the fact that the Government introduced a new 'Prior Approval' system which is intended to primarily allow householders greater scope above and beyond existing regulations to extend their properties. Before this date such extensions would have required a formal planning application to be submitted. These Prior Approvals do not appear in the formal figures for the numbers of applications dealt with but in essence, the process and the work required is the same as dealing with a full planning application. The Council received **207** such applications in 2023/24.

The large percentage of applications approved in part reflects the openness of the service in encouraging developers and prospective applicants to engage in pre-application discussions. A charge for such discussions was introduced at Sandwell from September 2019 to offer a complete service to potential applicants and bring the Council in line with neighbouring authorities. This approach sends the message that the Council, despite the existing economic difficulties, is very much open for business and ready to facilitate development opportunities.



The positive outcome of the vast majority of planning applications submitted at Sandwell is also in part a reflection of where there are challenges with a proposed scheme, officers will endeavour to negotiate workable solutions within the prescribed time scales.

In addition to the above planning applications, the Development Management section in 2023/24 also dealt with approximately 300 complaints regarding alleged breaches of planning control. A similar number of investigations were carried out in the preceding year. Officers remain acutely aware of the fact that the credibility of the planning system as a whole rests on the ability to take timely and appropriate enforcement action.

A further 100 sites in 2023/24 were also investigated by officers as potentially requiring tidy up work using in the main powers available under Section 215 of the Town and County Planning Act 1990. (This power allows the local planning authority to deal with privately owned land or buildings, the condition of which is adversely affecting the amenity of a particular area). Again, during the previous year, the number of cases remained similar. This area of work has grown in recent years on the back of the Council's own 'Grot Spots' programme. Officers continue to strive to build on the good work to date and the partnerships already created both within the Council and with outside bodies such as the Police and Fire Service.

Performance

The local planning authority is monitored closely by the Government regarding the time taken to determine planning applications. (Applicants have a right to appeal to the Planning Inspectorate if their application is not dealt within the prescribed time). The Government targets are as follows:-

60% of major applications to be determined in 13 weeks

70% of minor applications to be determined in 8 weeks

80% of other applications to be determined in 8 weeks

("Major" developments are defined as applications for 10 or more dwellings; where the floor space of the proposal exceeds 1000 square metres or if the application site area exceeds 1 hectare.



“Minor” developments include schemes for less than 10 dwellings and where floor area is less than 1000 square metres.

“Others” includes changes of use and householder extensions).

The Planning service has consistently exceeded these performance targets. The on-going commitment of all staff, coupled with the assistance of Planning Committee, has very much helped to achieve this;

Major applications: **29**; No. determined in 13 weeks target: **27**
Performance – 93%

Minor applications: **234**; No. determined in 8 weeks target: **205**
Performance – 87.6%

Other applications: **675**; No. determined in 8 weeks target: **631**
Performance – 93.5%

Community Feedback



Speed of decision making is important but is just one aspect of the service provided. With each decision notice sent out, a customer satisfaction survey is attached. 90% of applicants and/ or agents who responded were Very Satisfied or Fairly Satisfied with the overall service.

Looking Ahead

The Council will continue to strive to deal with planning applications in an effective and efficient manner. The continued support and pragmatism shown by Committee Members is invaluable for the service to continue to maintain the high performance and customer satisfaction levels achieved to date.

