

Date: 30 January 2007

Report: PUBLIC SPEAKING AT AUTHORITY AND COMMITTEE MEETINGS

Purpose of the report

1. To seek Members' views on amending the Public Question Time scheme at Planning Committee.

Strategic Planning Framework

2. The information and recommendation(s) contained in this report are consistent with the Authority's statutory purposes and its approved strategic planning framework:

- **Best Value Performance Plan objectives**

Improve the efficiency of the service, so that: 65% of minor applications & 80% of other applications are being determined within eight weeks by march 2007, and at least 98% of standard decision notices are issued within two working days of decisions.

Background

3. Members of the public have an opportunity to ask questions or make statements at meetings of the National Park Authority and at its Committees and Sub-Committees. A Public Question Time period is made available at the beginning of each meeting open to the public, and is limited to no more than 15 minutes in total of questions and answers. Questions may be asked or statements made that relate to any matters that are within the remit of the Authority or of that Committee or Sub-Committee – they do not just have to relate to items on the agenda of that particular meeting.
4. In addition to this, the Planning Committee has a separate scheme for public participation. This allows applicants and other interested individuals to address the Committee prior to it making a decision on an application.
5. The scheme specifies that 'if an application is deferred to a subsequent meeting after a presentation has been made, repetition of the presentation will not be allowed at subsequent meetings'. In practice, the two schemes have operated separately without any apparent conflict.
6. However, at the December meeting of the Planning Committee, an objector to an application on the agenda used the Public Question Time period to repeat objections that he had previously aired under the Planning Committee's public speaking scheme, at its November meeting.
7. The Public Question Time scheme is deliberately worded in an open fashion to encourage participation. It provides no basis for rejecting a submission on the grounds that it has previously been heard under the Planning Committee's public speaking scheme. This presents a potential problem.

8. The use of the Public Question Time slot to make statements for or against individual applications goes against the spirit of the schemes, given that special provision has been made by the Planning Committee for such statements, immediately prior to each application.
9. If this situation is not addressed, we may find increasing numbers of applicants & objectors exploiting it to repeat their views on each occasion that the case in which they are interested comes forward.
10. Through its Best Value Performance Plan Objectives, and the work of the Planning Performance Working Group, the Authority has committed itself to improving the efficiency with which the Planning Committee runs. Neither the efficient running of the Committee, nor its understanding of the merits cases would be helped by such repetition.

Options

11. There are two obvious options open to the Authority, to prevent repetition of statements.
12. Option 1) The Public Question Time slot could be withdrawn from the Planning Committee agenda. The Planning Committee already has a well established scheme for public speaking, unlike the National Park Authority itself, and its other committees and sub- committees. The Planning Committee is the only one in which two such systems operate. This would mean that public speaking at Planning Committee would be limited to live cases. In reality, it is rare for anyone to wish to speak on anything else. General statements or questions on the work of the Planning Committee could still be made at NPA meetings, in the event that someone wished to do so.
13. Option 2) A note could be added to the Public Question Time scheme, advising that it could not be used, at the Planning Committee, for questions or statements on live cases. This would not be as clear cut as Option 1. However, people wishing to use the Public Question Time slot are required to notify the Authority of the content of their statement in advance. This should allow inappropriate use of the system to be controlled.

RECOMMENDATION

14. That the Authority seeks to prevent repetition of statements by the public at Planning Committee meetings by adopting either;

Option 1 – Withdraw Public Question Time from Planning Committee, or

Option 2 – Amend the Public Question Time scheme, to exclude questions or statements on live cases.

Peter Watson
Head of Planning

15 January 2007