

## **Rother District Council**

**Report to:** Audit and Standards Committee

**Date:** 25 March 2024

**Title:** Proposed Change to the decision-making structure – reduction of Members Appointed to the Planning Committee

**Report of:** Lorna Ford, Chief Executive

**Purpose of Report:** To propose a reduction in the number of Members appointed to the Planning Committee in the interests of efficiency of decision making.

### **Officer**

**Recommendation(s):** **Recommendation to COUNCIL:** That:

- 1) the number of Members appointed to the Planning Committee be reduced from 14 to 10 to take effect from the first meeting in the new civic year 2024-25 (30 May);
  - 2) the views of the Planning Committee be sought at an informal MS Teams meeting in due course and their comments received alongside the reference from this Committee; and
  - 3) the Chief Executive be authorised to make all necessary amendments to the Council's Constitution to reflect the new size of the Committee, subject to full Council approval.
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### **Introduction**

1. This report proposes a change to the decision-making structure with a reduction in the size of the Planning Committee from 14 Members to 10, subject to full Council approval at the Annual Council Meeting.
2. Given the tight timescale to enable this proposal to be approved at the Annual Council Meeting, it has not been possible to consult formally with the Planning Committee ahead of this meeting. The Planning Committee will be consulted informally via MS Teams in due course and their views submitted to the Annual Council Meeting, as part of the reference from this Committee.

### **Current Position**

3. The Planning Committee comprises 14 Members which is a medium to large Committee and it has been this size for 20 years, reducing from 15 to 14 in December 2003. The Members are appointed in accordance with political balance and currently this is broken down as four Conservative Members, three each for the Rother Association of Independents, Labour and Liberal Democrats and one Green.

4. There is also a high number of Cabinet Members either acting as Substantive (three) or Substitute (four) Members on the Planning Committee which is inadvisable. The Cabinet and Planning Committee role can regularly clash, particularly if the portfolio is relevant to a particular application or if an application has a positive or negative impact on the Council's corporate priorities or land.
5. The time and commitment required by Members of the Planning Committee should not be underestimated. The Planning Committee meets monthly, usually has site inspections the Tuesday before the Thursday meeting, has large agendas, usually with complex, contentious applications to consider requiring significant pre-reading and research before each meeting. The number of Members who can dedicate their time to this role is therefore limited.
6. Since the introduction of the public speaking scheme in its present form, the length of meetings has also increased, and on some occasions, have been over six hours in length.

## Proposal

7. The most effective Planning Committees tend to be smaller, under 10 Members. In comparison to 16 other councils across the south east, 13 (81%) have less than 14 Members, with six of these, having 10 or less Members.
8. It is therefore recommended that the number of Members appointed to the Planning Committee be reduced from 14 to 10. The number of Members appointed by each political group, will be reduced by one per group (save for the Green Party who retain their existing seat) as follows:

Conservative	3
Association of Independents	2
Labour	2
Liberal Democrat	2
Green	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>10</b>

9. Each political party would have a named substitute as per the current substitute scheme.
10. The Planning Committee will consider and take forward other recommendations for improvement as soon as practical in the new civic year, which will include amongst other matters, a comprehensive review of the public speaking scheme.

## Conclusion

11. In order to ensure effective and efficient decision making, the Planning Committee is reduced from its current size from 14 to 10 Members appointed in accordance with political balance and that this takes effect from the new civic year, subject to full Council approval. The first meeting of the Planning Committee is on 30 May 2024.

## Implications

### Financial Implications

12. There will be modest savings in terms of mileage claims by less Members attending the Town Hall for site inspections and Planning Committee Meetings.
13. There will also be a reduction in costs for site visits as a smaller mini-bus will accommodate the Committee and will cost less than the current 22-seater coach.
14. There will also be modest potential savings in paper costs as several Members currently have hard copy agendas due to the size and complexity of the reports and this number may reduce with less Members serving on the Committee.

### Legal Implications

15. There are no legal implications for the proposals within this report.

### Human Resources Implications

16. There are no Human Resource implications for the proposals within this report.

### Environmental

17. Less travel and less paper will result in a reduction of the Council's carbon footprint in managing the Planning Committee.

Other Implications	Applies?	Other Implications	Applies?
Human Rights	No	Equalities and Diversity	No
Crime and Disorder	No	External Consultation	No
Environmental	Yes	Access to Information	No
Risk Management	No	Exempt from publication	No

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Appendices:	None
Relevant Previous Minutes:	None
Background Papers:	None
Reference Documents:	None