



The Civic Society For Milton Keynes

CONSULTATION UPON SCHEME OF DELEGATION AND CONSTITUTION

I have pleasure in setting out our comments upon this consultation below. Prior to writing this I have held meetings with both Anna Rose and Brett Leahy at which many of the points have been discussed and upon which I was pleased to receive a positive reaction

1. Whilst we appreciate that this is an appropriate time to review the issues around Development Control Committee meetings, we are disappointed in the narrow scope of the review. We feel that the focus, which seems to be based around speaking rights and cost, is too narrow: we feel that the Council should be looking at the performance of the entire planning service and the way it interacts with everyone connected with the service – applicants, supporters and others. We feel that the emphasis should be upon improving all aspects of the service so that everyone feels that they have received a proper hearing in which their views have been properly represented, even though they may disagree with the eventual outcome.
2. There have been selective quotes throughout the consultation exercise from the Peer Review undertaken in 2014 but we are unaware of any substantial output from the Review albeit that we accept that internal changes may have occurred of which we are unaware. We note, for example, that there was a recommendation to establish a Steering Group to “oversee the preparation and implementation of an Improvement Plan”¹. Has this happened and, if so, what progress has been made? Of particular interest to us was the suggestion of establishing a Local Engagement Forum. What is the progress upon this? It would seem to us that such a Forum would have been an ideal body to consider the current review.
3. We are disappointed in the nature of the consultation. We feel that the online form, whilst it has certain merits, was poorly worded in places and, in others, contained questions that are irrelevant to this particular exercise eg Q2 “What type of development is most important to you?” We also note that the wording of some of the answers has changed since the survey was first launched, which will generate problems in analysis of the responses. We feel that such issues undermine the credibility of the exercise and we await with interest to see how the results are reported. We are also disappointed, given the widespread interest that was shown when the proposals were discussed at DCC on 29 September last, that the Council did not call a meeting at an early stage with councillors, Parish and Town Councils and local interest groups such as ourselves so that we could discuss the matter in an open forum. In our experience, this is a better form of consultation

¹ Cabinet 12 January 2015

because this facilitates a better discussion and allows the cross-fertilisation of ideas as a result of which better solutions, which may not have been previously considered, may arise.

4. We appreciate that there are pressures upon the Council to reduce costs. However, this should not be at the expense of service and, as above, should be taken in the context of a review of the whole planning service. As an example, despite having given an email address when we comment upon applications, notifications of scheme changes etc are always sent to us by letter rather than electronically: we do not understand why as it seems an obvious cost saving.
5. We do not feel the need to change the basic current speaking arrangements for objectors ie three people speaking for three minutes each. We feel that that the risks of repetition are overstated - in our experience objectors will meet beforehand to discuss what each will say precisely to avoid such issues and maximise their individual contributions. In any event, repetition would only occupy a small proportion of the nine minute period and would be difficult to administer. If anything, there is a greater risk of repetition from the councillors in their subsequent discussions! We do however think that it would be advantageous to allow all objectors, at their discretion, to combine their individual contributions into a single presentation ie one nine minute presentation instead of three of three minutes each (which could be extended to twelve minutes with the parish council).
6. We feel that the current arrangements for choosing speakers (which gives places to the first three people to contact the Council once the agenda is published) is unsatisfactory as it penalises those who are either working or otherwise unavailable for some reason. We believe that there should be a time limit within which to submit one's name and, as a consequence of doing so, one accepts that one's contact details may be passed to other objectors. If more than three people wish to speak then they are advised of each other's names and required to choose three people from amongst their number before a given deadline. If they cannot do so, then the Council should choose the speakers by lots. This has an additional bonus because, if the presentations can be combined as in 5) above, it will give all applicants the potential opportunity to discuss things amongst themselves and to include all relevant points that individuals may wish to make.
7. We accept that it is fair that, if an application is recommended for refusal, the applicant has a right to speak, even if there is no-one speaking against it from the public gallery. However, this right should not be given to those applications recommended for approval if there are no-one in objection, the reason being that applicants would have a tendency to want to speak as a matter of course, which would lead to time wasting.
8. We believe that the public should have the right to be able to question officers about their reports and DCC meetings - a process which, we understand, happens elsewhere. We have no preconceptions about how this should be done ie whether there should be a set number of questions or a looser discussion but we would be happy that it could be administered by the chair.
9. We believe that there is scope to improve the quality of papers submitted to DCC and DCP. We appreciate that they have to contain a lot of information but we have a general feeling that they contain far too many words for the nature of the applications. Furthermore, they do not necessarily draw out the issues around the recommendations or, if they do, then such issues are not properly explained. The paper recommending the approval for intu was a notable case in point where it was a work of art to determine the main arguments relating to the proposed development and the reasons for the recommendation. As a very simple example of this, the recommendation in the committee paper is contained in Section 6, some way into the report and it is given no prominence above the other sections. It should also be noted that Section 1 (which is a critical part of any committee paper)

contains standard rhetoric which might be considered a statement of the obvious and therefore surplus to requirements.

10. We believe that there should be a separate procedure for contentious applications whereby they are given a greater degree of prominence within the Council's system and therefore subject to a greater degree of consultation between officers and objectors. It would be particularly helpful, we feel, for there to be a meeting between the parties prior to the drawing together of the officer's recommendation. The structure of such a process would need to be carefully considered but we believe that it can be made into a workable arrangement with goodwill on both sides.

I hope that you find our comments of use and please do not hesitate to come back to me if you have any queries.

TIM SKELTON
CHAIR