

Area North Committee – Review of Arrangements

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Purpose of the Report

To allow Area North Committee Members to consider the suitability of the current start time and other arrangements for the Area North Committee meetings. To agree any changes required for the forthcoming year.

Public Interest

Area North Committee meetings are held in public. This allows residents and others to observe the Committee in action and also to make representations. The Committee is held at various venues on the last Wednesday of every month starting at 2pm, with planning applications being determined last on the agenda.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- 1) The start time for Area North Committee remains at 2:00pm
- 2) The rotation around the most suitable venues in Area North continues, with new venues being trialled where the meeting space meets our criteria.
- 3) The order for the agenda remains the same with planning applications determined in the second half of the meeting

Background

Area Committee meetings are a key element of local governance in South Somerset. It is vital that elected members feel able to participate and contribute as fully as possible in local decision making.

Members will be aware that the choice of starting times has always been a matter for each Area Committee to decide. The expectation is that Area Committee meetings are held at a time and place that Members feel is best suited to their Area. The result is that the arrangements for all 4 Area Committees are not the same, with wide variation in 'best' practice. It is recognised that arrangements will always involve some compromise. All meetings are normally held on a Wednesday.

It is good practice to periodically review Area Committee arrangements. The last review was in summer 2015 shortly after the election, with a number of new Councillors appointed.

Analysis of meetings held since November 2015

The Democratic Services Officer has produced analysis of the meetings held over the last year to further inform Councillors of issues and trends

The following table gives an overview of Area North Committee from November 2015 to November 2016:

Date	Venue	Start	Finish	Duration	Total Reports	Planning
25/11/2015	Long Sutton VH	14:00	18:00	4.0	11	3
16/12/2015	Edgar Hall Somerton	14:00	16:55	2.9	12	5
27/01/2016	Edgar Hall Somerton	14:00	17:40	3.7	12	7
24/02/2016	Norton sub Hamdon VH	14:00	18:05	4.1	11	5
23/03/2016	Long Sutton VH	14:00	17:15	3.3	11	5
27/04/2016	Edgar Hall Somerton	14:00	18:20	4.3	10	7
25/05/2016	Council Chamber BW	15:30	16:30	1.0	7	1
29/06/2016	Edgar Hall Somerton	14:00	17:25	3.4	14	8
27/07/2016	Norton sub Hamdon VH	14:00	17:05	3.1	9	4
24/08/2016	Edgar Hall Somerton	14:00	16:00	2.0	6	3
28/09/2016	Norton sub Hamdon VH	14:00	15:10	1.2	6	1
26/10/2016	Edgar Hall Somerton	14:05	15:30	1.4	7	3
23/11/2016	Long Sutton VH	14:00	16:30	2.5	8	2
TOTAL				36.9	124	

- The average meeting time was 2hrs 50mins
- The shortest meeting took 1hr
- The longest meeting took 4.3hrs

Set up/pack away times for each venue, including travel time, loading up/packing away are shown below along with a comparator of Brympton Way:

Venue	Time	Comment
Edgar Hall Somerton	1.75hrs	Full caretaking & teas provided (& some equipment provided), wifi available & lone working not an issue
Long Sutton VH	3.25-3.75hrs	Dependent upon if caretaking & teas available, no wifi
Norton sub Hamdon VH	3.00-3.50hrs	Dependent upon if caretaking & teas available, no wifi – have to collect & return the key
Brympton Way	20-30mins	All caretaking, equipment & teas provided – no lone working or H&S issues

This shows that, after Brympton Way, the most time efficient hall for the Committee is Somerton and the least is Long Sutton. Venue choices are limited by hall size, acoustics, availability, accessibility and parking. This means that over the past year the Committee has rotated between 3 main Area North venues. Other halls are evaluated when they become available.

Area North Committee Arrangements Survey

To assist with the decisions over timing, location and order of agenda, a survey was sent to all Area North Councillors. This e-survey highlighted the pros and cons of the various options. Thirteen were received so 100% response rate.

Timing – there was unanimous agreement to retain the current arrangement for a 2:00pm start. One comment was: *“I am not aware of anyone having a problem so why change it.”*

Location – 7 selected to “continue with the existing arrangement”, 4 chose to ‘fix’ the venue in one optimum venue within Area North (ie: Edgar Hall, Somerton) and 2 would have preferred Brympton Way.

Comments included: *“survey other halls to give a choice rather than just Somerton, Select 2-3 that would be suitable and keep to those for the year”* and *“happy with existing, Edgar Hall is good but so is Norton though it has no wifi.”*

The majority view from Councillors 54% was to keep the current arrangements. Cost and time factors were not felt to be sufficiently important by that majority to warrant change, although 46% felt a fixed venue in North or Brympton Way was the way forward. There was support voiced for seeking to improve the rota of venues in Area North as opportunities occur. The Democratic Services Officer already evaluates alternative venues but only a few are able to meet our essential criteria.

Order of agenda – The Chairman and Vice Chairman assess the anticipated duration of non-planning items and from this set a realistic start time for the planning applications to be determined. This method has been quite accurate throughout the last year. The biggest variable to meeting length is therefore the number of planning applications.

Twelve Councillors wished to retain the current arrangement regarding the order of the agenda with only one Councillor wishing to have planning first followed by non-planning. Comments were: *“better for Officers to do planning second, they know what time the planning meeting will start”* and *“never hurts Members of the public to understand the wider work of the Council and Councillors.”*

Financial Implications

There are no new financial implications arising from this report. The current arrangements are more costly than operating all committees from Brympton Way. This “cost of democracy” is a conscious choice inherent in the area working arrangements.

Corporate Priority Implications

The work of the Area Committee system is dedicated to promoting all of the Council’s Corporate Priorities.

Carbon Emissions and Climate Change Implications

All the venues used by the Committee require the vast majority of people to travel by car. This is currently the case. The report doesn’t seek to change these arrangements

Equality and Diversity Implications

All venues are vetted to ensure that they are fully DDA compliant and provide a good quality meeting environment. Ideally they will offer wifi too as this is increasingly expected by the public.
