

## MEMBERS' PLANNING CODE OF PRACTICE

<b>Section</b>	<b>Page No</b>
Introduction	5:4 - 3
1. Relationship to the Members' Code of Conduct	5:4 - 3
2. Interests under the Members' Code	5:4 - 3
3. Development Proposals submitted by Councillors and Officers	5:4 - 4
4. Fettering Discretion in the Planning Process	5:4 - 5
5. Contact with Applicants, Developers and Objectors	5:4 - 6
6. Lobbying of Councillors	5:4 - 8
7. Lobbying by Councillors	5:4 - 9
8. Site Visits	5:4 - 9
9. Public Speaking at Meetings	5:4 - 10
10. Officers	5:4 - 10
11. Decision Making	5:4 - 11
12. Training	5:4 - 11

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# MEMBERS' PLANNING CODE OF GOOD PRACTICE

## Introduction

**The aim of this code of good practice:** to ensure that in the planning process there are no grounds for suggesting that a decision has been biased, partial or not well founded in any way.

**The key purpose of Planning:** to control development in the public interest.

**Your role as a Member of the Planning Authority:** to make planning decisions openly, impartially, with sound judgement and for justifiable reasons.

**When the Code of Good Practice applies:** this code applies to Members at all times when involving themselves in the planning process. (This includes, where applicable, when part of decision-making meetings of the Council in exercising the functions of the Planning Authority or when involved on less formal occasions, such as meetings with officers or the public and consultative meetings). It applies as equally to planning enforcement matters or site-specific policy issues as it does to planning applications.

**If you have any doubts about the application of this Code to your own circumstances, you should seek advice early from the Head of Democratic and Partnership Services (who is also the Monitoring Officer) or one of his/her legal staff, and preferably well before any meeting takes place.**

## 1. Relationship to the Members' Code of Conduct

- (i) First apply the rules in the Code of Conduct for Members, which must be complied with always.
- (ii) Then apply the rules in this Planning Code of Good Practice, which seek to explain and supplement the Code of Conduct for Members for the purposes of planning control. If you do not abide by this Code of Practice, you may put:
  - the Council at risk of proceedings on the legality or maladministration of the related decision; and
  - yourself at risk of either being named in a report made to the Standards Committee or Council or, if the failure is also likely to be a breach of the Code of Conduct, a complaint being made to the Standards Board for England.

## 2. Interests under the Members' Code

- (i) **You must** disclose the existence and nature of your interest at any relevant meeting, including informal meetings or discussions with officers and other Members. Preferably, disclose your interest at the beginning of

the meeting and not just at the commencement of discussion on that particular matter.

(ii) **Where your interest is personal and prejudicial:-**

- **don't** participate, or give the appearance of trying to participate, in the making of any decision on the matter by the planning authority;
- **don't** try to represent ward views; get another Ward Member to do so instead;
- **don't** get involved in the processing of the application;
- **don't** seek or accept any preferential treatment, or place yourself in a position that could lead the public to think you are receiving preferential treatment, because of your position as a councillor. This would include, where you have a personal and prejudicial interest in a proposal, using your position to discuss that proposal with officers or members when other members of the public would not have the same opportunity to do so.
- **You should** be aware that, whilst you are not prevented from seeking to explain and justify a proposal in which you have a personal and prejudicial interest, to an appropriate officer, in person or in writing or through an agent, the Code places greater limitations on you in representing that proposal than would apply to a member of the public. (For example, where you have a personal and prejudicial interest in a proposal to be put before a meeting, you will have to withdraw from the room whilst the meeting considers it, whereas an ordinary member of the public would be able to make use of the public speaking procedure to address the meeting on the proposal and observe the meeting's consideration of it.)

**3. Development Proposals submitted by Councillors and Officers**

- (i) **Don't** act as agent for people pursuing a planning matter with the Authority. Should you submit your own proposals to the Authority you serve, you should take no part in its processing.
- (ii) **You should** inform the Council's Monitoring Officer of such proposals.
- (iii) Proposals should be reported to the Planning Committee as main items and not dealt with by officers except to the extent permitted under delegated powers; as part of the report the Monitoring Officer should confirm whether it has been processed normally.

#### 4. Fettering Discretion in the Planning Process

- (i) **Don't** fetter your discretion and therefore your ability to participate in planning decision making by making up your mind, or clearly appearing to have made up your mind (particularly in relation to an external interest or lobby group), on how you will vote on any planning matter prior to formal consideration of the matter at the meeting of the planning authority and of your hearing the officer's presentation and evidence and arguments on both sides.
- (ii) **Fettering your discretion** in this way and then taking part in the decision will put the Council at risk of a finding of maladministration and of legal proceedings on the grounds of there being a danger of bias or pre-determination or a failure to take into account all of the factors enabling the proposal to be considered on its merits.
- (iii) **You should** be aware that you are likely to have fettered your discretion where the Council is the landowner, developer or applicant and you have acted as, or could be perceived as being, a chief advocate for the proposal. (This is more than a matter of membership of both the proposing and planning determination committees, but that through your significant personal involvement in preparing or advocating the proposal you will be, or perceived by the public as being, no longer able to act impartially or to determine the proposal purely on its planning merits.)
- (iv) **You should** also be aware that, whilst the Members' Code of Conduct provides for a presumption that you may regard yourself as not having a prejudicial interest in matters which relate to the organisations mentioned below, you must exercise your discretion in deciding whether or not to participate in each case and where:
  - you have been significantly involved in the preparation, submission or advocacy of a planning proposal on behalf of:
    - (a) another local or public authority of which you are a member;  
or
    - (b) a body to which you have been appointed or nominated by the Council as its representative; or
  - you are a trustee or company director of the body submitting the proposal and were appointed by the Council

you should always disclose a prejudicial as well as personal interest and withdraw.
- (v) **You may** take part in the debate on a proposal when acting as part of a consultee body (where you are also a member of the parish council, for example, or both a district/borough and county councillor), provided:

- the proposal does not substantially effect the well-being or financial standing of the consultee body;
  - you make it clear to the consultee body that:
    - your views are expressed on the limited information before you only;
    - you must reserve judgement and the independence to make up your own mind on each separate proposal, based on your overriding duty to the whole community and not just to the people in that area, ward or parish, as and when it comes before the Committee and you hear all of the relevant information; and
    - you will not in any way commit yourself as to how you or others may vote when the proposal comes before the Committee; and
  - you disclose the personal interest regarding your membership or role when the Committee comes to consider the proposal.
- (vi) **Don't** speak and vote on a proposal where you have fettered your discretion. You do not also have to withdraw, but you may prefer to do so for the sake of appearances. However you should explain that you do not intend to speak and vote because you have or you could reasonably be perceived as having judged (or reserved the right to judge) the matter elsewhere, so that this may be recorded in the minutes.

## 5. Contact with Applicants, Developers and Objectors

- (i) **You must** refer those who approach you for planning, procedural or technical advice to officers.
  - (ii) **Don't** agree to any formal meeting with applicants, developers or groups of objectors where you can avoid it. Where you feel that a formal meeting would be useful in clarifying the issues, you should never seek to arrange that meeting yourself but should request the Head of Planning to organise it. The officer(s) will then ensure that those present at the meeting are advised from the start that the discussions will not bind the authority to any particular course of action, that the meeting is properly recorded on the application file and the record of the meeting is disclosed when the application is considered by the Committee.
- (ii) Otherwise, **you should**:
- follow the rules on lobbying;
  - consider whether or not it would be prudent in the circumstances to make notes when contacted; and

- report to the Head of Planning any significant contact with the applicant and other parties, explaining the nature and purpose of the contacts and your involvement in them, and ensure that this is recorded on the planning file.

(iv) **In addition, in respect of presentations by applicants/developers you should:**

- **not** attend a planning presentation unless an officer is present and/or it has been organised by officers.
- **only ask relevant questions** for the purposes of clarifying your understanding of the proposals.
- **remember** that the presentation is not part of the formal process of debate and determination of any subsequent application; this will be carried out by the Planning Committee.
- **be aware** that a presentation is a form of lobbying and you must not express any strong view or state how you or other Members might vote.

(v) **In addition, in respect of pre-application discussions you should:**

- make it clear at the outset that the discussions will not bind a council to making a particular decision and that any views expressed are personal, provisional and given without prejudice.
- ensure that advice is consistent and based upon the Development Plan and material considerations.
- make written notes of any discussions or meetings. Two or more officers should attend potentially contentious meetings. A follow-up letter from the Council should set out the matters discussed, comments made and any agreed action.
- take care to ensure that advice is not partial (nor seen to be) otherwise a subsequent report could appear to be advocacy.
- preferably not take part in such discussions in order to maintain impartiality, and its appearance. Should there, however be occasions when Councillors are involved they should be advised by appropriate professional officers from the Council (which must always include a senior planning officer) and be authorised, on a case by case basis, by the Planning Committee or by the Chair/Deputy Chair. The actual officer(s) who attend will be agreed in advance between the Chair and Chief Officer.

- ensure that any involvement you have in such discussions is recorded in the Committee report (where appropriate) and notes of the meeting (which should always be sent to all parties involved in the meeting).

## 6. **Lobbying of Councillors**

- (i) **You should** explain to those lobbying or attempting to lobby you that, whilst you can listen to what is said, it prejudices your impartiality and therefore your ability to participate in the Committee's decision making to express an intention to vote one way or another or hold such a firm point of view that it amounts to the same thing.
- (ii) **You must** remember that your overriding duty is to the whole community not just to the people in your ward and, taking account of the need to make decisions impartially, that you should not improperly favour, or appear to improperly favour, any person, company, group or locality.
- (iii) **Don't** accept gifts or hospitality from any person involved in or affected by a planning proposal. If a degree of hospitality is entirely unavoidable, ensure it is of a minimum, its acceptance is declared as soon as possible and remember to register the gift or hospitality where its value is over £25.00 in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct.
- (iv) **You should** copy or pass on any lobbying correspondence you receive to the Head of Planning at the earliest opportunity.
- (v) **You must** promptly refer to the Head of Planning any offers made to you of planning gain or constraint of development, through a proposed s.106 Planning Obligation or otherwise.
- (vi) **You must** inform the Head of Democratic and Partnership Services where you feel you have been exposed to undue or excessive lobbying or approaches (including inappropriate offers of gifts or hospitality), who will in turn advise the appropriate officers to follow the matter up.
- (vii) **You should** note that, unless you have a personal and prejudicial interest, you will not have fettered your discretion or breached this Planning Code of Good Practice through:
  - listening or receiving viewpoints from residents or other interested parties;
  - making comments to residents, interested parties, other Members or appropriate officers, provided they do not consist of or amount to pre-judging the issue and you make clear you are keeping an open mind;
  - seeking information through appropriate channels.



## 7. Lobbying by Councillors

- (i) **Don't** become a member of, lead or represent an organisation whose primary purpose is to lobby to promote or oppose planning proposals. If you do, you will have fettered your discretion and are likely to have a personal and prejudicial interest and have to withdraw.
- (ii) If you join general interest groups which reflect your areas of interest and which concentrate on issues beyond particular planning proposals, such as the Victorian Society, CPRE, Ramblers Association or a local civic society, disclose a personal interest where that organisation has made representations on a particular proposal and make it clear to that organisation and the Committee that you have reserved judgement and the independence to make up your own mind on each separate proposal.
- (iii) **Don't** excessively lobby fellow Councillors regarding your concerns or views nor attempt to persuade them that they should decide how to vote in advance of the meeting at which any planning decision is to be taken.
- (iv) **Don't** decide or discuss how to vote on any application at any sort of political group meeting, or lobby any other Member to do so. Political Group Meetings should never dictate how Members should vote on a planning issue.

## 8. Site Visits

- (i) **You should** try to attend site visits organised by the Council where possible.
- (ii) **Don't** request a site visit unless you feel it is strictly necessary because:
  - particular site factors are significant in terms of the weight attached to them relative to other factors or the difficulty of their assessment in the absence of a site inspection; or
  - there are significant policy or precedent implications and specific site factors need to be carefully addressed.
- (iii) **You must** ensure that any information which you gained from the site visit is reported back to the Committee, so that all Members have the same information.
- (iv) **You must** ensure that you treat the site visit only as an opportunity to seek information and to observe the site.
- (v) **You should** ask the officers at the site visit questions or seek clarification from them on matters which are relevant to the site inspection.

- (vi) **Don't** hear representations from any other party (with the exception of the Ward Member(s) whose address must focus only on site factors and site issues). Where you are approached by the applicant or a third party, advise them that they should make representations in writing to the authority and direct them to or inform the officer present.
- (vii) **Don't** express opinions or views to anyone.
- (viii) **Don't** enter a site which is subject to a proposal other than as part of an official site visit, even in response to an invitation, as this may give the impression of bias unless:
  - you feel it is essential for you to visit the site other than through attending the official site visit;
  - you have first spoken to the Head of Planning about your intention to do so and why (which will be recorded on the file); and
  - you can ensure you will comply with these good practice rules on site visits.
- (ix) The senior Planning Officer attending the site visit should record the following details on a copy of the site visit notification letter:
  - 1) date of meeting
  - 2) Members/officers present
  - 3) Any comments/other relevant information

This record should be signed by the officer and placed on the application file.

## 9. Public Speaking at Meetings

- (i) **Don't** allow members of the public to communicate with you during the Committee's proceedings (orally or in writing) other than through the Committee's procedures for public speaking, as this may give the appearance of bias.
- (ii) **You should** ensure that you comply with the Council's procedures in respect of public speaking.

## 10. Officers

- (i) **Don't** put pressure on officers to put forward a particular recommendation. (This does not prevent you from asking questions or submitting views to the Head of Planning, which may be incorporated into any committee report.)
- (ii) **You should** recognise and respect that officers involved in the processing and determination of planning matters must act in accordance with the

Council's Code of Conduct for Officers and their professional codes of conduct, primarily the Royal Town Planning Institute's Code of Professional Conduct. As a result, planning officers' views, opinions and recommendations will be presented on the basis of their overriding obligation of professional independence, which may on occasion be at odds with the views, opinions or decisions of the Committee or its Members.

## 11. Decision Making

- (i) **You should** ensure that, if you request a proposal to go before the Committee rather than be determined through officer delegation, that your reasons are recorded and repeated in the report to the Committee.
- (ii) **You should** come to meetings with an open mind and demonstrate that you are open-minded.
- (iii) **You must** comply with Section 54A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 and make decisions in accordance with the Development Plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise
- (iv) **You must** come to your decision only after due consideration of all of the information reasonably required upon which to base a decision. If you feel there is insufficient time to digest new information or that there is simply insufficient information before you, request that further information. If necessary, defer or refuse.
- (v) **Don't** vote or take part in the meeting's discussion on a proposal unless you have been present to hear the entire debate, including the officers' introduction to the matter.
- (vi) **You should** have recorded the reasons for Committee's decision to defer any proposal.
- (vii) **You must** ensure that if you are proposing, seconding or supporting a decision contrary to officer recommendations or the development plan, you clearly identify and understand the planning reasons leading to this decision. These reasons must be given in a report to a future planning committee.

## 12. Training

- (i) **Don't** participate in decision making at meetings dealing with planning matters if you have not attended the planning training provided by the Council.
- (ii) **You should** endeavour to attend any other specialised training sessions provided, since these will be designed to extend your knowledge of planning law, regulations, procedures, Codes of Practice and the

Development Plans beyond the minimum referred to above and thus assist you in carrying out your role properly and effectively.

- (iii) **You should** participate in any annual review of a sample of planning decisions to ensure that Members' judgements have been based on proper planning considerations.