

Part 6Q: Members Planning Code of Good Practice

Background

The Members' Planning Code of Good Practice was originally prepared in response to a series of successful court challenges concerning local planning authorities and the members' conduct or conflicts of interests. It replaced what was a number of individual and sometimes haphazard approaches in individual councils at the time. The drafting of the Model Code was subject to consultation and comment from a number of local authorities through the machinery of LLG as well as with the Local Government Ombudsman and from firms of solicitors or counsel. LLG then worked with the Local Government Association to publish the Code as part of a suite of guidance.

The Model Planning Code and Protocol was first published in 2003, was refreshed in 2007. Following the Localism Act 2011's introduction of the new law on members' conduct, the clarification in the law on bias and predetermination in that Act and in the courts¹ and commentary from the Committee on Standards in Public Life in better defining the Nolan Principles, it was reviewed and updated in 2014.

In 2017, the UK Supreme Court stated that the Code and Protocol "*offers sound practical advice*"².

The Model Council Planning Code and Protocol has thus now become a central plank of the guidance used by local authorities to give their members and others advice and to direct the business of the planning decisions to ensure fairness and legality. Many councils have incorporated it into their constitutional documents and a number have turned its provisions into standing orders to provide binding rules of procedure. The ability to do this was confirmed by the Court of Appeal in 2023³.

As we approach ten years since that last update, we have looked again at the Code and Protocol for use by local authorities. In doing this we would wish to thank Bevan Brittan and in particular Philip McCourt, together with Sharon Bridglings, Director of Law and Governance at Milton Keynes City Council.

This refresh will help in having clarified some of the points concerning consistency and reasoning in decision making and underscores the potential impact of social media interactions upon proceedings.

The successful operation of the planning system relies on mutual trust and understanding of Member and officer roles. It also relies on the important legal principle that a decision-maker must not only ask themselves the right question, but to obtain the relevant information to enable them to answer it correctly and to be able and willing to understand it and then take it properly

¹ R (Island Farm Development Ltd) v. Bridgend County BC [2006] EWHC 2189 (Admin), [2007] LGR 60, approved R (Lewis) v. Redcar & Cleveland BC [2008] EWCA Civ 746, [2009] 1 WLR 83

² Para 62, Dover District Council (Appellant) v CPRE Kent (Respondent) [2017] UKSC 79

³ The Spitalfields Historic Building Trust, R (On the Application Of) v London Borough of Tower Hamlets [2023] EWCA Civ 917

into account when making their decision. All of this requires Members and their officers ensuring that they act in a way which that is fair and impartial and is clearly seen to be so.

In reproducing the Model Council Planning Code and Protocol in 2023, we are seeking to endorse and ensure that those principles continue to be upheld.

LLG January 2024

The Members Planning Code of Good Practice Revised and Adopted by West Oxfordshire District Council

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.

One of the key purposes of the planning system is to regulate the development and use of land in the public interest. **Your role as a Member of the Planning Authority is** to make planning decisions openly, impartially, with sound judgement and for justifiable reasons whilst not being involved if you have an interest or have pre-determined matters. You are also a democratically accountable decision-taker who had been elected to provide and pursue policies. You are entitled to be predisposed to make planning decisions in accordance with your political views and policies, as opposed to having pre-determined matters, **provided** that you have considered all material considerations and have given fair consideration to relevant points raised.

When the Code of Good Practice applies: this code applies to Members at all times when involving themselves in the planning process. (This includes when taking part in the 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 Monitoring Officer or their staff, and preferably well before any meeting takes place.

1. Relationship to the Members' Code of Conduct

- **Do** apply the rules in the Authority's Code of Conduct first, which must be always be complied with. This is both the rules on disclosable pecuniary interests (and other interests included in the Authority's Code) and the general rules giving effect to the seven principles of public life: selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.
- **Do** then apply the rules in this Members' Planning Code, which seek to explain and supplement the Members' Code of Conduct for the purposes of planning and Strategic Planning Committee. If you do not abide by this Members' Planning Code, 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 Sub-Committee or Council or, if the failure is also likely to be a breach of the Localism Act 2011, a complaint being made to the police to consider criminal proceedings.
- **Do** be aware that, like the Authority's Code of Conduct, this Planning Code is a reflection and summary of the law on decision making and not a direct replication of it. If in doubt, seek the advice of your monitoring officer or their staff advising at the meeting.

2. Development Proposals and Interests under the Members' Code

- **Do** disclose the existence and nature of your interest as required by your members Code of Conduct.
- **Do take into account when approaching a decision that** the Principle of integrity is defined, by the Committee on Standards in Public Life in 2013, in terms that "*Holders of public office must avoid placing themselves under any obligation to people or organisations that might try inappropriately to influence them in their work. They should not act or take decisions in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family, or their friends. They must declare and resolve any interests and relationships*". It is therefore advisable that you:
 - **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 disclosable or other personal conflict of 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.
 - **Do** note that you are not prevented from seeking to explain and justify a proposal in which you may have a conflict of interest to an appropriate officer, in person or in writing, but that the Members' Code of Conduct places additional limitations on you in representing that proposal
 - **Do** notify the Monitoring Officer in writing where it is clear to you that you have a disclosable pecuniary interest or other personal conflict of interest and note that:
 - you should send the notification no later than submission of that application where you can;
 - the proposal will always be reported to the Committee as a main item and not dealt with by officers under delegated powers;
 - you must not get involved in the processing of the application; and
 - it is advisable that you employ an agent to act on your behalf in respect of the proposal when dealing with officers and in public speaking at Committee.

3. Fettering Discretion in the Planning Process

(natural justice, predisposition and predetermination)

- **Don't** fetter your discretion and therefore your ability to participate in planning decision making at this Council by approaching the decision with a closed mind. Fettering your

discretion in this way and taking part in the decision will put the Council at risk of a finding of maladministration and of legal proceedings on the grounds of bias, pre-determination or a failure to take into account all of the factors enabling the proposal to be considered on its merits.

- **Do** be aware that in your role as an elected Member you are entitled, and are often expected, to have expressed views on planning issues and that these comments have an added measure of protection under the law. Your prior observations, apparent favouring or objections in respect of a particular outcome will not on their own normally suffice to make a decision unlawful and have it quashed, but you must never come to make a decision with a closed mind.
- **Do** keep at the front of your mind that, when you come to make the decision, you
 - must keep an open mind and hear all of the evidence before you, both the officers' presentation of the facts and their advice and the arguments from all sides;
 - are not required to cast aside views on planning policy you held when seeking election or when otherwise acting as a Member, in giving fair consideration to points raised;
 - are only entitled to take account a material consideration and must disregard considerations irrelevant to the question and legal context at hand; and
 - are to come to a decision after giving what you feel is the right weight to those material considerations.
- **Do** be aware that you can be biased 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.)
- **Do** consider yourself able to 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.

- **Do** explain that you do not intend to speak and vote as a member of the Committee because you will be perceived as having judged (or you reserve the right to judge) the matter elsewhere, so that this may be recorded in the minutes.
- **Do** take the opportunity to exercise your separate speaking rights as a Ward/Local Member (*where this is granted by the authority's standing orders*) where you have represented your views or those of local electors and fettered your discretion, but do not have a disclosable or other personal conflict of interest. Where you do:
 - advise the proper officer that you wish to speak in this capacity before commencement of the item;
 - remove yourself from the seating area for members of the Committee for the duration of that item; and
 - ensure that your actions are recorded in accordance with the Authority's committee procedures.

4. Contact with Applicants, Developers and Objectors

- **Do** refer those who approach you for planning, procedural or technical advice to officers.
- **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 seek to arrange that meeting yourself through a request to the Development Manager 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.
- **Do** otherwise:
 - 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 Development Manager 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.

In addition in respect of presentations by applicants/developers:

- **Don't** attend a planning presentation without requesting an officer to be present.
- **Do** ask relevant questions for the purposes of clarifying your understanding of the proposals.
- **Do** 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 appropriate Committee of the planning authority.

- **Do** be aware that a presentation is a form of lobbying and, whilst you may express any view on the merits or otherwise of the proposal presented, you should never state how you or other Members would intend to vote at a committee.

5. Lobbying of Councillors

- **Do** explain to those lobbying or attempting to lobby you that, whilst you can listen to what is said, it may subsequently prejudice 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 such a firm point of view that it amounts to the same thing.
- **Do** 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.
- **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, including its addition to your register of interests where relevant.
- **Do** copy or pass on any lobbying correspondence you receive to the Development Manager] at the earliest opportunity.
- **Do** promptly refer to the Development Manager any offers made to you of planning gain or constraint of development, through a proposed s.106 Planning Obligation or otherwise.
- **Do** inform the Monitoring Officer 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.
- **Do** note that, unless you have a disclosable or overriding other personal conflict of interest, you will not have fettered your discretion or breached this Planning Code through:
 - listening or receiving viewpoints from residents or other interested parties;
 - making comments to residents, interested parties, other Members or appropriate officers (making clear that you must keep an open mind);
 - seeking information through appropriate channels; or
 - being a vehicle for the expression of opinion of others in your role as a Ward Member.

6. Lobbying by Councillors

- **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 be seen to have fettered your discretion on the grounds of bias.
- **Do** 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, but you should normally disclose that interest on the grounds of transparency where the 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

- **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
- **Do** be aware of the power of social media posts or re-posting and be careful to not to give the impression that you will definitively vote in a certain way or act with a closed mind if you intend to participate in the decision making on behalf of the authority.
- **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.

7. Site Visits/Inspections

- **Do** try to attend site visits organised by the Council where possible.
- **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.
- **Do** ensure that you report back to the Committee any information gained from the site visit that you feel would benefit all Members of the Committee
- **Do** ensure that you treat the site visit only as an opportunity to seek information and to observe the site.
- **Do** ask the officers at the site visit questions or seek clarification from them on matters which are relevant to the site inspection.
- **Don't** hear representations from any other party. 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.
- **Don't** express opinions or views.
- **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 Development Manager 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.

8. Public Speaking at Meetings

- **Don't** allow members of the public to communicate with you during the Committee's proceedings (orally, in writing or by social media) other than through the scheme for public speaking or through the Chair, as this may give the appearance of bias.
- **Don't** participate in social media or exchanges by texting as a member of the committee during the committee's proceedings as this may give the impression of undue external influence and may give the appearance of bias.
- **Do** ensure that you comply with the Council's procedures in respect of public speaking.

9. Officers

- **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 Development Manager, which may be incorporated into any committee report).
- **Do** recognise that officers are part of a management structure and only discuss a proposal, outside of any arranged meeting, with the Development Manager or those officers who are authorised by them to deal with the proposal at a Member level.
- **Do** 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.

10. Decision Making

- **Do** ensure that, if you request a proposal to go before the Committee rather than be determined through officer delegation, that your planning reasons are recorded and repeated in the report to the Committee.
- **Do** come to meetings with an open mind and demonstrate that you are open-minded having fully read the papers in advance of the meeting.
- **Do** comply with section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 and make decisions in accordance with the Development Plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.
- **Do** 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.

- **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. (Where a matter is deferred and its consideration recommences at a subsequent meeting, only Members who were present at the previous meeting will be able to vote. If this renders the Committee inquorate then the item will have to be considered afresh and this would include public speaking rights being triggered again).
- **Do** have recorded the reasons for Committee's decision to defer any proposal.
- **Do** make sure that if you are proposing, seconding or supporting a decision contrary to officer recommendations or the development plan that you clearly identify and understand the planning reasons leading to this conclusion/decision. These reasons must be given prior to the vote and be recorded (it will help to take advice from officers when and where necessary to do this and, if there are no indications allowing you to do this in advance of the meeting, it may be helpful to request a short adjournment for these purposes to seek advice on the best grounds to consider an overturn). Be aware that you may have to justify the resulting decision by giving evidence in the event of any challenge.
Do remember that meetings are live streamed and recorded.

11. Training

- **Don't** participate in decision making at meetings dealing with planning matters if you have not attended the mandatory planning training prescribed by the Council.
- **Do** 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.
- **Do** participate in the annual review of a sample of planning decisions to ensure that Members' judgements have been based on proper planning considerations.

Appendices:

- 1 Process for determining planning applications
- 2 Roles and responsibilities at planning meetings

