

Working Together

The Planning Code of Good Practice for Members of Wiltshire Council

1. Why a Code of Good Practice is Required

- 1.1. As a local councillor you will inevitably be involved in planning matters; as a councillor representing your division's constituents; as a councillor responsible for forming the planning framework for Wiltshire, or as a councillor responsible for deciding planning applications at an area or strategic planning committee. You will have a crucial role to play in both making the planning system work and ensuring the best possible outcomes for the community, both now and in the future.
- 1.2. The key purpose of planning is to manage development in the public interest. However, concerns are sometimes expressed about the compatibility of councillors meeting developers, applicants and interest groups and then taking decisions on an impartial basis. The aim of this code of good practice is to ensure that in the planning process in Wiltshire there are no grounds for suggesting that a decision has been biased, partial or not well founded in any way. Your role as a member of the council is to make planning decisions openly, impartially, with sound judgement and for justifiable reasons. This Code of Good Practice has been prepared to help you in this task.

2. When the Code of Good Practice Applies

- 2.1. This code applies to Members at all times when involving themselves in the planning process. This includes not just the taking part in the planning committee meetings of the Council, but on less formal occasions, such as meetings with officers, the public, parish/town councils and pre-application and consultation meetings. It applies equally to planning enforcement matters or site-specific policy issues as it does to planning applications.
- 2.2. 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 one of his/her staff, and preferably well before any meeting takes place.
- 2.3. This code is based upon the 'Model Members Planning Code' adopted by the Association of Council Secretaries and Solicitors in 2003. The Model Code was produced following consultation with the Standards Board for England, the Local Government Ombudsman and the Audit Commission.

3. Relationship to the Members' Code of Conduct

3.1. The Members' Code of Conduct must be complied with at all times. This Planning Code of Good Practice seeks to explain and supplement the Members' Code of Conduct for the purposes of planning. It provides helpful guidance for members. However, you are advised that if you do not abide by this Code of Good 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 Committee.

3.2. In the event of a conflict between this Planning Code of Good Practice and the Members' Code of Conduct the latter will prevail.

4. Development Proposals and Interests under the Members' Code

4.1. Members may wish to make their own planning proposals, such as extending their own property. It is a fundamental point of principle that those who have a significant interest in the outcome of a planning decision should not take part in the decision making process. Members should disclose the existence and nature of their interest at any relevant meeting, including informal meetings or discussions with officers and other members. Such interests must be declared at the start of the meeting..

4.2. Where your interest is personal and prejudicial:

- Notify the Monitoring Officer in writing or by e-mail of your interest, if at all possible no later than the submission of the proposal;
- Consider employing an agent to act on your behalf in dealing with officers and any public speaking at Committee - at any meeting, you must ensure that you leave the room whilst the meeting considers it;
- Ask another elected member to represent division views;
- Do not participate in the processing of the application or the making of any decision on the matter by the Council;
- Do not 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.
- Your proposal will not be dealt with by officers under delegated powers if any objections to it are received. Where this happens it will be reported to a Committee for a decision.
- At the meeting of the Committee you may speak on the application, but only to the extent permitted for members of the public in accordance with paragraph 9.5 below. You must then leave the room.

5. Fettering Discretion in the Planning Process

- 5.1. The integrity and public support for the planning process relies on members of planning committees making decisions that are open, transparent and above board. To participate in decision-making on planning matters, it is essential that you do not state how you will vote on planning matters prior to formal consideration of them at the meeting of the planning committee where you will have the officer's report and hear the evidence and arguments on both sides.
- 5.2. If you appear to have made your mind up prior to the meeting by publicly supporting or opposing a proposal, or have announced how you will vote, you will have fettered your discretion. Taking part in the decision in these circumstances 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. Where you have fettered your discretion, do not speak and vote on a proposal and consider whether you should withdraw from the Council meeting for that item. You should ensure that your decision not to speak and vote on these grounds is recorded in the minutes. However, where you are representing the views of your local electors and have fettered your discretion, you may still speak in your capacity as a local member as long as you do not have a personal and prejudicial interest. In these circumstances, you should ensure that your actions are recorded and you must not vote.
- 5.3. *Where I am a member of a parish or town council, can I still attend the parish/town council meetings where planning matters are discussed and still be a member of a Wiltshire Council planning committee?*

You can still take part in debates on planning proposals at parish/town council meetings, provided that:

- The proposal does not substantially affect the well being or financial standing of the town/parish council;
- You must make it clear to them that any views you express are based on the limited information before you only and that you will not in any way commit yourself as to how you or others may vote when the proposal comes before the Committee;
- You make it clear that 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 parish, as and when it comes before the Committee and you hear all of the relevant information;
- When the development proposal comes up for consideration at a Wiltshire Council Planning Committee you should disclose the personal interest regarding your membership or role at the Town or Parish Council.

6. Contact with Applicants, Developers and Objectors

6.1. As a community leader and local representative you will want to be involved in relevant public meetings, pre-application discussions and policy production. Councillors can involve themselves in discussions with developers and others about planning matters provided you keep to the following guidelines:

- Where developers organise a public exhibition or display of their proposals, it is acceptable to visit to examine the proposals and ask questions of the developers to ensure that you are fully informed of the nature of the proposals. You may feed in your own and your local community's concerns and issues and engage in discussion. However, be aware that you must have and be seen to have an open mind at the point of decision-making and therefore you should not state how you or other Members might vote.
- Pre-application meetings with developers or prospective applicants may be a positive way of engaging the developer to seek to ensure that community needs are met. However, if approached, you should refer any requests for such a meeting to an officer of the Development Service. The officer(s) will then organise the meeting and ensure that those present are advised from the start that the discussions will not bind the authority to any particular course of action and that the meeting is properly recorded.
- Refer those who approach you for planning, procedural or technical advice to officers;
- Advise those looking for policy guidance to examine the policies in adopted local plans and the Local Development Framework;
- Avoid meeting developers alone or putting yourself in a position where you appear to favour a person, company or group.

7. Lobbying and Councillors

7.1. Lobbying is recognised as a normal and proper part of the political process. However, it is important for members to protect their impartiality and integrity in planning matters. You will not breach this code of Good Practice by listening to or receiving viewpoints from residents or other interested parties provided that you make it clear that you are keeping an open mind. Expressing an intention to vote one way or another before a meeting of the Council would prejudice your impartiality. It is advisable if the following procedures are followed:

- Avoid accepting gifts or hospitality from any person involved or affected by a planning proposal. If a degree of hospitality is entirely unavoidable, ensure that its acceptance is declared as soon as possible and enter it into the register of interests where its value exceeds £25 (twenty five pounds);

- Pass a copy of any lobbying correspondence that you receive to the relevant Development Control Area Team Manager or the case officer at the earliest opportunity;
- Do not pressurise or lobby officers for a particular recommendation;
- Promptly refer to the Development Control Area Team Manager any offers made to you of planning gain or constraint of development, through a Section 106 Planning Obligation or otherwise;
- Inform the Monitoring Officer where you feel that 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.
- Political Group Meetings should never dictate how Members should vote on a planning issue and members should not excessively lobby fellow councillors regarding 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.

7.2. Can I remain a member of an amenity society when it makes representations on planning matters?

There are many general interest groups who concentrate on issues beyond particular planning proposals. These include bodies such as the National Trust; CPRE; Wiltshire Archaeology and Natural History Society; Ramblers Association; local civic societies. It is acceptable to be members of these societies, provided that a personal interest is declared when that organisation has made representations on a particular proposal and you make it clear that you have reserved judgement and the independence to make up your own mind on each separate proposal. However, if you become a member of or lead or represent an organisation whose primary purpose is to lobby to promote or oppose planning proposals, you will have fettered your discretion and are likely to have a personal and prejudicial interest.

8. The Role of Officers

8.1. Officers and members work together to deliver the outcomes that seek to deliver the right development at the right place at the right time, whilst protecting the historic and natural beauty of Wiltshire's landscape. It is therefore essential that there is mutual trust and understanding between officers and members. Officers will advise and assist members in their formulation of planning advice and the determination of applications and will provide:

- Impartial and professional advice;
- Committee reports that include a clear and accurate analysis of the issues in the context of the relevant development plan and other material considerations; the substance of the representations and views of those who have been consulted and a clear recommendation of action.

Officers will process and determine applications in accordance with the Council's code of Conduct for Officers and the Royal Town Planning Institute's Code of Professional conduct.

9. Decision Making

- 9.1. Planning decisions are made within the context of a national, regional and local planning framework. By law, the Council has to make decisions in accordance with the Development Plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.
- 9.2. As a member, you can request that the relevant Planning Committee considers a planning application in your division and not be dealt with under delegated powers (although there are a few exceptions, such as tree applications, set out in the Scheme of Delegation. To call-in an application, you need to do this in writing (an electronic proforma will be available for electronic submission) and send it to the relevant Area Team Manager or Case Officer handling the application. Requests must be received within 21 days of the circulation of the weekly list. The proforma must record planning reasons why the Committee should deal with the application. (It would be helpful if Member would contact the Case Officer prior to call-in to discuss the planning issues involved and whether a call-in is necessary.)
- 9.3. Members should arrive at meeting with an open mind and make a decision only after due consideration of all the information reasonably required to make that decision including any matters reported at the meeting. If you feel that there is insufficient information before you, you should request that further information. If necessary, defer or, if the grounds are adequate, refuse the proposal.
- 9.4. *Site Visits – (content to be determined following decision of the Implementation Executive on 7 April 2009)*
- 9.5. *Public Speaking at Meetings* - The Council has an established procedure in respect of public participation at planning meetings. This should be complied with. In particular, it is not permissible during meetings for members of the public to communicate with councillors debating the proposal either orally or in writing, as this may give the appearance of bias.

Consultees and Members of the public who wish to speak at a planning meeting, either in favour of or against an application will be asked to register in person to speak prior to the start of the meeting.

There will be a maximum of three consultees permitted to speak on an application. Consultees include such bodies as Town and Parish Councils, CPRE, English Nature etc.

There will be a maximum of three members of the public permitted to speak in objection to an application and three members of the public permitted to speak in support of an application.

Each speaker will be allotted 3 minutes to address the committee.

In the case of particularly complex or large applications the Chairman of the committee will have discretion over these timings and will be able to allow more time. It is imperative, however, in the interests of natural justice that any increase in time allowance is applied across the board, i.e. not to only one group supporting or objecting.

9.6. *Decisions Contrary to Officer Recommendation*

There will be occasions when Councillors wish to make a decision that conflicts with the Planning Officer's recommendation. In these circumstances, members proposing, seconding or supporting such a decision must clearly identify and understand the planning reasons leading to this decision and must give the Planning Officer an opportunity to explain the implications of it. The reasons for the decision must be given prior to the vote and be recorded. If an application is to be approved, members should set out any particular conditions they would like imposed which will be in addition to the 'standard' conditions for that type of development which will be added by officers. An opportunity must be given to the Planning Officer to comment on conditions suggested by members and if necessary, the application should be deferred to the next available meeting to enable proper consideration to be given to the wording needed to achieve members' objectives or members may delegate to the officers the imposition of suitable conditions.

Reasons for refusal against officer advice must be planning related, clear and convincing. Be aware that you may have to justify the resulting decision by giving evidence in the event of any challenge or appeal.

10. Training

Planning is a complex area, but one that generates a great deal of interest amongst local residents and is at the heart of much of the activity of the Council. Great care needs to be taken over procedural matters and to ensure that consideration of applications takes place in a clear and open manner and that decisions are based on sound planning principles. For these reasons, it is **mandatory** for all elected members of Wiltshire Council to have training in planning matters prior to sitting on a planning committee. All elected members will be able to attend this training and it will be arranged immediately after each election. For those elected at by-elections, similar training will be made available.

11. The Order of Events at Committee Meetings

The applications will be determined in the order in which they appear in the agenda unless the Chairman has valid reasons for changing the order. Officer will try and ensure that applications which are likely to attract large numbers of the public appear early in the agendas. If the order is changed, this will be announced at the start of each meeting. The usual procedure will be:

- a) The planning officer will introduce each item and set out any representations, amended plans or material considerations which have been received or come to light in the period between the publication of the agenda and the committee meeting.
- b) Members of the public who wish to make representations opposing the application will then be invited to do so.
- c) Members of the public/applicant/agent (in this order) who wish to make representations in support the application will then be invited to do so.
- d) Consultees who wish to make representations will be invited to do so.
- e) The Town or Parish Council, if present, will then be invited to make representations.
- f) The planning officer will then have an opportunity to respond to comments or provide clarification of any points raised.
- g) The Chairman will then normally ask if anyone is prepared to move the officer recommendation, or table an alternative or move that the application be discussed. Once a motion has been seconded it will be open to the members to discuss the application. It will be usual practice to invite the relevant division Member or failing that a local Member to speak first on each application, following which other members of the committee will be asked for their contributions.
- h) If necessary the Chairman will then again ask if anyone is prepared to move the officer recommendation, or table an alternative.

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