

**STRATFORD-ON-AVON
DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**Members' Planning Code
Of Good Practice**

Members' Planning Code of Good Practice¹

1. Introduction

- 1.1 **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.
- 1.2 **The key purpose of Planning:** to control development in the public interest.
- 1.3 **Your role as a Member of the Planning Authority:** to make planning decisions openly, impartially, with sound judgement and for justifiable reasons.
- 1.4 **When the Code of Good Practice applies:** this code applies at all times to Members who are appointed to serve on a Committee which is required to make decisions about planning applications, planning enforcement matters or site specific policy issues.
- 1.5 **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 staff, and preferably well before any meeting takes place**

2. Relationship to the Members' Code of Conduct

- 2.1 **Do** apply the rules in the Members' Code of Conduct first, which must be always complied with.
- 2.2 **Do** then apply the rules in this Planning Code of Good Practice, which seek to explain and supplement the Members' Code of Conduct for the purposes of planning control. If you do not abide by this Code of Good Practice, you may put:
 - 2.2.1 the Council at risk of proceedings on the legality or maladministration of the decision; and
 - 2.2.2 yourself at risk of either being named in a report made to the Standards and Ethics Committee of the 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 of the Council.

¹ Based on a Model Code produced by the Association of Council Secretaries and Solicitors

3. Development Proposals and Interests under the Members' Code

- 3.1 **Do** 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.
- 3.2 The Audit Commission has expressed concerns that councillors who come from particular professional backgrounds (such as estate agency, property development) or who are local landowners may create a greater probity risk in the context of considering planning applications. In the light of this, you should consider whether your professional or personal background may give rise to a perception by the public that your impartiality may be affected. If you are likely to be required to declare personal or prejudicial interests on a regular basis, you should consider whether it is appropriate for you to take part in planning decision making.
- 3.3 **Do** then act accordingly. **Where your interest is prejudicial²**:-
- 3.3.1 **Don't** participate, or give the appearance of trying to participate, in the making of any decision on the matter by the planning authority.
- 3.3.2 **Do not** lobby Members of the Planning Committee(s).
- 3.3.3 **Don't** get involved in the processing of the application.
- 3.3.4 **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 prejudicial interest in a proposal, using your position to discuss that proposal with officers or members, or a Committee or the Executive, when other members of the public would not have the same opportunity to do so.
- 3.3.5 **Do** be aware that, whilst you are not prevented from seeking to explain and justify a proposal in which you have a prejudicial interest to an appropriate officer, in person or in writing, the Code places limitations on you in representing that proposal. You may only be allowed to attend a meeting for the purpose of making representations, answering questions or giving evidence in relation to the matter, provided that the public are allowed to attend the meeting for the same purpose.
- 3.3.6 **Do** notify the Monitoring Officer in writing of your own proposals and note that:

² Subject to certain exceptions, a member with a personal interest in a planning matter also has a prejudicial interest in that matter if the interest is one which a member of the public with knowledge of the relevant facts would reasonably regard as so significant that it is likely to prejudice the member's judgement of the public interest.

- 3.3.6.1 notification to the Monitoring Officer should be made no later than submission of the application;
- 3.3.6.2 the proposal will always be reported to the Committee as a main item and not dealt with by officers under delegated powers.

4. Fettering Discretion in the Planning Process.

- 4.1 There are occasions when you may have said something (e.g., in a comment to the press or in a public meeting) or acted in a way which creates a perception that you have prejudged or predetermined the outcome of a planning application or which suggests that you may have a biased view towards a particular development. This is known as 'fettering your discretion'.
- 4.2 **Don't** fetter your discretion and therefore your ability to participate in planning decision making at this Council 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.

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.

- 4.3 **Do** 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.)
- 4.4 **Do** also be aware that, whilst the Members' Code of Conduct does not necessarily give you 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:
 - 4.4.1 you have been significantly involved in the preparation, submission or advocacy of a planning proposal on behalf of:
 - 4.4.2 another local or public authority of which you are a member; or
 - 4.4.3 a body to which you have been appointed or nominated by the Council as its representative; or

- 4.4.4 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.
- 4.5 **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 and county councillor), provided:
 - 4.5.1 the proposal does not substantially effect the financial standing of the consultee body;
 - 4.5.2 you make it clear to the consultee body that:
 - 4.5.3 your views are expressed on the limited information before you only;
 - 4.5.4 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
 - 4.5.5 you will not in any way commit yourself as to how you or others may vote when the proposal comes before the Committee; and
 - 4.5.6 you disclose the personal interest regarding your membership or role when the Committee comes to considers the proposal.
- 4.6 **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.
- 4.7 **Do** explain that you do not intend to speak and vote because you have or you could reasonably be perceived as having judged (or reserve the right to judge) the matter elsewhere, so that this may be recorded in the minutes.
- 4.8 **Do** take the opportunity to exercise your separate speaking rights where you have represented your views or those of local electors and fettered your discretion, but do not have a prejudicial interest. Where you do:
 - 4.8.1 advise the proper officer or Chairman that you wish to speak in this capacity before commencement of the item;
 - 4.8.2 remove yourself from the member seating area for the duration of that item; and
 - 4.8.3 ensure that your actions are recorded.

5. Contact with Applicants, Developers and Objectors

- 5.1 **Do** refer those who approach you for planning, procedural or technical advice to officers.
- 5.2 **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.
- 5.3 **Do** otherwise:
 - 5.3.1 follow the rules on lobbying;
 - 5.3.2 consider whether or not it would be prudent in the circumstances to make notes when contacted, particularly where a proposal is likely to be contentious; and
 - 5.3.3 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.

In addition in respect of presentations by applicants/developers:

- 5.4 **Don't** attend a planning presentation unless an officer is present and/or it has been organised by officers.
- 5.5 **Do** ask relevant questions for the purposes of clarifying your understanding of the proposals.
- 5.6 **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.
- 5.7 **Do** be aware that a presentation is a form of lobbying and you must not express any view or state how you or other Members might vote.

6. Lobbying of Councillors

- 6.1 **Do** 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 such a firm point of view that it amounts to the same thing.

- 6.2 **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.
- 6.3 **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 £25³. Remember that you will have to declare the acceptance for the following three years when any business of the donor is considered at a meeting.
- 6.4 **Do** copy or pass on any lobbying correspondence you receive to the Head of Planning at the earliest opportunity.
- 6.5 **Do** 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.
- 6.6 **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.
- 6.7 **Do** comply with the Council's protocol on lobbying, presentations or discussions.
- 6.8 **Do** note that, unless you have a prejudicial interest, you will not have fettered your discretion or breached this Planning Code of Good Practice through:
- 6.8.1 listening or receiving viewpoints from residents or other interested parties;
 - 6.8.2 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;
 - 6.8.3 seeking information through appropriate channels;
 - 6.8.4 being a vehicle for the expression of opinion or speaking at the meeting as a Ward Member.

7. Lobbying by Councillors

- 7.1 **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

³ This is required by the Member's Code of Conduct

will have fettered your discretion and are likely to have a prejudicial interest and have to withdraw.

- 7.2 **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 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
- 7.3 **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
- 7.4 **Don't** lobby councillors at all where you have a prejudicial interest.
- 7.5 **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

- 8.1 **Do** try to attend site visits organised by the Council where possible.
- 8.2 **Don't** request a site visit unless you feel it is strictly necessary because:
 - 8.2.1 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 site inspection; or
 - 8.2.2 there are significant policy or precedent implications and specific site factors need to be carefully addressed.
- 8.3 **Do** 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
- 8.4 **Do** ensure that you treat the site visit only as an opportunity to seek information and to observe the site.
- 8.5 **Do** ask the officers at the site visit questions or seek clarification from them on matters which are relevant to the site inspection.
- 8.6 **Don't** hear representations from any other party, with the exception of the Ward/Local 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.
- 8.7 **Don't** express opinions or views to anyone.

- 8.8 **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:
- 8.8.1 you feel it is essential for you to visit the site other than through attending the official site visit,
 - 8.8.2 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
 - 8.8.3 you can ensure you will comply with these good practice rules on site visits.

9. **Public Speaking at Meetings**

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

10. **Officers**

- 10.1 **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 and Building Control, which may be incorporated into any committee report).
- 10.2 **Do** recognise that officers are part of a management structure and only discuss a proposal, outside of any arranged meeting, with a Head of Service or those officers who are authorised by their Head of Service to deal with the proposal at a Member level.
- 10.3 **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.

11. **Decision Making**

- 11.1 **Do** 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.
- 11.2 **Do** come to meetings with an open mind and demonstrate that you are coming to the meeting with an open mind.

- 11.3 **Do** 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.
- 11.4 **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.
- 11.5 **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.
- 11.6 **Do** have recorded the reasons for the Committee's decision to defer any proposal.
- 11.7 **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. Be aware that you may have to justify the resulting decision by giving evidence in the event of any challenge.

12. Training⁴

- 12.1 **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. The Standards and Ethics Committee of the Council has been given the responsibility of monitoring training undertaken by councillors in respect of planning matters. That Committee has the power to suspend a councillor from participating in the planning decision making process where it is apparent that the training requirements are not being complied with.
- 12.2 **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.
- 12.3 **Do** participate in any review of a sample of planning decisions to ensure that Members' judgements have been based on proper planning considerations.

⁴ All training sessions will incorporate appropriate reference to the Members' Code of Conduct