

# **E. Protocol for Members and Reserve Members when dealing with Planning Applications and Lobbying**

## **1. Introduction**

In making any determination under the Planning Acts, Members of the Council sitting on the Planning Committee should have regard to the development plan (the Unitary Development Plan) and shall determine applications in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. Members must do this by balancing the needs and interests of the whole community and of individual constituents, alongside the need to maintain an ethic of impartial decision making on what may be highly controversial proposals.

The aim of this protocol is to ensure that in the planning process there are no grounds for suggesting that a decision is biased, is not impartial or not well founded in any way.

### **1.2 When does this Protocol apply?**

This Protocol applies to Members at all times when involving themselves in the planning process, including planning appeals and planning enforcement. While this will normally be relevant for members (and reserves) on the Planning Committee, it will also apply to **all** Council members at Council meetings if they exercise any functions of the Planning Committee or in determining planning applications, appeals, enforcement and any other planning issues.

### **1.3 The requirement for Member training before serving on the Planning Committee**

Planning legislation and guidance can be complex. The Local Government Association (LGA), the Nolan Committee and the Royal Town Planning Institute all recommend that Members who have to make planning decisions should be specifically trained. The LGA updated its general guidance for Probitry in Planning in 2013.

Members serving on the Planning Committee must undergo training (which may be in a variety of alternative forms) validated and approved by the Planning Department before serving on the Committee, and must be updated regularly on changes to legislation or procedures. This training will be evidenced by records signed by the Member (e.g. attendance book)

## **2. Members' Interests and the Code of Conduct**

### **2.1 Relationship of the Protocol to the Members' Code of Conduct**

This Protocol supplements the Members' Code of Conduct (referred throughout this Protocol as "the Code") which applies to all their work as Council Members. Therefore Members must apply the Code and this Protocol to any activity of a Member in relation to decisions of the Planning Committee. A breach of the Code of Conduct may result in a complaint to, and/or an investigation by the Council's Governance, Audit, Risk Management and Standards Committee (GARMS).

Failure to follow the recommendations within this Protocol and the Code may also lead to an investigation by the Local Government Ombudsman into possible maladministration by the authority.

### **2.2 The registration of interests**

Members must complete a '*Register of Interest*' form as set down in the Code. They must review their register entry regularly and notify the Monitoring Officer of any change within 28 days.

### **2.3 Hospitality**

Members must be very cautious about accepting gifts and hospitality, especially in relation to planning applications. The Code requires Members receiving gifts or hospitality (in their capacity as members) over the value of £100, to provide details to the Monitoring Officer, for inclusion in the '*Register of gifts and hospitality*'. This notification must be made within 28 days of receiving the gift or hospitality.

## **3. Declaring an interest**

Members must consider whether they have an interest in a matter under discussion, and if so, what type of interest it is.

Members must declare any disclosable pecuniary interest. The definition of what constitutes a disclosable pecuniary interest is set out in detail in the Code at paragraph 8 and Appendix 2.

Paragraph 9 of the Code sets out the effect of a disclosable interest on a members participation at a meeting or any other decision making process.

### **Other Interests**

There is a duty on Members to register other types of interest and to further the principles in the Code of integrity, objectivity, accountability and to avoid any allegations of personal bias, Members should declare such interests wherever relevant to the matter being determined.

In accordance with the Code, if you attend a meeting at which an item of business is to be considered and you are aware that you have another type of interest in that item, you must make verbal declaration of the existence and nature of that interest at or before the consideration of the item of business or as soon as the interest becomes apparent.

You have another type of interest in an item of business of your authority where – a decision in relation to that business might reasonably be regarded as affecting the well-being or financial standing of you or a member of your family or a person with whom you have a close association to a greater extent than it would affect the majority of the Council Tax payers, ratepayers or inhabitants of the ward or electoral area for which you have been elected or otherwise of the authority's administrative area, or it relates to or is likely to affect any of the interests listed in the Table in Appendix 2 of this Code, but in respect of a member of your family (other than a relevant person) or a person with whom you have a close association.

### Dispensations

In cases where a member has a disclosable pecuniary interest, they may still be able to participate and vote at a meeting if they have obtained a dispensation from the GARMS. See paragraph 11 of the Code for full details

#### 3.1 Planning applications affecting Members of the Council

If a planning application affects a Member, either because they or a relevant person own the land or part of the land affected, or the proposal will affect their land or that of a relevant person, or they wish to act as an agent for the person(s) making the proposal, that Member must inform the Chief Planning Officer of the application immediately.

The notification must state the application which affects the member's land, and the nature of the interest. It must be in writing, by letter, fax or e-mail. The notification should be made not later than the submission of the application, or as soon as the Member becomes aware of it, if s/he acquires such knowledge after submission.

This will enable the Chief Planning Officer to ensure that the interest is included on the agenda sheet for the relevant meeting. The interest will be included under the 'Declaration of interests' heading. Members must also orally declare the interest at the meeting.

This will help all Members decide, early on, whether or not they can participate in a decision.

#### 3.2 Members of the Council who are not members of Planning Committee

Ward members wishing to speak in this capacity at Planning Committee meeting may do so provided they do not have a disclosable pecuniary or other interest. They will also require the agreement of the Committee (Committee Procedure Rule 4.1 refers).

The Member must tell the chair that they wish to speak in that capacity at the start of the meeting and must not sit in the Member seating area during the meeting so that members of the public can clearly see which Members are Members of the Committee and which are not.

A space will be reserved for backbench Members at the committee table, and when the relevant item is to be discussed, the backbench Member will be called to sit at the table, will take part in the discussion of that item, and will then withdraw from the table before the decision is taken

### 3.3 Interests of Cabinet and/or Executive Members

Where an application is made in which the Cabinet or Executive have an interest, any member of the Planning Committee who is also an Executive Member must carefully consider whether they have a disclosable pecuniary or other type of interest.

## **4. The roles of members in planning decisions and the role of officers in supporting them**

### 4.1 The role of elected Members

Elected members serving on the Planning Committee determine planning applications and enforcement issues. When members are taking decisions relating to planning issues they must listen carefully to all the arguments in favour and against each proposal and must:

- Act fairly and openly;
- Approach each application with an open mind;
- Carefully weigh up all relevant issues;
- Consider the professional advice of officers;
- Determine each application on its own merits;
- Ensure that there are clear and substantial reasons for their decisions and that these are clearly stated;
- Ensure decisions are proportionate;
- Ensure respect for human rights.

The basis of the planning system is the consideration of private proposals against wider public interests. Much is often at stake in this process and opposing views may be strongly held by those involved. Whilst Members should take account of these views, they must not favour any person, company, group or locality, nor must they put themselves in a position where they appear to do so.

The setting of planning policy is the function of the Executive, and members of Cabinet must comply with the same criteria when taking planning policy decisions. Although this protocol is specifically intended for those Members dealing with planning applications, it is generally as relevant to those sitting on the Executive, who should have training in planning matters before taking planning decisions.

### 4.2 The role of officers in relation to member decision making

Officers will advise and assist members in developing planning policy and in determining applications and enforcement issues by:

- Providing impartial and professional advice;
- Making sure all the information necessary for the decision to be made is given;
- Providing a clear and accurate analysis of the issues;
- Setting the applications and enforcement issues against the broader Unitary Development Plan policies and all other material considerations;
- Giving a clear recommendation;
- Carrying out the decisions of the Planning Committee;
- Carrying out the decisions of the ;
- Determining applications under powers delegated to them by the Council.

Where Members have factual questions about development proposals, it is very helpful for these to be put to officers, where possible, before the meeting. Not only can officers make sure all the information is obtained in response, but it also helps the effectiveness and efficiency of the committee meeting.

## **5. Lobbying (including representation and communication)**

### **5.1 Lobbying of Members by applicants or objectors**

It is quite common for applicants or other interested parties to wish to discuss a proposed development with elected Members before the determination of a planning application. By the same token, those affected by a proposed decision may seek to influence it through an approach to their elected ward councillor or a Member of the Planning Committee.

Members who are likely to be directly involved in taking planning decisions must, therefore, explain to lobbyists that, whilst they may listen to what is said, it prejudices their impartiality to express a firm point of view or an intention to vote one way or the other when the application is considered by the Planning Committee.

Lobbying can be perceived to affect the impartiality and integrity of a Member. In order to avoid that perception, members are advised to:

- Avoid meeting an applicant, potential applicant, or objector alone;
- Listen to any representations made but not make it known in advance of the Planning Committee or meeting whether they are minded to support or oppose a proposal;
- Restrict any response they do give to procedural advice;
- Direct lobbyists or objectors, including written representations, to planning officers who can include reference to their opinions in the report;
- Not pressurise officers into making a particular recommendation in the report;
- Notify the Chief Planning Officer of the existence of any lobbying interests;
- Notify the Chief Planning Officer of any interest they have in the application.

Members of the Planning Committee should not actively campaign either for or against planning applications.

Members should feel free to ask questions of officers in order to clarify their understanding of the proposals.

A Member who feels they have been exposed to undue or excessive lobbying or approaches (including inappropriate offers of gifts or hospitality) should tell the Monitoring Officer who can advise the relevant officer to take the matter up with the person concerned.

A Planning Committee member who does not represent the ward affected will find it easier to take an impartial stance on an application. A member who represents the ward concerned, possibly one who has also been campaigning for or against the proposal will find it difficult to argue, when the decision is taken at the Committee, that they have weighed up the arguments for the first time at the meeting. They should therefore declare an interest and not take part in the vote.

The responsibility for striking the right balance in this process lies with the individual member.

## 5.2 Discussions with potential applicants.

Potential applicants are encouraged to hold pre-application meetings with officers, but in order to avoid the perception that these are, or have become, a part of the lobbying process, these meetings:

- Should be at officer level;
- Will be at a forum prescribed for the purpose if they involve members;
- Where potentially contentious, will be attended by two officers including the Chief Planning Officer or his representative.

A note of the discussion will be taken and be kept on file and made available for inspection at the appropriate time.

It will be made clear that the discussions will not bind the Council and that any views expressed are personal and provisional based on the Unitary Development Plan.

It will be made clear that at such meetings all the relevant information may not be at hand and formal consultations with interested parties will also be taking place.

It will be made clear whether or not members or officers will consider the application.

Members of the Planning Committee should generally avoid meetings with applicants or potential applicants and should seek officer advice before making any commitment to do so.

## 5.3 Member Site visits

Site visits can be useful to identify features of a proposal that may be difficult to identify from the plans and supporting material; where there are features of the proposal which are difficult to convey in a written report, or the proposal is particularly contentious. However, site visits may delay an application, and therefore will only be authorised where the expected benefit of so doing is substantial and/or where there are significant and complex policy implications.

The approach taken by Harrow Council is for site visits comprising an organised inspection by the committee members with officer assistance. Informal visits to view the site from the public domain can often be helpful to familiarise members with the issues to be considered, but members should avoid making contact with applicants, property owners or objectors in such circumstances.

Site visits by members alone at the request of applicants or objectors should not be undertaken and may lead to accusations of impartiality and maladministration.

A revised Procedure Note for Member Site Visits was agreed by Planning Committee in May 2007 and is attached as **Annex 1**.

## 6. Early Engagement on Strategic Applications

Since 2003 the complexity of the planning process has increased considerably particularly in respect of major applications which can require Environmental Assessments, Access and Design Statements, Transport Assessments, Viability 'Toolkits', Energy Statements, Children's Play statements etc. The numbers of major applications which are currently in the pipeline is far above what has previously been the norm for the authority, and the pressure to deal with these in a timely manner within Government targets remains.

To enable members to understand large scale applications and their implications the officers consider that they should have the opportunity to ask questions, raise issues and meet applicants, both prior to submission and between submission and determination. However, to avoid any problems of probity this engagement needs to be carefully managed. This approach is recommended in a leaflet published by London Councils, The Government Office for London and London First in November 2007 and attached as **Appendix 2**.

Officers recommend that applicants for major strategic schemes should be invited to make a presentation to members of the Committee and reserves, at which they should explain their proposals and answer questions of fact. Such presentations may also involve a site visit, and where necessary site visits for strategic proposals should be arranged prior to Committee meetings where the proposal is to be considered. At such presentations there should be no debate about the merits or otherwise of the scheme.

At least one senior officer should be present at all such meetings and may be called upon to answer any factual questions about policy issues etc.

Such meetings can be at either pre- or post-application stages and in some instances both may be appropriate. Similar meetings may also be arranged for ward/backbench members and members of the Executive.

## 7. Committee Meetings

### 7.1 Officer reports to Committee

To ensure that the Council is not accused of inadequate consideration of the issues, or inconsistent decision-making or non-existent reasoning behind a recommendation, the following rules will be followed in the preparation of reports for committee:

- Reports must be accurate and cover, amongst other things, the objections, the views of those consulted, and the officer response to consultations;
- Relevant information should include an outline of the relevant development plan policies; site description, proposal description, relevant planning history, applicant's statement (if any) and an appraisal of all relevant considerations;
- Reports must have a written recommendation;
- Information received after the report was finalised will be reported on the printed addendum circulated at the Committee meeting;
- Oral reporting (except where an update is required) should be avoided and carefully minuted where it is necessary;
- Reports must contain technical appraisals, including references to specific clauses of the UDP, which clearly justify a recommendation;

- If the report recommendation is contrary to the Development Plan, the material considerations that justify the departure must be clearly stated.

## 7.2 Public representations at Committee

Planning Committee is held in public and the Council has a procedure for representations by applicants and objectors. The procedure applies only to applications for planning permission and consultations received from adjoining Councils that are to be determined by the Committee where the application is recommended for approval or 'grant'. It does not apply to applications, which are recommended for refusal or those to be determined by the Chief Planning Officer under his delegated powers. The case officer dealing with the application will be able to say how the application is being determined and by whom, although in some instances this can change, where, for example, the nominated party member requests an application to be considered by the Committee.

The procedures to be applied are as follows:

- No later than 5.00 pm on the day before the meeting, objectors should give the Committee Administrator notice of their wish to speak.

The following criteria will be applied:

- Only one objector on each relevant planning application may normally address the Committee, but in exceptional circumstances two objectors may be allowed to speak;
- a group of objectors will be asked to nominate a spokesperson;
- the applicant or their agent may only make representations if an objector has addressed the committee (if there is none, the applicant or agent will not be permitted to speak);
- any person making representations may speak for a maximum of three minutes. On major or significant applications five minutes may be allowed, but this will be at the discretion of the committee;
- there will be no further verbal exchanges after the representation though members of the Committee may ask factual questions if clarification is needed.

Where the officer is recommending refusal of an application and the Committee is minded to disagree with that recommendation, the application will be deferred to the next meeting in order to allow renotification of consultees to advise them of the opportunity to make representations as outlined in this procedure.

The Committee Administrator will know whether objectors or applicants have asked to speak on an application, though the only sure way of knowing whether representations from objectors or applicants will be heard is to attend the meeting.

Copies of the agenda and reports for Planning Committee meetings are available for inspection five clear working days before the meeting. These can be viewed in the Environmental Information Centre, the library next to the Harrow Council Hub and on the Internet at [www.harrow.gov.uk](http://www.harrow.gov.uk).

There is also a deputations procedure which applies to all other business discussed at Planning Committee.



## 8. Making the decision

### 8.1 Making up your mind about planning applications

When Members make their decisions at Planning Committee they must be able to demonstrate that all the relevant facts and arguments have been taken into account. Members must not declare the way they are minded to vote or express any opinion on the merits of the application before their attendance, and formal consideration, at the Planning Committee.

Members should not give a final view on an application before the Planning Committee meeting, as this may lead to the perception that the member has fettered their discretion. This places the Council at risk from a judicial review of the decision.

Even if a member has no disclosable pecuniary or other interest in the matter, if they take a view on it prior to the Planning Committee they should not attend the committee or participate in the decision.

A Member with no disclosable pecuniary or other interests may:

- Listen to and receive viewpoints from residents and other interested parties;
- Make comments to residents, interested parties, other members or appropriate officers provided they do not prejudice the issue and the member makes clear they are keeping an open mind;
- Seek information through the appropriate channels.

The overriding duty of Members is to the whole community not just to the people in their ward, and, taking account of the need to make decisions impartially, Members should not favour, or appear to favour, any person, company, group or locality.

### 8.2 Development proposals submitted by Members [or Officers of the Council]

Serving Members who act as agents for members of the public or developers pursuing planning matters within the Council must play no part in the decision making process for those proposals.

Similarly, Members submitting their own proposals to the Council should play no part in its processing, though they may explain and justify their proposal to an officer in advance of the Planning Committee meeting in the same way as any other applicant.

Such applications will be reported to Planning Committee for decision, not determined by Officers.

Two particular sets of circumstances that have caused problems for Members in the past are planning applications which involve the land of another Council Member of that Member's party. It is suggested that:

where a planning application includes land owned by a Member of the Council in a Member's political party, they may have an interest in the matter. They should consider not participating in the discussion of the application. This is clearly the safest option for Members:

If an application is made in respect of land adjacent to or nearby land owned by another Member within a member's political party, they may be able to argue that they do not have an interest if they have no knowledge of the scheme, or the impact on the Member other than that reported by officers, and they make no attempt to discuss the issue with anyone prior to the decision at Committee.

### 8.3 The party whip and discussions at group meetings

A decision on a Committee planning application will take place at the meeting of the Planning Committee when all available information is to hand. This does not prevent Members of the same party discussing proposed planning applications with each other, but a political group meeting prior to the Committee cannot be used to decide how representatives on the Planning Committee should vote. The use of the party whip to try to influence the outcome of a planning application may amount to maladministration.

### 8.4 Planning Applications by the Council in respect of Council land

The Council itself requires planning permission to carry out or authorise development on land it owns. These applications will be treated in the same way as those from private applicants.

On 15 January 2003 the Planning Committee agreed that applications for minor development of up to 100m<sup>2</sup> of floorspace on land owned, or where the Council holds an interest, may be determined under the delegated powers of the Chief Planning Officer. This delegation is subject to the proviso that the proposals, in the opinion of the Chief Planning Officer, do not conflict with agreed policies, standards and guidance.

### 8.5 Reserve members

Where a reserve member attends a Planning Committee meeting, that reserve must determine applications on their merits and cannot be mandated by the absent member.

### 8.6 Decisions contrary to Officer Recommendations

From time to time, Members may disagree with the advice of the Chief Planning Officer. In such cases it will be the Members' responsibility to clearly set out the reasons for refusal where the Officer recommendation is for grant. The planning reasons for rejecting the officer's advice will be clearly stated, whatever the recommendation, recorded in the minutes of the meeting and a copy placed on the application file.

The officer must be given the opportunity to explain any implications of the contrary decision.

Where an appeal arises against such a decision officers will support the Planning Committee in preparing evidence for the appeal.

Where conditions included in an officer report are amended by the Committee, an officer should be asked to draft the new conditions and these will be approved by the Chair and nominated members via the non-Executive Action procedure. The date of the decision in these circumstances will be the date the non-Executive Action is signed by the last signatory.

## **9. Complaints**

Any issues or concerns arising from this Protocol can be raised with the Monitoring Officer, the Chair of Planning Committee, or the Chair of GARMS.

The Place Directorate also has a formal complaints system in operation which can be used if necessary.

**Harrow Council****Procedure Note:****Member Site Visits for Planning Applications and Main Agenda Items deferred by Planning Committee****Notes:**

- (a) The purpose of a site visit is to allow Members of the Planning Committee to inspect the sites of deferred planning applications or main agenda items, accompanied by a Planning Officer(s).
- (b) Site visits are intended to:
  - be fact-finding exercises
  - enable officers to point out relevant features
  - enable questions to be asked on site for clarification
- (c) Site visits are not part of the formal consideration of the application and therefore public rights of attendance by neighbouring residents or other parties do not apply (*but see Note (d) below*).
- (d) A site visit will only include a visit to the application site. If a visit to an adjacent site is considered necessary this should be agreed by the Committees when the date for the site visit is selected.
- (e) Members are advised against making their own arrangements to visit applicants or objectors as they may prejudice their ability to take part in the decision-making process, or even the validity of the subsequent decision.

**Procedure:****1 Prior to the Site Visit**

- 1.1 Following the decision to defer an application or agenda item for a site visit the Committee will agree (normally) a date at the end of the meeting.
- 1.2 The Planning Officer will advise the applicant's agent (or applicant where there is no agent) of the details of the site visit, enclosing a copy of this guidance note.
- 1.3 Where the applicant is not the owner of the site, he / she will be asked to advise the owner and arrange access (if required) directly with the owner.
- 1.4 The Committee Clerk will confirm the site visit arrangements in writing to Members and Officers – this may include the provision of a minibus and driver, starting from the Harrow Council Hub, depending on the number and location of the visits and particular access requirements.  
If necessary, Members are free to make their own arrangements to meet at the site.

## 2 **The Site Visit**

- 2.1 On arrival at the application site the Planning Officer will contact the owner or agent to advise of the start of the visit.
- 2.2 The Planning Officer will explain the submitted plans and proposals in relation to the site and any relevant neighbouring land.
- 2.3 The Planning Officer may ask the applicant / agent to explain any discrepancies between the drawings and what is seen on the site
- 2.4 The Planning Officer may also ask the applicant / agent to point out particular features within or adjacent to the site, or to explain aspects of the proposals, but only as an aid to the explanation.
- 2.5 Members may seek clarification from the Officer on matters relevant to the site inspection.
- 2.6 However, Members and Officers should **not** enter into a debate with the applicant / agent (or with any third party - for example, a neighbouring resident) on the merits of the application, or on possible amendments to the proposals. If Members have any concerns or suggestions about the proposals the appropriate forum for these concerns is the subsequent Committee meeting, not the site visit.
- 2.7 Members may, of course, express concerns to the attending Planning Officer, but such concerns would only be informal in nature and should not be discussed on site with the applicant / agent or any third party.
- 2.8 Amendments to a proposal should only arise following subsequent discussion between the Planning Officers and the applicant / agent or from an instruction from either Committee.