



Planning Code of Practice

How we deal with planning applications and other planning issues

Introduction

The Planning system involves taking decisions about the use and development of land in the wider public interest having regard to the Development Plan, National Planning Guidance and other material considerations. Planning can be contentious because its decisions affect the daily lives of individuals, landowners and developers.

It is important therefore that the process is open and transparent. In other words the system should not only be fair but it should be seen to be fair. The Nolan Committee's report on Standards in Public Life gave close consideration to these issues and its recommendations feature significantly in the Local Government Association's revised 2002 guidance for Members and Officers in dealing with planning matters. Members are advised to read the LGA guidance as it provides useful background to the Code of Practice.

This Code of Practice provides guidance to elected Members, officers and developers on the planning process. It is supplementary to the Flintshire Member and Officer Codes of Conduct and the Protocol on Member/officer relations all of which are contained in the Council Constitution.

Whilst the principles set out in this document apply primarily to the manner in which individual planning applications should be dealt with, they also apply to the decision-making process relating to any aspect of the planning function.

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1. Role of Members and Officers

1.1 General

1.1.1 - Members and officers have different but complementary roles. Both serve the public but Members are responsible to the electorate, whilst officers are responsible to the Council as a whole. Officers advise Members and the Council and carry out the Council's work. They are employed by the Council, not individual Members, and Members instructions may only be given to officers through a decision of the Council, its Cabinet or a Committee.

1.1.2 - It is important that a good relationship exists between Members and officers and that this is based on mutual trust and understanding of each other's positions. This relationship and trust must never be abused or compromised.

1.2 Role of Officers

1.2.1 - The officer's function is to advise and assist Members in the formulation of planning policies, in the determination of planning applications and, deciding whether or not to take enforcement action.

For breaches of planning control officers should:-

- Provide impartial and professional advice
- Make sure that all accurate information necessary for the decision to be made is given.
- Provide a clear and accurate analysis of the issues.
- Set applications and enforcement issues against the broader Development Plan policies and all other material considerations.
- Give a clear recommendation based on the above requirements.
- Carry out the decisions made by Members in committee or through the delegated authority of the Chief Officer, Planning and Environment
- Update Members on new legislation and guidance.
- Provide appropriate training and briefings for Members.

1.3 Role of Members

1.3.1 - The full Council is responsible for setting the Council's formal planning policy framework through the Development Plan(s). As a general principle there is an expectation that Members will uphold the Council's planning policies.

1.3.2 - When Members come to make a decision they must:-

- Be clear as to whether or not they have an interest which needs to be declared if not already done so.
- Act fairly and openly.

- Approach each application with an open mind.
- Carefully weigh up all relevant issues.
- Determine each application on its own merits.
- Avoid giving the impression that the Member has made her / his mind up prior to the application being determined.
- Ensure that there are clear and substantial reasons for their decisions, and that those reasons are clearly stated.

1.3.3 - Where a planning application relates to a Member's ward the views of the local Member are important to the Chief Officer, Planning & Environment and to the Chair and Members of the Planning Committee. Ward Members should not become too closely identified with special interest groups if they wish to vote in the Planning Committee. Whilst Members have a responsibility to their constituents their overriding duty is to the whole County and therefore need to consider proposed developments in the interests of the wider community.

1.3.4 - Members should not decide how to vote on any application at any formal political group meeting. Political group meetings should never dictate how Members should vote on a planning issue.

1.4 Member / Officer Contact

1.4.1 - The officer / Member relationship is extremely important for good decision making and an effective planning service. The mutual understanding of their respective roles and respect for each other's position is vital for good relations.

1.4.2 - In making enquiries regarding individual applications Members should make contact with the Case Officer or Line Manager and ideally make an appointment. As all the planning officers work in an agile manner and are required to carry out site visits it is highly likely they may not be available at County Hall for a member to call-upon without prior arrangement. Whilst Members may wish to seek advice or information from the Chief Officer, Planning & Environment or the Development Manager, Members should in the first instance seek information from the Case Officer. Information can be sought and provided by e-mail.

1.4.3 - Officers will provide every reasonable help to Members in the carrying out of their duties. Meetings between officers and Members may sometimes be helpful, but are only likely to be of value if prior arrangements have been made. This allows the officer to have all relevant documents available at the meeting. Prior arrangements may be made by telephoning or emailing the relevant Officer. A meeting room should be booked in order to allow a meeting between a member and officer to take place in a comfortable and private environment. The planning office is now located in one small room in County Hall. There is insufficient space for meetings to take place in the planning office with any degree of privacy or without considerable disturbance to other officers. For this reasons Members

should not go directly to the planning office to discuss matters with officers. If a Member wishes to contact an officer for a meeting at short notice, whilst they are at County Hall, they should ask committee services to book one of the executive meeting rooms. The officer can then come down to meet the Member. If the case officer isn't available another officer will try their best endeavours to assist.

1.4.4 - It is acknowledged that Members and officers may well have differing views on a proposal but Members should on no account interfere with or put pressure on officers to make a particular recommendation.

2. Training

2.1 - All Members of the Council are required to have received core planning training covering planning policies, procedures, law and this Code.

2.2 - Other training will be arranged by officers in consultation with Members in the form of additional sessions, seminars and workshops on topical issues and to keep members up to date on new procedures, advice and guidance.

2.3 - Members of the Planning Committee are required at all times between ordinary County Council elections to attend at least 75% of the planning training topics covered during their membership of the Committee.

2.4 - Attendance at planning training will be monitored and reported to the Planning Strategy Group who may grant an exception to the requirements of paragraph 3.3 where there is good reason for a Member temporarily failing to meet this requirement.

3. Registration and Declaration of Interests

3.1 - Code of Conduct

3.1.1 - Members should follow scrupulously the County Council's **Members' Code of Conduct** in relation to registration and declaration of interests and, if an interest is declared, in deciding whether the Member should participate in the consideration of an application. Not only should impropriety be avoided but also any appearance or grounds for suspicion of improper conduct. If a Member considers he/she may have a personal interest they should consult the Monitoring Officer or a Senior Officer of Legal & Democratic Services for advice on their position ideally in advance of the meeting.

3.2. Personal Interests

3.2.1 - The principles about the disclosure of interests should be applied, not only to formal meetings, but also to any of a Member's dealings with Council officers, or with other Members. Where a Member has a personal interest, as defined by the Code, it must always be declared. It does not necessarily follow that the Member is debarred from participation in the discussion. The responsibility for declaring an interest lies with the Member, but the Monitoring Officer is there to advise. If there is any doubt in a Member's mind, he / she should seek early advice from the Monitoring Officer or other Senior Officer of Legal & Democratic Services on their position. Members should err on the side of declaring an interest when they are not sure.

3.2.2 - Members who have substantial property, professional or other interests relating to the planning function which would prevent them from voting on a regular basis, should avoid serving on the Planning Committee.

3.2.3 - Where a Local Member has decided he / she has a personal interest making it inappropriate for that Member to be involved in the processing and determination of a planning application in his / her ward such a Member may arrange for another Member to act as local Member instead to represent constituents views. In such a situation the local Member should inform the Monitoring Officer and the Chief Officer, Planning & Environment of the arrangement made and take no further part in the processing and determination of the planning application other than referring any representations or communications received to the Member who is acting as local Member.

3.3. Declaration

3.3.1 - When declaring an interest at committee, this should be done at the beginning of the meeting. Members should be clear and specific in identifying the item on the agenda in which they have an interest, and the nature of that interest.

3.4. Predetermination

3.4.1 - A Member has predetermined a planning application where the Member shows (e.g. in local press) he/she has made their mind up on the merits of the application prior to it being considered at committee. A predisposition is where a Member has an inclination or preliminary view on the merits of the application.

3.4.2 - A Member who has predetermined the merits of a planning application in advance of it being considered at committee should not be a Member of the committee that considers that application. A Member of the committee may have a predisposition or a preliminary view. If in doubt a Committee Member should seek advice prior to the Committee meeting from either the Monitoring Officer or the Solicitor who attends committee meetings.

3.4.3 - Those Members who do not sit on the Planning Committee may predetermine their stance on an application but should respect the fact that Planning Committee Members cannot do the same.

3.5. Register

3.5.1 - A register of Members' interests is maintained by the Council's Monitoring Officer. It is available for public inspection. Each Member has a responsibility to provide the Monitoring Officer with up to date written details of relevant interests.

3.6. Dual Community / Town & County Council Membership

3.6.1 - Membership of a Town / Community Council which has expressed a view on a planning matter does not in itself mean that the Member cannot take part in the determination of the matter when it comes before the Planning Committee provided that the Member has kept an open mind and not committed himself / herself to a final view on the matter until all the arguments for and against have been aired at committee. The Member can enter into discussion and ask questions, but should make clear that a view in favour or against the proposal is on the basis of knowledge and information known at that time.

3.6.2 - Where an application submitted by a Community or Town Council is being considered then a Member of that Council may not vote on the proposal to determine the application unless the Member has obtained dispensation from the Standards Committee.

4. Lobbying

4.1 - Lobbying is a part of the political process and it is quite common for Applicant's or other interested parties to wish to discuss a proposed development with Members before a planning application is determined. This can help Members' understanding of the issues and concerns associated with an application. Officers should be made aware of any lobbying correspondence Members receive.

4.2 - However, Members of the Planning Committee are under an obligation to determine matters on their merits. That means that they should not take a firm view on a planning matter before receiving and reading the officer's report or receiving any new information reported to the committee. Whilst Members of the committee may form an initial view or opinion, and indicate their view that an application is contrary to policy, they should not openly declare which way they intend to vote in advance of the Planning Control Committee meeting. To avoid compromising their position before they have received all the relevant information, committee Members are advised that they should:-

- **Refer** applicants / developers who approach them for planning or procedural advice to the appropriate Planning Officer.
- **Avoid** making it known in advance whether they support or oppose the proposal.
- **Avoid** campaigning actively in support of a particular outcome.
- **Direct** lobbyists or objectors to the appropriate Planning Officer, who will include reference to their opinions where relevant in their report.

4.3 - Members should declare at the appropriate part of the committee meeting significant contact with applicants and objectors. Significant contact is where a Member has been contacted on four or more occasions by the applicant or the same objector (either orally or in writing).

4.4 - Members must advise the Ward Member as a courtesy in cases where they are seeking to be involved in a development proposal or enforcement issue outside of their own Ward. It is accepted that where a planning application has a significant effect on another ward the Member(s) for that ward is entitled to become involved in the development proposal.

4.5 - Members of the Planning Committee must avoid organising support for or against a planning application. Where such a Member does organise support for or against a planning application then that Member must stand down from the Planning Committee on such a planning application. Where a Member is in doubt about such issues the Member should seek advice from the Monitoring Officer or other Senior Officer in Legal & Democratic Services ideally in advance of the meeting.

4.6 - If a Planning Committee Member expresses support for, or opposition to, a proposal before the matter is formally considered at the relevant meeting, whether or not there has been lobbying, he / she could have some difficulty in being able to claim to retain an open mind on the issue and to be prepared to determine the application on its merits. If such a Member does express an opinion, then it should make it clear that it is a preliminary opinion and that he / she will only be in a position to take a final decision when all the evidence and arguments have been considered.

4.7 - Where a member of the committee has not complied with 5.2, 5.5 or 5.6 above and has predetermined the merits of the application, they must not participate in the decision making on that application.

5. Applications Submitted by Members and Officers

5.1 - Planning applications submitted by or on behalf of Members, or officers involved in the planning application process, or the close relatives* of Members or such officers where the officer or Member knows of the application shall be decided by the Planning Committee and not by the Chief Officer, Planning & Environment under delegated powers.

[* Close relative is defined as spouse, partner, parent, child or sibling].

5.2 - A Member affected by clause 6.1 shall declare the personal and prejudicial interest at any meeting of the Planning Committee to determine the application, take no part in the decision and leave the meeting place unless granted a dispensation by the Standards Committee.

5.3 - The affected officer shall take no part in the processing of the application and its determination.

6. Applications Submitted by the Council

6.1 - It is important that the Council is seen to be treating applications for its own development (or a development involving the Council and another party) on an equal footing with all other applications as well as actually doing so.

6.2 - Subject to any legislative restrictions all such proposals will be subject to the same administration processes, including consultation, as private applications with consideration being made in accordance with policy and any other material planning considerations.

7. Pre-Application and Enforcement Discussions

7.1 - Pre-application meetings between officers and potential applicants and negotiations regarding breaches of planning control are encouraged.

The aim of such meetings is to ensure beneficial development and to resolve matters that might otherwise lead to the refusal of planning permission. Such discussions will normally take place at officer level and Members should refer requests for such advice to the officers. If Members become involved in such discussions they should make it clear that their views are personal and provisional. To avoid such meetings being misunderstood:-

- **It will be made clear** prior to and at such meetings that only personal and provisional views based upon the Development Plan and other material considerations can be given and no commitments can be made which would bind or otherwise compromise the Planning Committee or any member of the committee.

- **A note** of the discussion will be taken and placed on file and made available for public inspection once an application has been made.
- **Where** exceptionally meetings are to involve Members the meetings will be arranged by and attended by officers.

8. Planning Committee Site Visits

8.1.1 - Planning Committee site visits are not meetings where decisions are made and neither are they public meetings. They are essentially fact finding exercises held for the benefit of Members where a proposed development may be difficult to visualise from the plans and supporting material. They may be necessary for careful consideration of relationships to adjoining property or the general character of the area due to the scale or design of the development.

8.2. Request for a Site Visit

8.2.1 - A request for a site visit is normally made by the local Ward Member in response to being consulted on the proposed development. The request must be in writing (e.g. e-mail) and should clearly indicate the planning reasons for the visit which will appear on the agenda for site visits. Site visits can be costly and cause delay so it is important that they are only held where necessary and prior to committee. Site visits are held pursuant to a decision of the Chair of the Planning Committee or pursuant to a request from a local Member including another Ward Member consulted because the application significantly affects the other ward. All local Members will be advised when a site visit has been arranged.

8.2.2 - Examples where a site visit would not normally be appropriate include where:

- Purely policy matters or issues of principle are at issue
- The Member wishes to consider boundary or neighbour disputes
- Issues of competition
- Loss of property values
- Any other issues which are not material planning considerations
- Where Members have already visited the site within the last 12 months, except in exceptional circumstances

Where no planning reason is given for the site visit or the reason for the site visit is any of the above the Chair should not convene the site visit.

8.3. Format and Conduct at the Site Visit

8.3.1 - Members of the Planning Committee and the Local Ward Member(s) will be notified in advance of any visit. Such visits are not formal meetings of the

Committee and there is no right of public attendance at the visit itself. If the public in lobbying Members on their way to or from a site visit seek to present documentation they should be advised to send it to the Planning Department instead

8.3.2 - Advance notice of the site visit will also be sent to the applicant or agent requesting that access to the site for Members/officers be provided at the specified time/date and pointing out that the applicant/agent will not be allowed to participate in the site visit. Any Member with a personal and prejudicial interest must not take part in the site visit.

8.3.3 - The Chair will invite the Planning Officer to briefly outline the proposal and point out the key issues raised by the application and of any vantage points from which the site should be viewed then the local ward Member will be invited to speak, followed by other Members of the Committee who may ask questions and seek clarification from officers who will respond. Any statement or discussion concerning the principles and policies applicable to the development should not be allowed by the Chairman.

8.3.4 - Although site visits are not part of the formal committee consideration of the application, the Code of Conduct still applies to site visits and Members should have regard to the guidance on declarations of personal interest.

8.3.5 - A file record will be kept of those attending the site visit, together with a brief note of any points raised.

8.3.6 - For the avoidance of doubt references in this section to Local Member(s) includes adjacent ward Members where the application significantly affects their ward.

8.3.7 - Occasionally the applicant/agent/owner of the site to be visited may not permit Members and officers onto the site. There may be good reason for this, for example, if someone was injured they could have a claim against the landowner. Where access is refused to one or more of the elected Members, the Chairman will be advised that none of the Members and officers should enter onto the land. In such circumstances the site should be viewed from the nearest public land such as the public highway.

8.3.8 - In summary site visits are:

- **Fact** finding exercise.
- **Not part** of the formal committee meeting and therefore public rights of attendance do not apply.
- **To enable** officers to point out relevant features.

- **To enable** questions to be asked on site for clarification. However, discussions on the application will only take place at the subsequent committee.

9. Procedure at Planning Committee

9.1 - The majority of planning applications are determined by the Chief Officer, Planning & Environment under the Council's delegation scheme. This is necessary to ensure that most decisions are made in a timely manner. Whilst Members have a right to request that applications, affecting their ward be determined by the Planning Committee such requests should be justified by clearly identifying in writing why a committee decision is required. This is generally done on the return notification form sent out to Members.

9.2 - Officers will produce written reports on all planning applications reported to committee. In respect of each proposal the report will include, amongst other matters:

- Description of the proposal
- Description of the site
- Responses to consultations and officer observations thereon.
- Summary of objections and / or support received
- Relevant site history
- Relevant Development Plan policies
- Relevant planning guidance where appropriate
- Any other material planning consideration
- An appraisal by the Case Officer which will include the relevant views of other consulted officers within the Planning Division
- A clear recommendation
- Brief details of the substance of any conditions to be imposed or;
- Full details of reasons for refusal.

9.3 - Late observations received up to 5.00 p.m. the day before a committee meeting will be summarised and reported separately and circulated to Members immediately prior to the start of the meeting.

9.4 - The Planning Officer will briefly introduce each item highlighting the key issues for Members consideration.

9.5 - Where an application is being reported to committee, the Chair will allow oral representations to be made in accordance with the protocol on public speaking prior to the committee debating the application.

9.6 - Where a Member seeks and obtains a majority for a deferment for a specific purpose then there will be no further debate on that matter until such time as the proposal is re-presented.

9.7 - Members who read out at committee, or refer to, communications they have received should provide an advance copy to officers.

10. Decisions Contrary to Officer Recommendation

10.1 - From time to time members of the Planning Committee will disagree with the professional advice given by the Chief Officer, Planning & Environment. The committee's decisions must be in accordance with the provisions of the Development Plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. If Members propose to make a decision contrary to the officer recommendation (whether for approval or refusal), the proposer should set out clearly the reasons for doing so. The Chairperson will ensure that the officer is given the opportunity to explain the implications of the contrary decision, before a vote is taken.

10.2 - In cases where the Planning Committee decides for good and valid reasons to depart from the Chief Officer, Planning & Environment recommendation, the committee must always define the reasons for rejecting the officer's recommendation and those reasons must be recorded in the minutes of the meeting.

10.3 - In the case of conditions which the committee has resolved to add or amend the precise wording is delegated to the Chief Officer, Planning & Environment and, if appropriate, in consultation with the Chair of committee.

10.4 - In cases of refusal the reasons shall be clearly stated and agreed by Members. There may be occasions when officers need to clarify the reasons for refusal either at the meeting itself, in an email to the proposer and seconder, or by a report to a subsequent meeting.

10.5 - A legal advisor present at the committee meeting may subsequently prevent a decision notice being issued until a report by the Chief Officer Governance has been considered at the subsequent committee meeting. The reason for this report may be concerns of a legal nature or that at the committee meeting the Chief Officer, Planning & Environment indicated the proposed decision represents a significant departure from planning policy and the legal officer subsequently agreed.

11. Planning Appeals

11.1 - There are a wide variety of different factual situations relating to appeals. There can be appeals against non-determination or against a refusal made under

officers' delegated powers or by the Planning Committee, either in accordance with the officer recommendation or contrary to the officer recommendation. Appeals can be heard by way of written representations, informal hearing or at an inquiry or a combination of those. The appeal may relate to a major or a minor planning proposal, a development that has attracted a lot of interest from Members and the public or a proposal that is of limited interest. Because of the range of circumstances, the way the Council responds to an appeal will be individual to the circumstances of that appeal. The following principles will guide the Council's response to each specific appeal.

11.2 - The Council recognises the importance of complying with the timescales within the appeal process as a failure to meet these timescales can lead to an award of costs against the Council and the lost ability of the Council to properly set out their case.

11.3 - The Council will adopt a team approach to appeals whereby Members and officers work together in the best interest of the Council, irrespective of how the decision appealed against was arrived at.

11.4 - The decision whether an appeal is determined by way of written representations, informal hearing or public inquiry is a matter for the Planning Inspectorate but the Council is given the opportunity of making representations as to the appropriate format. The Chief Officer, Planning & Environment will make representations on behalf of the Council as to its preferred format where possible following consultation with the local Member(s).

11.5 - In the case of Informal Hearings and inquiries, the Chief Officer, Planning & Environment will determine who shall present the case on behalf of the Council following consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair of the Planning Committee.

11.6 - Where the decision appealed against was made by officers under delegated powers or was pursuant to an officer recommendation, the case will normally be presented by the Council's officers.

11.7 - Where the decision was made by Members contrary to officer recommendation, attendance by one or more Members would assist the Council's case and relevant Members will be approached by the Chief Officer, Planning & Environment to ascertain their availability. Officers will assist any such Member in preparing for the appeal.

11.8 - External legal representation and/or consultants will be engaged where the Chief Officer, Planning & Environment, following consultation with the Local Member(s) and the Chair and Vice Chair of the Planning Committee, believes this to be appropriate in all the circumstances. One relevant circumstance is the need for Planning Officers who are members of The Royal Town Planning Institute to

comply with its Code of Professional Conduct and not make statements purporting to be their own which are contrary to their bona fide professional opinion.

12. Planning Obligations

12.1 - The Planning Committee may, when considering the merits of an individual planning application, consider any planning obligation which has been raised with the applicant or agent but should form a view solely on the basis of the contents of the application and should take into account offered planning obligations only to the extent that they are necessary to make a proposal acceptable in land use planning terms.

12.2 - Members should avoid becoming involved in discussions with applicants, prospective applicants, their agents, landowners or other interested parties regarding benefits, which may be offered to the Council, or benefits which the Council itself wishes to obtain.

13. Regular Review of Decisions

13.1 - As part of the aim to continually improve the quality of planning decisions Members will have the opportunity to revisit a sample of implemented planning decisions. Such reviews will be a positive step to improve the quality and consistency of decision-making, not only strengthening public confidence in the planning system but also assist with the review of planning policy.

13.2 - Such a review will take place annually and briefing notes will be prepared for each case. The Planning Strategy Group will formally consider the review and decide whether it gives rise to the need to reconsider any policies or practices.

14. Complaints

14.1 - Any issues or concern arising from this Code of Practice can be raised with the Chairperson of the Planning Committee, the Monitoring Officer, the Chief Officer, Planning & Environment or the Legal Officer present at committee. (The Council also has a formal complaints system in operation, which can be used if necessary).