

positive engagement

a guide for planning councillors
updated version



'The engagement of local councillors as leaders and representatives of the community is vital in the delivery of positive outcomes from the planning process.'

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A message from **Iain Wright MP Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, DCLG** and **Paul Bettison, Environment Board Chairman, LGA**.

There have been some considerable changes over the last few years in how the planning process is delivered within England with a move away from an often adversarial, reactive and conflict based system towards a more pro-active, inclusive and creative approach.

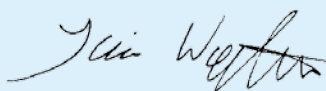
As a local councillor involved in planning matters, whether as a ward councillor representing your area's constituents as a councillor responsible for drawing up the spatial plan for your area, or as a councillor responsible for deciding upon application you have a crucial role to play in both making the planning system work and ensuring the best possible outcomes for your community for both now and in the future. The engagement of local councillors as leaders and representatives of the community is vital in the delivery of positive outcomes from the planning process.

However, concerns are sometimes expressed about the compatibility of councillors meeting developers and interest groups and then taking decisions on an impartial basis.

This leaflet is an updated version of the positive engagement for elected members launched in 2005. It is intended to summarise the principles that should be observed to enable you to both participate in and lead the system.'



Paul Bettison



Iain Wright

In broad terms, the success of the planning system will depend on:

- establishing and taking forward a clear spatial vision for the area based on the sustainable community strategy
- effective dialogue between applicants, local authority, local people and other interests to help define and realise the vision
- ensuring that the spatial plan for an area embodies the aspirations of the community
- effective communication and ownership of policy between executive and planning committee
- the planning service being focused on outcomes
- early and effective community engagement in discussions on plans and development proposals, in accordance with the authority's Statement of Community Involvement.
- upholding the ACSeS Model Members Planning Code

As a community leader and local representative you will want to be involved in relevant public meetings, pre-application discussions and policy production. However, this may create some risks for councillors, particularly those who are members of the planning committee, and for the integrity of the decision making process. You should familiarise yourself with guidance found in the LGA guide *Probity in Planning* (update) – the role of councillors and officers, guidance from the Standards Board for England which provides an overview of the Model Code of Conduct which applies to all members and co-opted members of local authorities and the ACSeS Model Members Planning Code. (see the weblinks at the end of this leaflet).

Councillors can involve themselves in discussions with developers, their constituents and others about planning matters. However, difficulties can be avoided if you follow these useful general hints:

do

- ✓ always involve officers and structure discussions with developers
- ✓ inform officers about any approaches made to you and seek advice
- ✓ familiarise yourself with your authority's Code of Conduct and follow it when you are representing your authority
- ✓ keep your register of interests up to date
- ✓ follow your local authority's planning code
- ✓ be aware of what predisposition, predetermination and bias mean in your role – ask your monitoring or planning officer and refer to the Standards Board Occasional Paper on Predetermination, Predisposition and Bias if unsure
- ✓ be prepared to hold discussions with an applicant and your officers before a planning application is made, not just after it has been submitted to your authority
- ✓ preface any discussion with disclaimers; keep a note of meetings and calls; and make clear at the outset that discussions are not binding
- ✓ be aware of what personal and prejudicial interests are – refer to your monitoring officer and the Standards Board's website if you are unsure
- ✓ recognise the distinction between giving advice and engaging in negotiation and when this is appropriate in your role
- ✓ stick to policies included in adopted plans, but also pay heed to any other considerations relevant to planning
- ✓ use meetings to show leadership and vision
- ✓ encourage positive outcomes
- ✓ ask for training from your authority in probity matters
- ✓ recognise that you can lobby and campaign but that this may remove you from the decision making process
- ✓ feed in both your own and your local community's concerns and issues
- ✓ be aware that you can engage in discussions but you must have and be seen to have an open mind at the point of decision making

do not

- X use your position improperly for personal gain or to advantage your friends or close associates
- X meet developers alone or put yourself in a position where you appear to favour a person, company or group – even a ‘friendly’ private discussion with a developer could cause others to mistrust your impartiality
- X attend meetings or be involved in decision-making where you have a prejudicial interest under the Model Code of Conduct – except when speaking when the general public are also allowed to do so
- X accept gifts or hospitality
- X prejudge or be seen to prejudge an issue if you want to be a decision maker on a proposal
- X seek to influence officers or put pressure on them to support a particular course of action in relation to a planning application
- X compromise the impartiality of people who work for your authority
- X invent local guides on probity in planning which are incompatible with current guidance – look for commonly held and common sense parallels in other authorities or the principles set out in national guidance

This simple guide has been produced by a number of organisations who have shared interest in maximising the effectiveness of councillor involvement in planning.

They include: the Local Government Association, Association of Council Secretaries and Solicitors, the Standards Board for England, Planning Advisory Service and The Department of Communities and Local Government and Planning Officers Society.

weblinks

The Association of Council Secretaries and Solicitors

Model Members Planning Code

www.acses.org.uk/documents/category/4

Department of Communities and Local Government

www.communities.gov.uk

Local Government Association

Probity in planning (update): the role of councillors and officers

www.lga.gov.uk/planning

A LGA update to the highly successful original guidance (published in 1997) on preparing a local code of good practice for those dealing with planning matters will be available shortly

National Planning Forum

Pre-application advice for town and country planning:

National Planning Forum good practice note 2 one of a series of 'inspiring planning' good practice notes

www.natplanforum.org.uk/good%20practice.html

Planning Advisory Service

Member development modules

www.pas.gov.uk/membertraining

Planning Officers Society

Members and Planning

www.planningofficers.org.uk/article.cp/articleid/176

The Standards Board for England

Guidance on the Model Code of Conduct, including personal and prejudicial interests

www.standardsboard.gov.uk/TheCodeofConduct/Guidance/

Fact sheets and Frequently Asked Questions

www.standardsboard.gov.uk/TheCodeofConduct/Factsheetsandfrequentlyaskedquestions/

Paper on predisposition, predetermination or bias, and the Code

www.standardsboard.gov.uk/Publications/OccasionalPaper/

IDT 2517