

PLANNING CODE

Introduction

1. The purpose of this Code is to give clear guidance to councillors about how they should carry out their duties in relation to planning and development proposals so as to ensure openness, impartiality, transparency and consistency in planning decisions.

General Role of Councillors

2. Councillors have a special duty to their ward constituents, including those who did not vote for them, but their overriding duty is to the whole community. Whilst representing their constituents on planning issues and taking account of their views, councillors must make their decision within the statutory planning framework and base these on material planning considerations and what they believe is best for the Borough as a whole. A councillor is not under any obligation to represent a resident on a specific planning application if, in the opinion of the councillor, there are no issues which have wider significance for the neighbourhood, ward or Borough as a whole.

General Role of Staff

3. Staff are responsible to the Council as a whole. They must always act openly and impartially and provide consistent professional advice based on statutory planning framework, planning policies and procedures, ensuring councillors are aware of all relevant material planning considerations before decisions are made.

Codes of Conduct

4. Both councillors and staff are required to observe codes of conduct and statutory provisions including the code of conduct for Members, the aim of which is to ensure the integrity of the Council and individual councillors. These require the open disclosure of any pecuniary, non-pecuniary and conflict of interests in issues being considered by the Council or its committees. Councillors and staff are also advised not to accept any gifts or hospitality, which might reasonably be considered to influence their judgement and to record any they do accept in the registers maintained for the purpose. Planning decisions in particular can affect the daily lives of everyone and it is important to ensure there can be no justifiable grounds for suggesting a decision has been biased or influenced in any way.
5. Training and guidance on the code, and in particular the local code of conduct for Members on the declaration of interests, has been provided to all councillors by the Council's Monitoring Officer and will be regularly updated. Members of the Planning Committee must be particularly careful to ensure that they are familiar with this. It is the personal responsibility of individual councillors to ensure they comply with the code and make all appropriate declarations at Planning Committee. If in any doubt they should seek advice from the Monitoring Officer or the solicitor to the Planning Committee. Staff with an interest in property in the vicinity of an application or any relationship to an

applicant, should disclose this to the Planning Development Manager, who will record the interest and make appropriate arrangements for the handling and supervision of the application to avoid any perception of a conflict of interest.

Lobbying of and by Councillors

6. Lobbying of councillors for or against proposals is a normal part of the planning process. The rules of natural justice mean that planning applications should be determined in an open and fair manner and taking account of relevant information and arguments. It is only at Planning Committee meetings that councillors will have, and be able to consider, all the relevant information and arguments about an application before making a decision.
7. Councillors should feel free to engage in free and frank discussion about all aspects of planning applications in advance of the Committee. Councillors may have strong views on a proposed decision, and may have expressed those views in public, and still participate in a decision. However, it is important to maintain the integrity of individual councillors and the Council as a whole that Members of the Planning Committee should:-
 - a) if lobbied, explain that, whilst they can listen to what is said, they cannot indicate before the relevant Committee meeting which way they intend to vote as it would prejudice their impartiality;
 - b) preface any discussion on a planning application to make it clear from the outset that discussions are not binding and they will only be able to make a final decision at the Committee after hearing all relevant information and arguments;
 - c) declare at the Committee meeting, any meetings they have had with applicants or objectors;
 - d) advise Planning Officers of letters/personal lobbying in relation to applications so the issues raised can be taken into account in the professional advice given to the Planning Committee.
 - e) abide by the guidance in this Code with relation to site visits;
 - f) not organise support or opposition to any planning application, lobby other councillors or put pressure on staff for a particular recommendation because this might remove them from the decision making process.
8. Councillors are encouraged to be responsive to all residents about planning matters. Frequently, applications are daunting for residents who need advice and support about the issues which they raise. All councillors are able to have discussions with residents about planning applications even if that councillor is on Planning Committee.

Declarations of interest

9. If a councillor has received legal advice with regard to a declaration: a Disclosable pecuniary interest, non-pecuniary or conflict of interest, then he / she may disclose the fact that legal advice has been given at the time when the declaration or interest is disclosed.

Predetermination and Predisposition

Predisposition

10. Predisposition is lawful. Councillors may have strong views on a proposed decision, and may have expressed those views in public, and still participate in a decision. The key issue is that the councillor ensures that their predisposition does not prevent them from consideration of all the other factors that are relevant to a decision, such as committee reports, supporting documents and the views of objectors. In other words, the councillor retains an “open mind”.
11. Section 25 of the Localism Act 2011 confirms this position by providing that a decision will not be unlawful because of an allegation of bias or predetermination “just because” a councillor has done anything that would indicate what view they may take in relation to a matter relevant to a decision. However, if a councillor has done something more than indicate a view on a decision, this may be unlawful bias or predetermination so it is important that advice is sought from the Head of Corporate Governance where this may be the case.

Pre-determination / Bias

12. Predetermination and bias are unlawful and can make a decision unlawful. Predetermination means having a “closed mind”. In other words, a councillor has made his/her mind up on a decision before considering or hearing all the relevant evidence.
13. Bias can also arise from a councillor’s relationships or interests, as well as their state of mind. The Code of Conduct’s requirement to declare interests and withdraw from meetings prevents most obvious forms of bias, e.g. not deciding your own planning application. However, councillors may also consider that a “non-pecuniary interest” or Conflict of Interest under the Code of Conduct also gives rise to a risk of what is called apparent bias. The legal test is: “whether the fair-minded and informed observer, having considered the facts, would conclude that there was a real possibility that the Committee was biased”. A fair minded observer takes an objective and balanced view of the situation but councillors who think that they have a relationship or interest that may raise a possibility of bias, should seek advice.
14. Members of the Planning Committee should bear in mind that it would not be appropriate to call-in an application, for consideration for the whole committee if they have already predetermined the matter themselves.

Meetings and pre-application discussions

15. Planning staff frequently hold meetings or have correspondence with applicants to give pre-application advice on their development ideas. Such advice will cover general planning policy applying to a site, technical design and other requirements and the likelihood of a development being acceptable. Such pre-application advice, however, it is given is on a confidential basis so as to encourage early contact with the Council which can assist in better planning proposals coming forward or ideas which have no hope of being acceptable in principle being abandoned at an early stage.
16. These meetings or exchanges of correspondence are part of the normal planning process but are, and must be clearly stated to be, without prejudice to

the professional recommendation of Planning staff to the Committee and the decision of the Committee when all information is before it.

17. All applicants are encouraged to carry out pre-application consultation with neighbours to try and resolve issues at an early stage. For larger schemes this may be a more formal public consultation. Where councillors attend such pre-application consultation meetings run by the potential applicant they should abide by the guidance in this Code. The expectation is that where councillors are invited to attend that the applicant invites all Ward Councillors.
18. It is important that councillors do not give views to potential applicants either through pre-application consultations or other meetings that could be interpreted by them as giving planning advice and in turn taken as implied support for a proposal if those views are then followed.
19. If a councillor wishes to arrange a meeting with planning staff for themselves and a small number of constituents about a planning application this will be arranged at the Council Offices. If requested to do so staff will try to attend meetings arranged by councillors with their constituents away from Knowle Green provided all Ward Councillors are invited to attend.
20. If attending public meetings arranged by local groups about a planning proposal the principles outlined above should be followed and, councillors of the Planning Committee should try to maintain an impartial role, listening to what is said but not expressing any opinion which could be construed as a final or fixed position. Planning Officers will not normally attend public meetings unless their attendance has been agreed by the Planning Development Manager and representatives of both the applicant and objector are given the opportunity to be present. Ward Councillors and the Chairman of the Planning Committee will be advised of any public meeting in relation to a planning issue or which Planning Officers have agreed to attend.

Presentations on Likely Major Development Proposals

21. For very large complex schemes the Council may arrange appropriate presentations to Councillors by the potential applicant. This is seen as beneficial to inform councillors at an early stage and to encourage pre-application discussion and free flow of information on what are often complex issues. The Council itself will also organise presentations to keep councillors informed generally on matters which appear to have or are likely to have strategic importance for the Borough. The Planning Development Manager may also organise technical briefings on major developments at which developers may be present. At any such presentations councillors should abide by the guidance in this Code, listening to presentations, raising concerns and questions, debating the issues but not coming to fixed or final positions in advance of the full debate at Planning Committee.

Site Visits

22. Formal site visits by the Planning Committee are rare because of the amount of material, including plans and photographs submitted with planning applications included in the Planning Committee agenda and presented at Planning Committee. Where they do occur they must be undertaken in accordance with the guidelines attached at **Appendix 'A'**. The necessity for such a visit will be agreed between the Chairman of the Committee and the Planning Development

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Manager in advance. Ward Councillors who are not members of the Committee will be advised of any site visit and invited to attend. Members of the Planning Committee will often wish to make informal visits to an application site prior to Planning Committee to familiarise themselves with the context of the proposal. Such visits are encouraged. Please note that councillors have no right of entry to the application site. Provided that no other persons are present then councillors do not need to declare such a visit at Planning Committee. If other people are present at the site visit (e.g. applicant or objector) then councillors should have regard to the advice in paragraph 7 (lobbying) and are advised to declare such a visit at Committee before consideration of the item.

Planning Officer Reports to Committee

23. All matters requiring a decision by the Planning Committee must be the subject of a written report from Planning Officers which will give an accurate summary of all relevant planning issues. In particular it should include a clear outline of the site history, the relevant development plan policies, the response of consultees and the substance of objections. The report will include a clear recommendation with a technical appraisal justifying it. Any objections or other relevant issues arising after the report is printed will be reported verbally to the Committee at its meeting.

Procedure at Committee Meetings

24. Applicants and objectors will be able to address the Planning Committee in accordance with the protocol attached at **Appendix 'B'**. Further information on how to ask to speak at the Committee and the issues that can be covered are set out in the Planning pages of the Council's website.
25. Where there are major applications which require special consideration because of the large number of people wishing to speak, then the Chairman may, in his or her discretion, make provision for public speaking rights in excess of the usual procedure. The Chairman will be guided by the need to ensure overall fairness in the proceedings within the constraints of the time allowed in the meeting.
26. Where councillors who are not members of the Planning Committee have indicated to the Chairman, prior to a Committee meeting, their wish to speak on a matter in their ward being considered at the Committee, they will be entitled to speak immediately after representatives of the applicant and/or objectors have addressed the Committee. Non-members of the Committee should comply with the procedure for declaration of interests and contact with the applicant or objectors if they attend and speak at a Committee meeting in the same way as members of the Committee.

Ward Councillors may wish to address Planning Committee on:

- Applications which have caused interest amongst large numbers of residents of the Ward
- Applications which have significance for the character, facilities or environment of the Ward.

Ward Councillors should not usually seek to address Planning Committee on:

- Matters which are the subject of a dispute between two residents of the Ward
- Matters which reflect the concerns of one resident only, unless there is some reason why the resident is not able to speak for himself at the Planning Committee.

Call-in procedure

27. Councillors must take the following into account before 'calling-in' a planning application for consideration by the Planning Committee:
- a) Subject to the terms of reference of the Planning Committee and these rules a planning application other than those identified in the weekly Planning Publicity Schedule can be called in by a Councillor for determination by the Committee;
 - b) The guiding principle of 'Call-In' is that there is a wider public interest in the application being considered by the Committee
 - c) Prior to a Councillor calling in an application he/she must inspect the submitted plans and is advised to discuss the application with the relevant case/planning officer.
 - d) The 'call-in' will be activated by an email to the Planning Development Manager **and** the case officer which must give a planning reason why it should be determined by the Committee;
 - e) The email must be received by Planning Officers no later than one day after the end of the public consultation period for that application. The date of which is set out on the weekly Publicity schedule in which it was publicised.
 - f) The Committee report will identify the Councillor who called in the application along with the reason given.
 - g) Councillors who 'call-in' an application are expected to attend and speak at the Planning Committee setting out their concerns and issues. This will inform the general debate of the committee.
 - h) If Councillors are unable to attend for any reason, they should send a statement to the Chairman setting out their issues and concerns so that they can be read out at the committee meeting.
 - i) Where the councillor who 'Called-in' an application is a member of the Planning Committee, that councillor will be given 3 minutes to speak following the public speakers and may then speak again as a member of the Committee during its debate on the item.

Call-over

28. The Council will organise a meeting immediately prior to the Planning Committee (a "Call-Over") which will deal with the following administrative matters for the Committee:

Any Ward Councillor speaking who is not a member of the Committee
 Public Speakers
 Declarations of Interests

Late Information

Withdrawals

Recommendations to defer

Changes to planning conditions, informatives or reasons for refusal; or any other procedural issues which in the opinion of the Chairman ought to be dealt with in advance of the meeting.

29. The Call-Over will be organised by staff who will be present. Unless there are exceptional circumstances, the meeting will be in the same room planned for the Committee. The Planning Committee Chairman will preside at the Call-Over. The Call-Over will take place in public and staff will advise the public of the proceedings at the meeting. Public speaking at the Call-Over either in answer to the Chairman's questions or otherwise will be at the sole discretion of the Chairman and his ruling on all administrative matters for the Committee will be final.
30. Councillors should not seek to discuss the merits of a planning application or any other material aspect of an application during the Call-Over.

Decision Making

31. A decision on a planning application cannot occur before the Committee meeting when all available information is to hand. All Councillors should bear in mind the need to keep an open mind about all the available evidence on a planning application.
32. Planning law requires that applications for planning permission must be determined in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. If the Planning Officer's report recommends a departure from the development plan the justification for this must be included in the report.
33. Decisions must be made on planning merits and the reasons for making a decision should be clear and supported by material planning considerations. The reasons for refusing an application should always be minuted as should any conditions attached to an approval.
34. If the Committee wishes to make a decision contrary to the Planning Officers' advice, a member of Planning staff present at the meeting should be given the opportunity to explain the implications of such a decision. If the Committee wish to refuse an application the reasons for doing so must be clear and precise and based on planning policies. Similarly any additional planning conditions must be properly justified and expressed. The decision and reasons for it as agreed by the Committee must be minuted.
35. Members of the Planning Committee who wish to propose an outcome against Planning Officer advice should first seek advice from the Planning Development Manager prior to the application being determined at a Planning Committee. Any motion contrary to Planning Officer advice should be formulated in writing with material planning reasons which can be handed up to the Chairman. Councillors should be prepared to explain in full their material planning reasons for not agreeing with the Planning Officer's recommendation. Councillors should not rely on staff to produce the material planning reasons for their motion at the meeting.

36. Members of the Planning Committee who require information which is not contained within the Planning Committee report should request this in writing to the Planning Development Manager, one working day before the Committee meeting.
37. Councillors who are predisposed to an outcome opposed to the Planning Officer's recommendation are encouraged to seek advice from Planning Development Manager prior to the meeting.

Applications Involving Councillors, Staff or the Council

38. Any planning application made by a councillor, member of staff or the Council itself should be determined by the Planning Committee and not by the Planning Development Manager under delegated powers, unless they relate to types of 'application' which do not relate to planning merits but are a legal determination as to whether permission is required or are otherwise forms of notification to the Council including that 'permitted development' is proposed under what are called 'prior approval' procedures – in these cases the Planning Development Manager will determine the application after discussion with the Chairman of the Planning Committee or, if unavailable, the Vice Chairman.
39. Members of the Planning Committee and staff should not normally act as agents for another person or body pursuing a planning matter with the Council and, if they do, any planning decision must be made by the Planning Committee and not under delegated powers.
40. Whenever possible a councillor making a planning application should appoint an agent to act on their behalf. The councillor must take no part in making a decision on the application and should leave the room for that item if in attendance.

Involvement of Councillors in Appeals

41. Where a councillor wishes to play a part in any appeal, he/she should seek first the advice of the Planning Development Manager and as a courtesy, inform the relevant Ward Councillors.

Training of Councillors in Planning Issues and Procedures

42. No councillor should be appointed to the Planning Committee without having agreed to undertake suitable induction training and familiarisation in planning procedures and the Code of Conduct. The Planning Development Manager, with the support of the Monitoring Officer, and after consultation with the Chairman of the Planning Committee, will arrange suitable ongoing opportunities as required and will supplement this with written guidance. It is expected that such induction should take place within three months of appointment to the Committee.
43. It is also envisaged that all Members of the Council will engage in induction and familiarisation about planning matters and this Planning Code so that as Ward Councillors they can effectively represent residents and promote the interests of the Borough as a whole.