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NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

COUNCIL

THURSDAY, 18TH APRIL, 2024

SUPPLEMENTARY AGENDA

Please find attached supplementary papers relating to the above meeting, as follows:

Agenda No **Item**

8C **ITEMS REFERRED FROM OTHER COMMITTEES** (Pages 3 - 10)

Item 8C – Members Planning Code of Good Conduct.

The enclosed document includes the amended and updated version of the Members Planning Code of Good Practice as agreed at the Standards Committee Meeting on the 27 March 2024.

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8C Updated Referral
post Standards Committee meeting

The Members Planning Code of Good Practice¹

Introduction

The aim of this code of good practice: to ensure that in the planning process there are no grounds for suggesting that a decision has been biased, partial or not well founded in any way.

One of the key purposes of the planning system is to regulate the development and use of land in the public interest. **Your role as a Member of the Planning Authority is** to make planning decisions openly, impartially, with sound judgement and for justifiable reasons. You are also a democratically accountable decision-taker who had been elected to provide and pursue policies. You are entitled to be predisposed to make planning decisions in accordance with your political views and policies **provided** that you have considered all material considerations and have given fair consideration to relevant points raised.

When the Code of Good Practice applies: this code applies to Members at all times when involving themselves in the planning process (*this includes when taking part in the decision making meetings of the Council in exercising the functions of the Planning Authority or when involved on less formal occasions, such as meetings with Officers or the public and consultative meetings*). It applies as equally to planning enforcement matters or site-specific policy issues as it does to planning applications.

If you have any doubts about the application of this Code to your own circumstances you should seek advice early, from the Monitoring Officer or one of their staff, and preferably well before any meeting takes place.

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Executive bullet point summary of the dos and don'ts: if unsure, seek advice

- Firstly, apply the NHDC Member Code of Conduct and then this Members Planning Code.
- Declare interests, follow procedures that apply to those interests.
- Come to meetings with an open mind and demonstrate that you are open-minded.
- Don't involve yourself in pre-application advice or negotiations.
- Refer queries on applications and procedures to Officers.
- Ensure that if you call in a proposal to go before the Committee that your reasons are clear (as per the Committee terms of reference). You should attend the Committee and speak to the item if you do this. **Don't do this if you have an interest.**
- Avoid meeting directly with developers/ attending presentations by them. If you need a meeting, speak to the Development and Conservation Manager to arrange, and don't go without Officer(s) being present. Avoid lobbying other Members about a proposal.
- Attend a site visit if organised by the Council. Don't enter a site other than as part of an official site visit, even if invited.
- Comply with the Council's public speaking procedures and if sitting on the Committee, don't communicate directly or participate in social media exchanges with others.
- Don't put pressure on Planning Officers to change their recommendations before a Committee.
- Come to your decision only after due consideration of all relevant information. Make decisions in accordance with the Development Plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.
- Don't vote or take part in the discussion on a proposal at the Meeting unless you have been present to hear the entire debate, including the Officers' introduction to the matter.
- Report potential planning breaches to the Development and Conservation Manager.
- You must attend any mandatory training. Attend other specialist training if offered.

¹ Based on the Lawyers in Local Government 'LLG' Model January 2024

1. Relationship to the Members' Code of Conduct

- **Do** apply the rules in the Member's Code of Conduct first, which must always be complied with. This is both the rules on Disclosable Pecuniary Interests (and [Other Registrable or Non-Registrable Interests as per Member's Code of Conduct](#)) and the general rules giving effect to the seven principles of public life: selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty, and leadership.
- **Do** then apply the rules in this Members' Planning Code, which seeks to explain and supplement the Member's Code of Conduct for the purposes of planning and development control. If you do not abide by this Members' Planning Code, you may put:
 - the Council at risk of proceedings on the legality or maladministration of the related decision; and
 - yourself at risk of either being named in a report made to the Standards Committee or Council or, if the failure is also likely to be a breach of the Localism Act 2011, a complaint being made to the police to consider criminal proceedings.
- **Do** be aware that, like the Authority's Code of Conduct, this Planning Code is a reflection and summary of the law on decision making and not a direct replication of it. If in doubt, seek the advice of your Monitoring Officer or their staff advising at the meeting.

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2. Development Proposals and Interests under the Members' Code

- **Do** disclose the existence and nature of your interest as required by [the Member's Code of Conduct](#).
- **Do take into account when approaching a decision that** the principle of integrity is defined, by the Committee on Standards in Public Life in 2013, in terms that "*Holders of public office must avoid placing themselves under any obligation to people or organisations that might try inappropriately to influence them in their work. They should not act or take decisions in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family, or their friends. They must declare and resolve any interests and relationships*". It is therefore advisable that you:
 - **Don't** seek or accept any preferential treatment or place yourself in a position that could lead the public to think you are receiving preferential treatment, because of your position as a Councillor. This would include, where you have a disclosable or other personal conflict of interest in a proposal, using your position to discuss that proposal with Officers or Members when other members of the public would not have the same opportunity to do so.
 - **Do** note that you are not prevented from seeking to explain and justify a proposal in which you may have a conflict of interest to an appropriate Officer, in person or in writing, but that the Members' Code of Conduct may place additional limitations on you in representing that proposal.
 - **Do** notify the Monitoring Officer in writing where it is clear to you that you have a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest or [Other Registrable and Non-Registrable interests](#) and note that:
 - you should send the notification no later than submission of that application where you can;

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- the proposal will always be reported to the [Planning Control](#) Committee as a main item and not dealt with by Officers under delegated powers;
- you must not get involved in the processing of the application ([this includes pre-application discussions with Officers and Members](#)); and
- it is advisable that you employ an agent to act on your behalf in respect of the proposal when dealing with Officers and in public speaking at [Planning Control](#) Committee ([as there are specific legal and Code restrictions on what you will be unable to do, if at all, at a meeting under legislation and the Member's Code of Conduct, without a prior dispensation from the Monitoring Officer in writing](#)).

3. Fettering Discretion in the Planning Process (natural justice, predisposition and Predetermination)

- **Don't** fetter your discretion and therefore your ability to participate in planning decision making at this Council by approaching the decision with a closed mind. Fettering your discretion in this way and taking part in the decision will put the Council at risk of a finding of maladministration and of legal proceedings on the grounds of bias, pre-determination or a failure to take into account all of the factors enabling the proposal to be considered on its merits.
- **Do** be aware that in your role as an elected Member you are entitled, and are often expected, to have expressed views on planning issues and that these comments have an added measure of protection under the law. Your prior observations, apparent favouring or objections in respect of a particular outcome will not on their own normally suffice to make a decision unlawful and have it quashed, but you must never come to make a decision with a closed mind.
- **Do** keep at the front of your mind that, when you come to make the decision, you.
 - must keep an open mind and hear all of the evidence before you, both the Officers' presentation of the facts and their advice and the arguments from all sides.
 - are not required to cast aside views on planning policy you held when seeking election or when otherwise acting as a Member, in giving fair consideration to points raised;
 - are only entitled to take account a material consideration and must disregard considerations irrelevant to the question and legal context at hand; and
 - are to come to a decision after giving what you feel is the right weight to those material considerations.
- **Do** be aware that you can be biased where the Council is the landowner, developer or applicant and you have acted as, or could be perceived as being, a chief advocate for the proposal (this is more than a matter of membership of both the proposing and [Planning Control](#) Committee, but that through your significant personal involvement in preparing or advocating the proposal you will be, or perceived by the public as being, no longer able to act impartially or to determine the proposal purely on its planning merits).
- **Do** consider yourself able to take part in the debate on a proposal when acting as part of a consultee body (where you are also a member of the Parish Council, for example, or both a District and County Councillor), provided:
 - the proposal does not substantially affect the wellbeing or financial standing of the consultee body;
 - you make it clear to the consultee body that:
 - your views are expressed on the limited information before you only;

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- you must reserve judgement and the independence to make up your own mind on each separate proposal, based on your overriding duty to the whole community and not just to the people in that area, ward or parish, as and when it comes before the [Planning Control](#) Committee, and you hear all of the relevant information; and
 - you will not in any way commit yourself as to how you or others may vote when the proposal comes before the [Planning Control](#) Committee.

- **Do** explain that you do not intend to speak and vote as a member of the [other Parish/Town/ Community or County](#) committee because you will be perceived as having judged (**or you reserve the right to judge**) the matter elsewhere, so that this may be recorded in the minutes.

- **Do** take the opportunity to exercise your separate speaking rights as a Ward [Advocate](#) (where this is [available as per the Procedure for Speaking at Planning Control Committee](#)) where you [need to](#) represent [the views of](#) local electors, **but only where you do not have a Disclosable Pecuniary or Other Registrable or Non-Registrable Interest**. Where you do [not have an Interest, and can speak](#):

- advise the proper Officer or Chair that [you have registered your](#) wish to speak in this capacity before commencement of the item;
- remove yourself from the seating area for members of the [Planning Control](#) Committee for the duration of that item; and
- ensure that your actions are recorded in accordance with the [Committee's](#) procedures.

4. Contact with Applicants, Developers and Objectors

- **Do** refer those who approach you for planning, procedural, or technical advice to Officers.

- **Don't** agree to any formal [or informal](#) meetings with applicants, developers, or groups of objectors where you can avoid it, [without the prior knowledge and approval of the Development and Conservation Manager \(this includes at the pre-application stage discussions or negotiations with Officers or Members\)](#). Where you feel that a formal meeting would be useful in clarifying the issues, *you should seek to arrange that meeting yourself through a request to the [Development and Conservation Manager](#) to organise it*. The Officer(s) will then ensure that those present at the meeting are advised from the start that the discussions will not bind the authority to any particular course of action, that the meeting is properly recorded on the application file and the record of the meeting is disclosed when the application is considered by the Committee.

- **Do** otherwise:

- follow the rules on lobbying;
- consider whether or not it would be prudent in the circumstances to make notes when contacted; and
- report to the [Development and Conservation Manager](#) any significant contact with the applicant and other parties, explaining the nature and purpose of the contacts and your involvement in them, and ensure that this is recorded on the planning file.

In addition, in respect of presentations by applicants/developers:

- **Don't** attend a planning presentation without requesting an Officer to be present.

- **Do** ask relevant questions for the purposes of clarifying your understanding of the proposals.

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- **Do** remember that the presentation is not part of the formal process of debate and determination of any subsequent application, this will be carried out by the appropriate Committee of the planning authority.
- **Do** be aware that a presentation is a form of lobbying and, whilst you may express any view on the merits or otherwise of the proposal presented, you should never state how you or other Members would intend to vote at a Committee.

5. Lobbying of Councillors

- **Do** explain to those lobbying or attempting to lobby you that, whilst you can listen to what is said, it may subsequently prejudice your impartiality, and therefore your ability to participate in the Committee's decision making, to express an intention to vote one way or another or such a firm point of view that it amounts to the same thing.
- **Do** remember that your overriding duty is to the whole community not just to the people in your ward/particular interest or area and, taking account of the need to make decisions impartially, that you should not improperly favour, or appear to improperly favour, any person, company, group or locality.
- **Don't** accept gifts or hospitality from any person involved in or affected by a planning proposal. If a degree of hospitality is entirely unavoidable, ensure it is of a minimum, its acceptance is declared as soon as possible, including its addition to your register of interests where relevant.
- **Do** copy or pass on any lobbying correspondence you receive to the Development and Conservation Manager at the earliest opportunity.
- **Do** promptly refer to the Development and Conservation Manager any offers made to you of planning gain or constraint of development, through a proposed s.106 Planning Obligation or otherwise.
- **Do** inform the Monitoring Officer where you feel you have been exposed to undue or excessive lobbying or approaches (including inappropriate offers of gifts or hospitality), who will in turn advise the appropriate Officers to follow the matter up.
- **Do** note that, (unless you have a Disclosable Pecuniary or Other Registrable or Non-Registrable interest), you will not have fettered your discretion or breached this Planning Code through:
 - listening or receiving viewpoints from residents or other interested parties;
 - making comments to residents, interested parties, other Members or appropriate Officers (making it clear in those exchanges that you must keep an open mind);
 - seeking information through appropriate channels; or
 - being a vehicle for the expression of opinion of others in your role as a Ward Advocate.

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6. Lobbying by Councillors

- **Don't** become a member of, lead or represent an organisation whose primary purpose is to lobby to promote or oppose planning proposals. If you do, you will be seen to have fettered your discretion on the grounds of bias. This is also likely to be a Registrable Interest and you must act according to the Code of Conduct and this Code if that applies).
- **Do** join general interest groups which reflect your areas of interest and which concentrate on issues beyond particular planning proposals, such as the Victorian Society, CPRE,

Ramblers Association or a local civic society, but you should disclose that interest on the grounds of transparency where the organisation has made representations on a particular proposal, [seek advice from the Monitoring Officer in advance of the meeting on how \(if applicable\) you can participate](#), and make it clear to that organisation and the Committee that you have reserved judgement and the independence to make up your own mind on each separate proposal.

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- **Don't** excessively lobby fellow Councillors regarding your concerns or views nor attempt to persuade them that they should decide how to vote in advance of the meeting at which any planning decision is to be taken.
- **Do** be aware of the power of social media posts or re-posting and be careful to not to give the impression, [if you are a Member or substitute Member of the Committee](#), that you will definitively vote in a certain way or act with a closed mind if you intend to participate in the decision making on behalf of the authority.
- **Don't** decide or discuss how to vote on any application at any sort of Political Group Meeting or lobby any other Member to do so. Political Group Meetings should never dictate how Members should vote on a planning issue.

7. Site Visits/Inspections

- **Do** try to attend site visits organised by the Council where possible.
- **Don't** request a site visit unless you feel it is strictly necessary because:
 - particular site factors are significant in terms of the weight attached to them relative to other factors or the difficulty of their assessment in the absence of a site inspection;
 - or
 - there are significant policy or precedent implications, and specific site factors need to be carefully addressed.
- **Do** ensure that you report back to the [Planning Control](#) Committee any information gained from the site visit that you feel would benefit all Members of the [Planning Control](#) Committee.
- **Do** ensure that you treat the site visit only as an opportunity to seek information and to observe the site.
- **Do** ask the Officers at the site visit questions or seek clarification from them on matters which are relevant to the site inspection.
- **Don't** hear representations from any other party, with the exception of the [Ward Member\(s\)](#) whose address must focus only on-site factors and site issues. Where you are approached by the applicant or a third party, advise them that they should make representations in writing to the authority and direct them to or inform the Officer present.
- **Don't** express opinions or views.
- **Don't** enter a site which is subject to a proposal other than as part of an official site visit, even in response to an invitation, as this may give the impression of bias unless:
 - you feel it is essential for you to visit the site other than through attending the official site visit,
 - you have first spoken to the [relevant Development and Conservation Manager](#) about your intention to do so and why (which will be recorded on the file) and

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- you can ensure you will comply with these good practice rules on site visits.

8. Public Speaking at Meetings

- **Don't** allow members of the public to communicate with you during the [Planning Control](#) Committee's proceedings (orally, in writing or by social media) other than through the scheme for public speaking or through the Chair, as this may give the appearance of bias.
- **Don't** participate in social media or exchanges by texting as a Member of the [Planning Control](#) Committee during the Committee's proceedings as this may give the impression of undue external influence and may give the appearance of bias.
- **Do** ensure that you comply with the Council's procedures in respect of public speaking.

9. Officers

- **Don't** put pressure on Officers to put forward a particular recommendation (*this does not prevent you from asking questions or submitting views to the [Development and Conservation](#) Manager, which may be incorporated into any [Planning Control](#) Committee report*).
- **Do** recognise that Officers are part of a management structure and only discuss a proposal, outside of any arranged meeting, with [the Development and Conservation Manager or Service Director](#) or those Officers who are authorised by their [Service Director](#) to deal with the proposal at a Member level.
- **Do** recognise and respect that Officers involved in the processing and determination of planning matters must act in accordance with the Council's [Employee](#) Code of Conduct and their professional codes of conduct, primarily the Royal Town Planning Institute's Code of Professional Conduct, [and applicable law](#). As a result, planning Officers' views, opinions and recommendations will be presented on the basis of their overriding obligation of professional independence, which may on occasion be at odds with the views, opinions or decisions of the [Planning Control](#) Committee or its Members.

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10. Decision Making

- **Do** ensure that, if you request a proposal to go before the [Planning Control](#) Committee [that the "call in" complies with the Committee's Terms of reference](#).
- **Do** come to meetings with an open mind and demonstrate that you are open-minded.
- **Do** comply with section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 and make decisions in accordance with the Development Plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.
- **Do** come to your decision only after due consideration of all of the information reasonably required upon which to base a decision. If you feel there is insufficient time to digest new information or that there is simply insufficient information before you, request that further information. If necessary, defer or refuse.
- **Don't** vote or take part in the meeting's discussion on a proposal unless you have been present to hear the entire debate, including the Officers' introduction to the matter. *Where a matter is deferred and its consideration recommences at a subsequent meeting, only Members who were present at the previous meeting will be able to [participate and](#) vote. If this*

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renders the [Planning Control](#) Committee inquorate then the item will have to be considered afresh and this would include public speaking rights being triggered again.

- **Do** have recorded the reasons for [Planning Control](#) Committee's decision to defer any proposal.
- **Do** make sure that if you are proposing, seconding or supporting a decision contrary to Officer recommendations or the development plan that you clearly identify and understand the planning reasons leading to this conclusion/decision. These reasons must be given prior to the vote and be recorded. It will help to take advice from Officers when and where necessary to do this and, if there are no indications allowing you to do this in advance of the meeting, it may be helpful to request a short adjournment for these purposes. Be aware that you may have to justify the resulting decision by giving evidence in the event of any challenge ([at a Planning Appeal and/ or during any Court proceedings](#)).

11. [Planning Enforcement](#)

- [It is not always a criminal offence to carry out development without planning permission. However, it is likely to constitute a contravention of planning laws and the Council \(as Local Planning Authority\) can enforce those laws. Therefore:](#)
- [Do pass on reports from local residents of suspected planning breaches or those you believe have taken place, to the Development and Conservation Manager as soon as possible, as enforcement action is time critical. These will then be investigated in line with the Corporate Enforcement Policy and Members updated when or where appropriate and enforcement matters reported regularly to the Planning Control Committee.](#)
- [Don't discuss enforcement matters with third parties – you should stress that you cannot commit the Council to any particular course of enforcement action.](#)
- [Don't recommend a preferred course of action to Officers – what action is taken, if any, must conform to the Corporate Enforcement Policy.](#)

12. [Training](#)

- **Don't** participate in decision making at meetings dealing with planning matters if you have not attended the mandatory planning training prescribed by the Council.
- **Do** endeavour to attend any other specialised training sessions provided, since these will be designed to extend your knowledge of planning law, regulations, procedures, Codes of Practice and the Development Plans beyond the minimum referred to above and thus assist you in carrying out your role properly and effectively.
- **Do** participate in [any](#) annual review of a sample of planning decisions to ensure that Members' judgements have been based on proper planning considerations.

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