

# positive engagement

## a guide for planning councillors

A message from **Baroness Andrews OBE, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the ODPM** and **Sir Sandy Bruce-Lockhart, Chair of the Local Government Association**:

'The 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act marks a fundamental change to the current town and country planning system. Whilst there are important changes to the processes and procedures, of greater importance is the need for change in the way that we 'do' planning. The act will require all involved in planning to move away from an often adversarial, reactive and conflict based system to a more pro-active, inclusive and creative approach<sup>2</sup>.

As a local councillor involved in planning matters, whether as a member of your authority's executive helping to draw up the spatial plan for your area, as a member of the planning committee deciding planning applications, or as a ward member, you have a crucial role to play in both making the new planning system work and ensuring the best possible outcomes for your community.

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 intended to summarise the principles that should be observed to enable you to both participate in and lead the system.'



Sir Sandy Bruce-Lockart



Baroness Andrews

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

- establishing and taking forward a clear spatial vision for the area based on the 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 of policy between cabinet and planning committee
- focus on outcomes
- early and effective community engagement in discussions on plans and development proposals, in accordance with the authority's Statement of Community Involvement.

As a community leader and local representative you will want to be involved in public meetings and pre-application discussions. 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. Guidance is set out in the LGA guides **Probity in Planning (update) – The Role of Councillors and Officers**, and **Members Engagement in Planning Matters** and from the Standards Board for England (see the weblinks at the end of this leaflet).

Councillors should 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

- ✓ read the LGA guidance
- ✓ hold discussions before a planning application is made, not after it has been submitted to the authority
- ✓ preface any discussion with disclaimers; keep a note of meetings and calls; and make clear at the outset that discussions are not binding
- ✓ recognise the distinction between giving advice and engaging in negotiation
- ✓ structure discussions and involve officers
- ✓ 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 council in probity matters

## do not

- 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 accept gifts or hospitality
- X expect to lobby and actively support or resist an application and still vote at committee (or even stay in the room during discussions)
- X seek to influence officers or put pressure on them to support a particular course of action in relation to a planning application
- 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 the national LGA 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: LGA, ACSES, Standards Board for England, RTPI, PAS and ODPM.

## weblinks

**ACSES – The Association of Council Secretaries and Solicitors**  
[www.acses.org.uk](http://www.acses.org.uk)

**The Standards Board for England**  
[www.standardsboard.co.uk](http://www.standardsboard.co.uk)  
[enquiries@standardsboard.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@standardsboard.co.uk)

**Office of the Deputy Prime Minister**  
[www.odpm.gov.uk](http://www.odpm.gov.uk)

**Local Government Association**  
[www.lga.gov.uk](http://www.lga.gov.uk)

**Member Engagement in Planning Matters**  
<http://www.lga.gov.uk/Publication.asp?lsection=0&ccat=28&id=5XCD5F-A782ABF7>  
*this guide is produced by the LGA in association with Quarry Products Association and the Association of Council Secretaries and Solicitors (Jan 2005)*

**Probity in Planning (Update): The Role of Councillors and Officers**  
<http://www.lga.gov.uk/Publication.asp?lsection=0&ccat=28&id=5XA88F-A7807EC5>  
*an 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 (February 2002) ISBN 1 84049 280 5*

**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  
<http://www.lga.gov.uk/Publication.asp?lsection=0&ccat=28&id=5XD08B-A782E214>

**Planning and Advisory Service**  
[www.idea.gov.uk/pas](http://www.idea.gov.uk/pas)

<sup>1</sup> *Planning Policy Statement 1: Delivering Sustainable Development*

<sup>2</sup> *The objectives for the reformed planning system are set out in PPS1*

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planning shapes the places where people work and live... community involvement is vitally important to planning and the achievement of sustainable development <sup>1</sup>