

Practice Guidance Note 1

Public Speaking in Planning Committees

The POS Development Management Practice Project works with a group of local authorities to address issues in development management where there is a lack of published guidance. The group examines the range of approaches across the authorities to identify good practice, and this is drawn together as a practice guidance note.

Introduction

- 1 It is generally considered good practice to provide the opportunity for objectors and supporters to address a Committee which is making decisions on controversial or important planning applications. It creates the opportunity for people to feel more involved in the decision making process by being able to articulate their concerns before a decision is taken.
- 2 Initial concerns that public speaking could lead to over lengthy meetings have not generally been borne out, particularly where authorities have high levels of officer delegation and limit the number of speakers. In these cases the time available to elected members to focus on major or controversial decisions is judged to have brought about better management of performance, and better public satisfaction.
- 3 Objectors are more likely to feel due weight is given to their views, and supporters or promoters are able to respond to issues raised, if “public speaking” is allowed. The planning authority shows itself open to listening to differing views before a decision is taken.
- 4 However the process has to be fair and avoid the risk of bias, and therefore procedural rules have to be established, publicly available and followed.
- 5 Many individual authorities have worked out detailed procedural schemes, but no general guidance has been published comparing schemes and advising authorities on establishing or reviewing “public speaking” arrangements. This guidance note has been drawn from discussions on best practice and is intended to provide such guidance.

Published procedures

- 6 The procedures to be followed need to be carefully worked out to ensure fairness and to avoid any risk of actual or perceived bias by the decision making body. The procedures should be freely available to all. Many authorities advise on their public speaking opportunities and procedures when consulting on or notifying planning applications. This demonstrates openness on the part of the authority and avoids last minute requests to speak. It also gives all parties time to consider if and how they might wish to participate in “public speaking”, well before a meeting.

Registration

- 7 Objectors or supporters (including applicants where relevant (see below)) must advise the authority in good time to allow appropriate administrative arrangements to be put in place to ensure all parties are aware of who is to speak. Authorities should require registration at the latest by noon on the working day prior to the Committee. Many require earlier registration which allows more time for those of opposing views to prepare to speak, especially if they had not anticipated speaking until becoming aware of the request from a speaker of the opposing view. It also allows the authority more time to contact all those wishing to speak for or against, and for those of the same viewpoint to

agree amongst themselves who will act as a spokesperson and avoid repetition or duplication.

Choice of speaker(s)

- 8 Where there is a limit on the number of speakers, the authority should not choose those who will be allowed to speak. Adequate time between registration and Committee allows parties of a like mind time to compare views and decide who should represent views where it is not practical or desirable for all who might wish to speak. The authority should seek the agreement of anyone indicating they may wish to speak to share their contact details with others of the same general view to facilitate this. Where this is not acceptable or where the parties cannot reach agreement, speakers should be selected on a “first come first served” basis to avoid any risk of bias.

Number of speakers and time limits

- 9 Authorities should ensure equal time to those wishing to speak for or against a proposal to ensure fairness. Most authorities limit the time available to speakers to ensure fairness for all, and to avoid excessively lengthy meetings running the risk of affecting the quality of decision making. Many use a timed automatic system. Whilst this may risk appearing unwelcoming, it does ensure fairness for opposing parties. A time limit of 3 or 5 minutes per speaker is common. Many authorities limit the number of speakers to one or two for and the same against a proposal. In some cases procedures allow Chairs the discretion to allow extended times or numbers speaking in respect of complex or major controversial applications. However extended times risk unfairness if not evenly applied and should be treated with care. When dealing with major complex proposals at the pre-application stage, it may be helpful to identify the likely level of public interest and to ask the developer to make arrangements for a public presentation or forum, which could be chaired by the Authority to reinforce its independent role, and allow a wide range of views to be heard at a formative stage. An example of such a process is Enquiry by Design promoted by the Princes Trust.

Purpose of speaking

- 10 Most authorities only allow those who have made written representations or submitted the proposal to speak. Therefore the views of the parties and the material points arising are already available to the authority and included in the Committee report. It is helpful if the authority’s published advice to those contemplating public speaking makes this clear, and states that any previous representations will be available to the Committee. Published advice can helpfully explain that the purpose of the speaking opportunity is not to seek to explain all points expressed (as the authority is already aware of these), but to emphasise important points before a decision is taken. It is important to convey that public speaking is not an adversarial opportunity, and to explain the limited time available and how the public speaking opportunity relates to the Committee procedure and decision making process as a whole. It is also useful for published advice to explain that questions of other parties or the Council are not appropriate and clarifications should be sought of the officers or other parties prior to the meeting. Published advice should explain that after each party has spoken the Councillors may want to clarify any points raised, and then the Committee will proceed to determine the application without further public speaking opportunities.

Order of speaking

- 11 Most authorities regard the public speaking as part of the Committee meeting, and have standing orders allowing public speaking immediately before the Committee debates a particular application. Once the planning officer has set the scene and updated the meeting on any late matters not dealt with in the published report, in most cases

objectors are invited to speak first, followed by the applicant or supporters. The officer's introduction needs to be brief, but is found helpful to objectors and supporters giving them any update before they speak. (Officers do not need to balance material considerations or explain the published recommendation at this point. Their comments on material considerations or recommendations can be made at the appropriate point in the Committee's subsequent deliberations.)

- 12 Some authorities only allow applicants or supporters to address a committee if objectors have requested to speak, or if the officer recommendation is one of refusal. However this needs careful consideration as it may risk being unfair to a party wishing to speak. Parish Councils have no rights to address a Committee as a consultee, but where an authority wishes to allow a Parish Council representative to speak this should be subject to the same procedural rules as for other parties, and be heard during the public speaking process. Ward Councillors (not members of the decision making committee) are either heard as part of the public speaking, or as part of the subsequent committee debate, depending on the authority's standing orders.

Late plans, photos, or circulation of further written submissions

- 13 The circulation of materials should not normally be accepted during the meeting. The public speaking opportunity is an opportunity to highlight important points already made in representations. One party submitting late material may be unfair to other parties who have not had a chance to peruse that material or comment on inaccurate or misleading information. It will often not be reasonable for such late submissions to be read by decision makers. The risk of unnecessary deferral may therefore arise. However, if new or further material is to be allowed by public speakers, depending on the method of projecting or circulating information to the Committee, it is desirable to require any further submissions such as photos, plans, models, or written materials to have been received far enough in advance of the meeting to be circulated to members by the set date, and to specify the number of copies required. Speakers should be advised that a copy of any such material will need to be kept by the authority, for the record.
- 14 Some authorities have discretion for the chair or a senior officer to allow such submissions only if they are requested and provided prior to the committee and are necessary to update the representations made. This allows consideration of any fresh material considerations raised late by objectors or supporters/agents to be considered and decisions taken on whether they are of such significance that deferral needs to be considered, and to ensure members have all the necessary information to determine the application at the meeting. It is helpful if published advice explains this and any procedures to ensure fairness in circulating late information from objectors or supporters.

Conduct of Committee meetings

- 15 Speakers should not be allowed to engage in discussion with members of the Committee during public speaking or the Committee deliberations, to avoid any risk of accusation of bias or personal interest.

Public Speaking & Delegated Applications

- 16 Most authorities do not have public speaking opportunities on delegated applications, for good reason. In most cases public speaking opportunities are only available on applications which are not delegated to the officers. Some authorities only allow public speaking on major applications. Other authorities, which have delegation schemes allowing members to request minor applications to be referred to a Committee if judged controversial, provide for public speaking on such cases. A request for public speaking from an objector should not transfer a delegated application to a Committee item. It is

helpful for delegation schemes and published advice on public speaking to explain how delegated applications will be handled.

The project

The Development Management Practice Project is sponsored by the Planning Officers Society, and is run on its behalf by POS Enterprises and Trevor Roberts Associates. . The local authorities involved in the project are Arun, Ashford, Barnsley, Bournemouth, Broadland, Caradon, Chiltern, Hambleton, Hampshire, Lichfield, Portsmouth, Redcar & Cleveland, Richmond, Suffolk, Swindon, Vale Royal and Wycombe. The project will run for a year in the first instance, from April 2007 to March 2008. Finalised guidance is published on the POS web site and circulated direct to Society members.

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