



ANNEXE TO CONSTITUTION

Part ____

**CODE OF GOOD PRACTICE AND
GUIDANCE ON THE
THE CONDUCT OF PLANNING MATTERS**

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1 BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This document sets out the way in which the Maldon District Council (“the Council”) will discharge its planning functions and responsibilities, in particular the determination of planning applications and related matters. In this document, the term “Planning Committees” means the Area Planning Committees and/or the Planning and Licensing Committee. It will also apply to extraordinary meetings of the Council called to deal with defined strategic planning applications.
- 1.2 This document applies to Members and Officers at all times when involved in the planning process. (This includes, where applicable, when part of 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, the public and consultative meetings). It applies as equally to planning enforcement matters as it does to planning applications.
- 1.3 This Guidance supplements the Members’ Code of Conduct. It is unlikely that there will be any conflict between the two documents but, if there is, the provisions of the Members’ Code of Conduct will take precedence.
- 1.4 One of the key purposes of the planning system is to manage development in the public interest. In performing this role, planning necessarily affects land and property interests, particularly the financial value of landholdings and the quality of their settings. It is important, therefore, that the local planning authority, both planning officers and the planning committee, make, planning decisions affecting these interests openly, impartially, with sound judgement and for justifiable reasons. The process should leave no grounds for suggesting that a decision has been partial, biased or not well founded in any way.
- 1.5 An important reference document is Probity in Planning for Councillors and Officers (April 2013) issued jointly by the Local Government Association and the Planning Advisory Service.

2 COUNCILLORS AND OFFICERS – ROLES, RELATIONSHIPS AND CONDUCT

- 2.1 The successful operation of the planning system relies on mutual trust between Members and Officers, and an understanding of each other’s roles. It also relies on each ensuring that they act in a way which is not only fair and impartial but is also clearly seen to be so. Councillors and Officers have different but complementary roles. While both serve the public in different ways, Councillors are elected and therefore have a responsibility towards the electorate. Officers are employed by and therefore responsible to the Council as a whole. It follows that although Officers will advise Councillors, both individually and collectively, they may only take instructions from the Council or a Committee. Officers are responsible for the implementation of decisions of the Council and its Committees.

- 2.2 Both Councillors and Officers are guided by codes of conduct. Councillors have signed up to the Council's own Local Code of Conduct and must have regard to and follow this in all their official actions. Breaches of the Code may result in complaints to the Council's Monitoring Officer who may decide to refer the matter to the Standards Committee. Should a breach of the Code be found, sanctions may be imposed on the Councillor concerned. Breaches of the code may also result in complaints of maladministration to the Local Government Ombudsman.
- 2.3 Officers who are Chartered Town Planners are guided by the Royal Town Planning Institute's (RTPI) Code of Professional Conduct. Breaches of this Code may result in disciplinary action by the Institute. The Council also has in place a Code of Conduct for its staff. In addition to these Codes, its Council and Committee Procedural Rules govern the conduct of Council business, and the Protocol on Member/Officer Relations sets out in greater detail and provides guidance on how the working relationship between Councillors and Officers should operate.
- 2.4 Councillors must not instruct officers to make a particular recommendation nor to take a particular course of action other than through a decision of the Council or one of its committees. Officers must give objective, impartial planning advice, based on their professional judgement and not be compromised or influenced by political considerations. Chartered Town Planners may only advocate their own professional view. Under the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 the Council is able to place restrictions on the outside activities of senior and other designated Officers, particularly in relation to membership of political parties and other Councils.
- 2.5 The Council's Local Development Plan is adopted in the interests of the whole community, following public consultation. It therefore reflects the overall public interest, rather than those of individuals or organisations. Councillors and Officers must support the Council's planning policies and make decisions in accordance with them, unless there are sound planning reasons for not doing so.
- 2.6 In dealing with planning applications, Councillors will be acting both as representatives of the people and also as decision makers, objectively considering all relevant issues and deciding upon them. Councillors will justifiably take into account matters of public concern, representations they have received and an assessment of what may or may not be appropriate for the area.
- 2.7 Not all planning decisions are a matter of planning law or policy. Many decisions required an element of judgment, and therefore Councillors need to retain a fair and open-minded approach to the decision making process. So too will Officers in determining applications under delegated powers. In addition, Officers through their professional responsibilities will be involved in the processing of planning applications including negotiating with and

providing assistance to applicants and their agents and also members of the public.

- 2.8 While Councillors may sense a particular responsibility to serve their Ward electors, they have an overriding duty to people of the Maldon District as a whole. It follows that since planning decisions are being taken on behalf of the Maldon District Council they must be reflective of the interests of the District community as a whole. The decision making process is covered in greater detail in section 6 of this document.

3 COUNCILLORS' TRAINING

- 3.1 Planning is a complex area, and planning decisions are open to challenge both on appeal and in the courts. It has long been a constant theme of national advice, that all Councillors regardless of their experience should receive adequate training to assist them in the performance of their duties.
- 3.2 Councillors will be given regular updates to keep them informed of important changes in legislation, procedures or practices, mainly through briefing presentations by Officers at committee meetings. Officers will also arrange training on more specialised planning issues and all members of the Council will be encouraged to attend.

4 PROBITY IN THE PLANNING PROCESS

- 4.1 Involvement in the planning process creates considerable potential for conflicts of interest, whether it is through an issue directly affecting a Councillor or an Officer, or indirectly in terms of family, friends or possibly an organisation with which he or she is associated. It is a fundamental principle that decisions should not be made by those who have a pecuniary interest in the outcome. This is vital to avoid public confidence in the planning system being eroded.
- 4.2 The general rule is that a Councillor or Officer should not use his or her position to further a private or personal interest, rather than the general public interest, or give grounds for any suspicion. The key issue is whether a member of the public would reasonably think that they might be influenced by their interest.
- 4.3 Councillors engaged in the determination of planning applications must ensure that they do not use their position improperly to confer on or secure for themselves or any other person, an advantage or disadvantage.

Pre-determination/Pre-disposition

- 4.4 Councillors taking planning decisions are required to have an ‘open mind’ and listen to all the evidence before taking a decision. The Localism Act 2011 (S25) provides Members with a degree of assurance should they wish to indicate their views in advance without fear of being regarded as having pre-determined the issue and subsequently excluded from the decision making. To do so may still indicate pre-judgment of the application and expose the Council to the possibility of legal challenge.
- 4.5 The intended effect of the Localism Act provision has still to be determined in the courts, but even if it were held to reduce the prospect of or prevent a legal challenge to the validity of a decision it offers no protection against allegations of maladministration or a breach of the Local Code of Conduct. Members should not make up their minds until they have read the relevant committee reports, heard the evidence and considered the representations. It is important that Members hear all the evidence and representations prior to reaching a decision.
- 4.6 The concept of pre-determination is different to that of pre-disposition. While carefully wishing to avoid any show of bias of view, it is acceptable for a Member to indicate a view, even campaign, on planning issues in a general way. This is relevant where Members of a Planning Committee are also Parish/Town Councillors and where they may wish to contribute to a particular discussion at a more local level. Members must still avoid specific statements on how they will vote on individual planning applications or types of planning application prior to the relevant District Council Planning Committee meeting to avoid any impression of bias and pre-determination. If such statements have been made, they should declare an interest, withdraw and not take part in the debate or vote.
- 4.7 Councillors on a Planning Committee who are also members of Town or Parish Councils may speak and vote at Town or Parish and District levels if they are genuinely willing to listen to the later debate and weigh the considerations material to the later decision.

Interests and the Local Code of Conduct

- 4.8 Membership of another body would constitute a non-pecuniary interest, particularly if it is an organisation whose primary purpose is to lobby to promote or oppose planning proposals. Depending on the degree of involvement there is the prospect of fettering a Councillor’s discretion and limiting the ability to participate in the consideration and determination of a planning application.
- 4.9 Members of Planning Committees who are also Parish/Town Councillors should be aware of the potential repercussions of their involvement in the consideration of planning proposals at Parish/Town Council level. They should make it clear at that time that any views they may express, including the exercise of a vote, on the comments to be made to the District Council, can

only be based on the information available to the Parish/Town Council at the time.

- 4.10 Members of Planning Committees not affected by an interest through being Parish/Town Councillors are equally advised to take great care about responding to local opinion and publicly declaring a firm view on a proposal at an early stage. It is important that they do not 'fetter their discretion', but rather leave themselves free to reach a view at District Council level based on all the facts and information.
- 4.11 The Local Code of Conduct sets out requirements and guidance for Councillors, for the registration and declaration of interests. These must be followed scrupulously and Councillors should review the situation regularly. It must be borne in mind that not only should impropriety be avoided but also any appearance, or grounds for suspicion, of improper conduct.
- 4.12 It is for the individual Councillor to decide whether he or she has an interest in any matter considered by a Planning Committee, and if so whether that interest is a pecuniary or non-pecuniary or other one. Councillors with a pecuniary interest must not speak or vote in the decision making process. The Local Code of Conduct explains the effect of interests on participation.
- 4.13 When declaring an interest at a committee meeting this should be done at the relevant point in the meeting or as soon during the consideration of the matter that the interest becomes apparent. Councillors should be clear and specific in identifying the item on the agenda in which they have an interest and if so the nature of that interest. Councillors do not need to declare interests that are not covered by the Code of Conduct, e.g. that they know the applicant, agent or an objector, or that they use the premises the subject of the application. If they feel that such an interest is material they should explain the nature and relevance of it.
- 4.14 Officers must declare any personal or financial interest in any planning matter before the Council, must not deal with such matters on behalf of the Council and must not give advice to Councillors or other Officers on them. An Officer with a personal or financial interest in a planning matter must withdraw from any relevant committee meeting whilst that matter is discussed. Planning Officers must maintain their professional integrity and should avoid becoming associated in the public mind with representatives of the development industry or environmental or other pressure or amenity groups.

Gifts and Hospitality

- 4.15 Councillors and Officers should be very cautious about accepting gifts and hospitality and must follow their respective Codes of Conduct.

5 PRE-DISCUSSION AND LOBBYING

- 5.1 This theme is closely linked to issues covered in the previous Probity section. It is inevitable that Councillors will be subject to lobbying, particularly on planning applications. Again, it is emphasised that great care needs to be taken to maintain the integrity of the planning process, the Council, and the Councillor concerned. Lobbying can lead to the impartiality of a Councillor being called into question and could even cause public mistrust of the Council.

Lobbying

- 5.2 Lobbying is an attempt to influence Councillors' views in order to achieve a particular decision. It can be by applicants, agents or objectors or by other Councillors. Lobbying may be verbal or by the circulation of letters or documents to all or some Councillors. Planning decisions must be made strictly on the facts and policies relating to each application. Lobbying can, unless care and common sense are exercised by all parties concerned, lead to the impartiality and integrity of a Councillor being called into question.
- 5.3 Notwithstanding the provisions of s.25 of the Localism Act 2011 (as mentioned in 4.2 above) when being lobbied, Councillors, and members of a Planning Committee in particular, should take care about expressing an opinion which may be taken as indicating that they have already made up their mind on the issue before they have been exposed to all the evidence and arguments. In such circumstances they should restrict themselves to giving procedural advice, including suggesting to those who are lobbying that they should speak or write to the relevant Officer in order that their opinions can be included in the Officer's report to the Committee. If they do express an opinion they should make it clear that they will only be in a position to take a final decision after having received and considered all the relevant evidence and arguments at the Committee meeting.
- 5.4 A Committee member who represents a ward affected by an application is in a difficult position if it is a controversial application around which a lot of lobbying takes place. If a Member responds to lobbying by deciding to go public in support of, or against, a particular outcome it would be very difficult for that Member to argue convincingly when the Committee takes its decision that he has carefully weighed the evidence and arguments presented at committee. Although not amounting to a disclosable or other pecuniary interest according to the Code of Conduct the proper course of action for such a Member would be to make an open declaration not to vote. However, this is a severe restriction on the Member's wish - duty, even – to represent the views of the electorate. Councillors should therefore generally avoid organising support for or opposition to a planning application and avoid lobbying other Councillors. Such actions can easily be misunderstood by parties to the application and by the public.
- 5.5 Councillors should not excessively lobby fellow Councillors regarding their 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.

- 5.6 Councillors may often be asked by both applicants and objectors to visit application sites. Such visits may be valuable in gaining an understanding of the implications of proposals. It is important however that the parties are clear in the understanding that the reason for Councillors' involvement in this way is purely to gather information. An approved protocol for site visits organised by a Planning Committee is at Appendix 1.

Pre-application discussion

- 5.7 It is likely that in certain cases discussions will take place between potential applicants and Officers prior to the submission of a planning application. Such discussions may be beneficial in terms of applications being prepared for submission which can then proceed without delay to determination. Potential appeals may be avoided by good communication at an early stage of the process. Advice given should be consistent and based on the development plan and material considerations. An approved protocol for Pre-Application Discussions is at Appendix 2.
- 5.8 If Councillors receive information that is relevant to a prospective planning decision they must declare that information to the relevant planning officers and to the committee. Discussions with applicants, agents or objectors should be reported and any correspondence made available to officers before the committee meeting. Where information has been provided to Councillors or Officers on a confidential basis, it shall not be disclosed to third parties.
- 5.9 Where Councillors are acting as agents for people pursuing a planning matter with the Council or submitting planning applications on behalf of their employers as part of their job, they should make it clear to their clients that they cannot and will not use their position as a Councillor to influence the outcome of an application.
- 5.10 Councillors should not meet applicants or agents or third parties in connection with a current or proposed application. If Councillors do agree to meet they should only do so in the presence of a planning officer. In exceptional circumstances, where it is not possible to arrange a meeting in the presence of a planning officer without causing undue delay, Councillors should notify the relevant planning officer of the proposed meeting beforehand and the notification recorded in the application file. Councillors should listen and may ask questions but should not comment or negotiate. They must make clear that any views they express are personal, rather than those of the Council. A note should be taken of the meeting and placed on the application file. The fact that a Councillor has discussed any proposal with the applicant, agent, supporters or objectors must be made clear when the application is before the Committee for determination.

Planning Enforcement

- 5.11 Councillors may also become involved in matters the subject of complaint or investigation, and on which enforcement or other legal action may be under consideration. In these circumstances Councillors are strongly advised to ensure that any action on their part does not prejudice the Council's position, that any enquiries on specific issues are restricted to matters of fact or general case progress, and acknowledge that enforcement cases will be dealt with in accordance with the Council's Planning Enforcement Policy (see Appendix 3).

Contact with Application Case Officer

- 5.12 Councillors will often need to contact the Planning Case Officer on development proposals. Contact should however be limited to requests for factual information and the seeking of advice on progress and the nature of consultation responses received. While Councillors are encouraged to discuss their concerns with Officers, they should not attempt to influence or pressure Officers in the making of particular recommendations. If a Councillor is unhappy with the way in which a case is progressing, the matter should be discussed with a senior officer of at least Team Leader level.
- 5.13 Officers should remain free of any outside influence to make recommendations on planning matters based on their own professional judgements and having regard to all material and other considerations. Councillors should not put improper pressure on Officers for a particular recommendation and, as required by the Code of Conduct, should not do anything which compromises, or is likely to compromise, their impartiality.

Availability and Veracity of Information

- 5.14 Planning applications must be determined on the basis of the documents and information formally submitted. Any submissions from applicants' agents or objectors which are formally received by the Council can properly be taken into account in making a decision. It can cause problems if Councillors are given information or assurances by applicants which are not part of the formal application and which are not, therefore, enforceable. Problems can also arise if Councillors are given information by objectors which may be misleading, untrue or irrelevant. It can be problematical if officers are unaware of submissions by applicants and objectors and are therefore unable to consider them and advise the Committee about their relevance or enforceability. Councillors should forward such information to the officers for consideration prior to the Committee meeting.

Committee Decisions

- 6.1 All planning applications to be determined by a Committee will be the subject of comprehensive, written reports from Officers. These reports will describe the site and the proposal, relevant planning history, development plan policies and other material considerations including, where appropriate, national or local guidance, and also representations made by statutory consultees, local residents and other interested parties. They will also contain an assessment of the proposal against those considerations and a reasoned recommendation. Reports will contain all the relevant material known at the time when produced and published as part of the Agenda for a particular meeting. Councillors should endeavour to obtain factual information from officers prior to the meeting. This can assist in reducing delays which may be caused by deferment to obtain further information.
- 6.2 Sometimes applicants and objectors write directly to Committee Members, after the report has been published, commenting on the report or providing further material. If Planning Services have not been copied into the correspondence, Committee Members should forward any correspondence to the Case Officer.
- 6.3 Any information material to the decision-making process that is received subsequent to the publication of the Committee Agenda and no later than noon on the last working day prior to the meeting will be reported to the Committee at its meeting. At the meeting the Planning Officer will advise if the late material raises any matters which should be taken into account by the Committee. The Officer report and last-minute papers should be read and plans/photographs seen before decisions are made. Councillors will also have an opportunity to put questions to Officers and hear the views of their fellow Councillors, the Applicants and other third parties during the course of the debate.
- 6.4 The law requires that where the Development Plan is relevant, decisions should be taken in accordance with it, unless material considerations indicate otherwise (s54A, Town and Country Planning Act, 1990). The Development Plan is therefore the starting point of the decision making process. Proposals having been identified as amounting to a departure from the Development Plan need to be advertised as such. An Officer recommendation to approve contrary to the Development Plan would need to be justified in the most careful terms, and if the Committee is mindful to approve then the application may then need to be referred to the Secretary of State.
- 6.5 Planning decisions will not always be dictated by planning law or policy. They will sometimes be matters of fine judgment where the balancing of considerations may be difficult. The Officer's report and recommendation will be founded on adopted planning policy and guidance. Planning Committee Members should take care, if expressing any opinion on the planning applications before them, that they confine their comments to matters which are material planning considerations. Regardless of any political group

discussion prior to the Committee meeting, Committee Members must consider applications on their merits and not simply feel bound by decisions made at group meetings. Committee Members cannot be “whipped” to vote in a particular way; this advice is supported by the Local Government Ombudsman. Any decisions taken in this way may be viewed as maladministration and could be subject to legal challenge.

- 6.6 Where Councillors disagree with the Officer recommendation a proposition can be made to overturn that recommendation. The Committee remains bound by law to make decisions in accordance with the Development Plan and all other material planning considerations. It will therefore need to demonstrate that this requirement has been met in its deliberations making clear what material considerations are leading it to a decision contrary to professional advice. Failure to do so could result in an appeal against the decision with potential for an award of costs against the Council in the event that unreasonable behavior on its part is found. It could also render a decision subject to legal challenge (judicial review).
- 6.7 A proposition contrary to an Officer recommendation, together with the reasoning behind it, needs to be clearly presented and will be recorded in the Minutes. It must then be seconded. Before any debate, the Chairman shall afford the Officers an opportunity to respond to the proposition by way of advice on the implications in terms of risk. Depending on the circumstances and complexity of the case it may be that Officers will need to consider those implications in greater detail and report back. Any proposal for deferment must be disposed of ahead of any conclusion being reached on the decision itself. The Chairman will summarise, or cause to be summarised, the salient points of the debate and will seek to ensure the terms of the proposition are clearly understood before putting the matter to the vote.
- 6.8 Whilst the Committee must clearly set out the reasons for its decisions contrary to Officer recommendations the final drafting of conditions and reasons will normally be carried out by Officers. Reasons for refusal must be clear, unambiguous and justified by the evidence of the case. Conditions attached to permissions should be necessary, relevant to planning and the proposed development, enforceable, precise and reasonable in all other respects. The text of non-standard conditions and reasons will be determined by the Director of Planning and Regulatory Services in consultation with the Committee Chairman (or Vice Chairman in his/her absence) following the meeting. The same mechanism will be used for the updating of any conditions required through the passage of time between a Committee decision and the issue of a decision notice consequent upon completion of a S106 agreement/planning obligation.
- 6.9 During Committee Meetings, everything said may be scrutinised by Applicants, objectors, legal advisers and the Press, so Councillors and Officers should be circumspect. Councillors who serve on a Planning Committee should ensure they do not speak to members of the public, or pass or accept notes from them, during the course of a meeting. Councillors who leave the room during the Meeting should avoid speaking to any Applicants or

objectors/supporters who may be waiting outside the room. Councillors who leave the room during debate or whilst an application is before the Committee will not take part in the debate or vote on that application.

- 6.10 Given the nature of the decisions to be taken it is vital that means by which decisions are reached are clear and understood by everyone present. The role of the Chairman is therefore important. Although the Council's Procedure Rules allow decisions to be reached through general assent of the Councillors present at a meeting, best practice with regard to decisions on Planning Applications suggests that a show of hands is far preferable.

Decisions delegated to Officers

- 6.11 Not all decisions on planning applications and related matters will be taken by a Committee. The Council has agreed, and will keep under review, a Scheme of Delegation (alongside the Terms of Reference of Committees) which enables decisions to be taken by responsible Officers. Decisions taken under delegated powers will be subject to the same process and analysis of the facts and all material considerations as if they were referred to a Committee for determination. A statement to support each delegated decision will be produced and placed on the case file as a matter of record and also for the benefit of interested Councillors and the public.
- 6.12 Officers take instructions from Councillors only through a decision of the Council or one of its Committees. In the exercise of delegated powers, Officers may in certain cases be required to consult with individual Councillors, and take the views of those individual Councillors into consideration. Officers must always act impartially and advise the Council according to their own professional opinion.

Deferments

- 6.13 A decision on an application should not be deferred without proper justification. For example, the justification might be to ensure that all the proper information is to hand and this might include a site visit. The reason for requesting a deferment must be clearly set out by the proposer and recorded in the Minutes.

Public Attendance at Committee Meetings

- 6.14 All planning applications referred to a Committee for determination will be considered in public session and all background information will be made available for public inspection upon publication of the agenda papers, unless there are specific reasons for not disclosing or publishing 'exempt information' in accordance with the Local Government Act 1972. Applicants, agents and members of the public, representatives of Parish/Town Councils may speak on planning applications being considered at the meeting. The Council's public participation scheme is at Appendix 5.

7 DEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS BY THE COUNCIL, COUNCILLORS AND OFFICERS

- 7.1 Committee Terms of Reference provide for the determination of planning applications for the District Council's own development or affecting Council land and applications submitted by Council Members or Officers, by a Planning Committee rather than under delegated powers.
- 7.2 Such applications will be treated no differently to any other application and the requirements of the Town and Country Planning legislation and ministerial guidance will be followed in the usual way. Officer recommendations and Committee decisions will be made strictly on planning merits without regard to any financial or other gain which might accrue to the Council if the development is permitted, or to other issues which may need more properly to be considered by another Committee of the Council. It is important that the Council not only treats, but is seen to treat such applications the same as any other.
- 7.3 Councillors or Officers proposing to submit a planning application should notify the Monitoring Officer. If a Councillor or Officer submits a planning application, they should take no part in its processing by the authority at any point. It is important that neither Councillors nor Officers take any part in the preparation of Local Development Plan policy or supplementary planning guidance they may influence, or be seen as influencing, with a view to future planning proposals they may wish to submit.

8 PLANNING APPEALS

- 8.1 A Planning Appeals Protocol has been approved and is at Appendix 6. In the event of a decision taken to refuse contrary to the recommendation of the Director of Planning and Regulatory Services, the Committee may nominate a Member to assist in agreeing the precise reasons for refusal and with the preparation and presentation of the Council's case should the decision be appealed.
- 8.2 As referred to earlier, Officers must always act impartially and advise the Council of their professional opinion. Chartered Town Planners are obliged to follow the Royal Town Planning Institute's Code of Professional Conduct. Whilst Chartered Town Planners appearing as the Council's expert witnesses at planning inquiries and hearings have a duty to set out the Council's case, they must, if asked, give their own professional view in accordance with that Code.
- 8.3 The Council is at risk of an award of costs against it if the Planning Inspector finds that there has been unreasonable behaviour. Common examples of unreasonable behaviour are failure to comply with procedural requirements for inquiries or hearings, failure to provide planning evidence to support reasons for refusal, and failure to take into account relevant policy statements in departmental guidance.

9 COMMITTEE SITE VISITS

- 9.1 Site visits can cause delay and additional costs and should only be used when the expected benefit is substantial. A site visit is only likely to be necessary if the impact of the proposed development is difficult to assess from the plans and any supporting material, including any photographs taken by Officers. The reason for requesting a site visit must be clearly set out by the proposer and recorded in the Minutes. All site visits must be carried out in accordance with the Council's agreed guidelines set out in Appendix 1 to this document.
- 9.2 Site visits are not part of the formal committee proceedings and are not a forum for debate or making planning decisions. Site visits are not open to the public and should not be used to canvass local opinions or as an opportunity for lobbying or advocacy. Councillors should not express personal opinions during site visits.

10 PLANNING OBLIGATIONS

- 10.1 Under section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, the Council as local planning authority may seek planning obligations in connection with grant of planning permission. Planning Obligations may be given by way of unilateral undertaking or agreement, and for the most part will regulate the use or development of land as distinct from the controls that may be available through the imposition of planning conditions. In addition, they may be used to secure off-site improvements or financial contributions towards local infrastructure provision.
- 10.2 To avoid any public mistrust or suspicion, it is important that arrangements in connection with planning obligations are operated in accordance with the principle that planning permission may not be bought or sold. The Council must conduct any negotiations and arrangements in a way which is seen to be fair, open and reasonable.
- 10.3 If a planning obligation is created in isolation or before a planning application is determined, a copy will be placed as required in Part 1 of the statutory Planning Register and therefore made available for public inspection. Similarly, if a planning obligation is created following determination of an application, a copy will be placed in Part 2 of the Register.

11 ADMINISTRATION

Monitoring of Decisions

- 11.1 The Council should monitor planning decisions taken, on an annual basis, both in terms of quality and consistency. Annually, Councillors will visit a sample of implemented planning permissions to assess the quality of the decisions. The committee should formally consider the annual report and decide whether it gives rise to the need to review any policies or practices. The review may include information identifying the number of cases where Officers' recommendations were not accepted and the outcome of any related appeal decisions. The results of the monitoring will be reported to Councillors along with any recommendations to improve quality, consistency or performance.

Records management

- 11.2 The planning application files should be complete and accurate containing sufficient information and a record of events so that the decision and the process leading to it can be easily understood. Only "background papers" as defined in the Local Government Act 1972 (and listed in committee reports) are automatically available to the public. These would include, in addition to the application document, associated letters and supporting information, replies from consultees and letters from supporters and objectors. The same principles apply to applications determined under Officers' delegated powers. Such decisions should be as well documented and recorded in the same way as those taken by Committees. These principles apply equally to enforcement and development plan and associated policy matters.

Complaints

- 11.3 Any complaints received about the way in which a planning application or other planning matter has been dealt with in terms of procedures or fairness will be investigated under the Council's complaints procedures. The fact that someone may disagree with the decision the Council has reached is not a complaint which will normally necessitate investigation, although Officers will explain the reasons for the Council's decision in such a case.

12 INTERPRETATION

- 12.1 The Chief Executive, Legal and Democratic Services Manager and Director of Planning and Regulatory Services, as appropriate, will provide advice or clarification on any matters of a planning nature contained within this document or otherwise. Issues of probity or otherwise requiring interpretation should be referred to the Monitoring Officer.
