

## **COUNCIL MEETING ON 15 JULY 2014 – ITEM 11(d)(i)**

### **Extract from the Minutes of the Constitution Working Group meeting on 1 July 2014 – Recommendation to Adopt a Revised Public Speaking Procedure at Planning Committee Meetings**

#### **PUBLIC SPEAKING AT PLANNING COMMITTEE MEETINGS**

The Chief Executive reported that the Planning Committee had resolved at its meeting on 7 May 2014 to ask this working group to review the issue of public speaking. This had followed a number of lengthy meetings arising from the consideration of contentious planning applications when many members of the public had requested to speak.

He reminded members that the public speaking scheme at planning meetings had been considered by the Council in February 2013. At that time members had been unwilling to place a limit on the number of people able to speak either in favour or in opposition to planning applications and the scheme had operated on this basis since then.

Prior to that meeting the Planning Committee had operated a limit of one speaker for and against each application for the previous eleven years since public speaking had been introduced.

The report included a summary of public speaking at Planning Committee meetings since the introduction of unrestricted speaking and a schedule of public speaking arrangements in neighbouring and nearby authorities.

Councillor Cheetham, speaking at the invitation of the Chairman in her capacity as Chairman of the Planning Committee, said that, in her view, the constant repetition of argument by different objectors to the same application was of limited value and detracted from the case being made. It was much better to hear arguments marshalled by one or two people as this avoided undue repetition and made it both clearer and easier for members to judge the merits of the application.

Members debated the reference from the Planning Committee on this issue and agreed the following points:

- Too much repetition of matters of support or of objection was damaging and counter-productive to the process of deciding on the merits of planning applications.
- It was a basic democratic right for members of the public to be able to express their views about planning matters, but other means existed for that to happen.
- There should be either a time limit, or a limit on the number of speakers, applicable to all planning meetings with the proviso that the chairman would always retain the discretion to allow more speakers or more time if the situation demanded it.
- It was a perfectly reasonable approach, and conducive to the effective conduct of business, to allow and to encourage campaigners, either for or against an application, to organise themselves into groups for the purpose of delivering verbal representations.
- A more focussed public speaking scheme, by avoiding unnecessary delay,

would help applicants and members of the public waiting to have their applications heard.

Councillor Ketteridge expressed a concern that local pressure groups would dominate public speaking under a more restrictive scheme to the possible detriment of other members of the public.

Members generally favoured a restriction on the number of speakers as suggested in the final paragraph of the report. They agreed that the scheme could work well if up to three members of the public were allowed to speak for and against each application being considered.

Officers clarified how the registration of speakers would work in practice in the event of a restriction operating, and the effect of a revised scheme bearing in mind previous decisions made by the Ombudsman. The effect was that the Council was entitled to decide upon a scheme restricting the numbers of speakers and to operate guidance limiting each speaker to three minutes, but had to apply discretion to allow speakers to complete their presentation unless this involved constant repetition.

The working group asked officers to ensure that the revised scheme was adequately publicised to mitigate the impact of a negative reaction from the local press and pressure groups. This would include issuing a press release and preparing text for a revised leaflet explaining about public involvement in planning matters. Officers were asked to table revised text explaining how the revised scheme would work for consideration at the Council meeting.

It was AGREED to recommend to Council that a revised scheme of public speaking should operate at meetings of the Planning Committee to restrict speakers to no more than three supporters and three objectors, together with the applicant/agent and the relevant parish council.