

GUIDANCE NOTE ON BIAS AND PREDETERMINATION IN THE PLANNING PROCESS

What is Bias and Predetermination?

The law on bias and predetermination (which is a particular form of bias) is part of the general legal obligation on public authorities to act fairly.

Decision makers are entitled to be **predisposed** to particular views. However, **predetermination** occurs where someone closes their mind to any other possibility beyond that predisposition, with the effect that they are unable to apply their judgement fully and properly to an issue requiring a decision.

The leading case on local authority bias and predetermination¹ acknowledges the difference between judges sitting judicially and councillors making decisions in a democratic environment. Given the role of councillors, there must be 'clear pointers' before predetermination is established.

Section 25 Localism Act 2011

Section 25(2) of the Localism Act 2011 provides that a decision maker is not to be taken to have had, or to have appeared to have had, a closed mind when making a decision just because –

- (a) the decision maker had previously done anything that directly or indirectly indicated what view the decision maker took, or would or might take in relation to a matter, and
- (b) the matter was relevant to the decision.

The section makes it clear that if a councillor has given a view on an issue, this, considered in isolation, does not show that the councillor has a closed mind on that issue. So, the mere fact that a councillor has campaigned on an issue or made public statements about their approach to an item of council business does not prevent that councillor from being able to participate in discussion of that issue and to vote on it.

Having said this, the use of the words 'just because' in section 25 suggest that other factors when combined with statements made etc. can still give rise to accusations of predetermination. This has also been the approach that the courts have taken to this issue. When considering whether predetermination has taken place they will consider all events leading to the decision, (and also, where appropriate, those following the decision) rather than looking at individual events in isolation.

The case law has also made it clear that the words used by particular members and the interpretation put on those words is of particular importance. So care still needs to be taken when making statements in advance of the determination of planning applications as there is a risk that they can be misinterpreted or taken out of context.

¹ (R(Lewis)v Persimmon Homes Teeside Ltd [2008] EWCA Civ 746

Guidance

With this in mind:-

- It is always advisable to avoid giving the impression that you have made up your mind prior to the decision making meeting and hearing the officer's presentation and any representations made on behalf of the applicant and any objectors.
- With this in mind, if you do comment on a development proposal in advance the decision, consider using a form of words that makes it clear that you have yet to make up your mind and will only do so at the appropriate time and in the light of the advice and material put before you and having regard to the discussion and debate in the Panel meeting.
- Particular care should be taken where there are chance encounters with objectors to development proposals or in the context of meetings which are not formally minuted. These are situations where the risk of what you say being misrepresented or taken out of context is particularly high.

Concluding Comments

As a councillor operating within a political environment you should not be afraid to express views on issues. However, in doing so it is important that you avoid giving the impression that you have already made up your mind and that your part in the decision is a foregone conclusion.