

Code of Practice on Probity in Planning and Protocol on Public Participation at Planning and Rights of Way Committee

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all subsequent approved amendments up
to 1 March 2022

Contents

Code of Practice on Probity in Planning and Protocol on Public Participation at Planning and Rights of Way Committee	1
Code of Practice on Probity in Planning	1
1. Introduction - The need for guidance.....	1
2. General Role and Conduct of Members and Officers	1
3. Declaration and Registration of Interests.....	2
4. Applications for the County Council’s Own Development and Development Proposals Submitted by Members	3
5. Lobbying of and by Members	4
6. Pre-Application Discussions.....	5
7. Committee Reports and Decisions Contrary to the Officer Recommendation	6
8. Committee Site Visits	7
9. Public Speaking at Planning and Rights of Way Committee.....	8
10. Complaints and Record Keeping	8
11. Information Disclosure	8
12. Planning and Rights of Way Application Decision Making (at Committee) .	8
13. Planning and Rights of Way Committee Disputes Procedure	9
14. Development Plan Decision Making	10
Protocol on Public Participation at Planning and Rights of Way Committee	11
1. Types of application.....	11
2. Who may address the Committee?	11
3. Time limits for presentations/order of speakers.....	11
4. Minutes of the meeting	12
5. Circulation of written/visual material	12

Part 5 Section 3

Code of Practice on Probity in Planning

1. Introduction - The need for guidance

- 1.1 The third report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life (the Nolan Committee) recommended that all planning committees should consider whether their procedures are in accordance with best practice, and adapt their procedures if necessary, setting them out in a code accessible to members, staff, and the public.
- 1.2 The planning system regulates the development of land in the public interest. In doing so it can greatly affect the value of land and the character and amenity of an area. Inevitably therefore, there will be perceived winners and losers. In order for public confidence in the planning system to be maintained it is important that the system operates in a transparent and fair manner giving no reasonable basis for asserting that decisions have been made in a partial manner. This is particularly important as planning is not an exact science. Planning decisions are based on the weighing of competing interests and are therefore always open to criticism that the balance which has been struck is wrong. This heightens the need for an open and fair system.
- 1.3 The aim of this Code of Practice is therefore to ensure that the County Council does operate an open system. By setting out the County Council's approach to both the determination of planning applications and the Development Plan making process it is hoped that public confidence in the system can be maintained. The code also aims to provide helpful guidance to both members and officers in ensuring that there is no reasonable basis for alleging that the planning system has been operated in a partial or biased manner.

2. General Role and Conduct of Members and Officers

- 2.1 Section 54A of the Town and County Planning Act 1990 requires all planning applications to be determined by reference to the Development Plan, if material to the application, and any other material consideration. If the Development Plan is material to the application, then the statutory position is that the application should be determined in accordance with the Development Plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. The emphasis in determining applications is upon a plan led system.
- 2.2 The public are entitled to expect the highest standards of conduct and probity by all persons holding public office and in particular when dealing with planning matters only material planning considerations are taken into account. There are statutory provisions and codes setting standards which must be followed.
- 2.3 A range of seminars is held for members after the County Council elections. Guidance is given on the Code Conduct and the Constitution. In addition, members of the Planning and Rights of Way Committee will be expected to attend specialised training seminars in relation to planning regulations and

procedures, the Development Plan, rights of way and the practical operation of this Code of Practice. In consultation with officers, the Chairman of the Planning and Rights of Way Committee will review annually the training requirements of the members.

- 2.4 Members are required to comply with the Code Conduct. The general obligations of members under the Code of Conduct include that "You must not conduct yourself in a manner which could reasonably be regarded as bringing your office or authority into disrepute." (paragraph 3 of the Code of Conduct). In addition, a member "must not use or attempt to use your position as a member improperly to confer on or secure for yourself or any other person, an advantage or disadvantage" (paragraph 3 (8) of the Code of Conduct). Members should therefore ensure not only that they avoid impropriety but that they avoid any situation in which impropriety could reasonably be suspected.
- 2.5 Officers are employed by and serve the whole County Council. They advise the County Council, the Executive and its non-Executive committees and are responsible for effectively implementing the decisions of the County Council, the Executive, non-Executive committees, or officers where decisions are formally delegated to them. Officers must act in accordance with the requirements of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 and the various documents referred to in the Human Resources Guidance on Propriety and Official Conduct. Officers must also act in accordance with the orders of conduct of the professional bodies to which they belong.
- 2.6 Officers are all required to be politically neutral and for senior officers there are political restrictions imposed by the Local Government and Housing Act 1989. This ensures that all members should be able to seek the advice of officers and that information communicated privately to officers by members will be kept in confidence.
- 2.7 Hospitality, gifts or sponsorship by third parties should generally not be accepted by members and officers. Guidance on the acceptance of hospitality is provided for members in the Guidance on Hospitality and Gifts in Part 5, Section 1 of the Constitution and for officers in the Human Resources Guidance on Propriety and Official Conduct. The correct test is to consider whether a member of the public appraised of all the facts would regard the acceptance of the offer as likely to unduly influence a member or officer. For example, in terms of the provision of refreshment, an appropriate question may be, whether if the event had been hosted by the County Council, the County Council would have provided refreshment. If the answer is no, then the offer should be declined. In addition to this general principle of propriety, members should be aware of a specific duty under the Code of Conduct (paragraphs 5(1)(cc)(viii) and 10(2)) that they must within 28 days of receiving any gift or hospitality with an estimated value of over £25 provide written notification to the Director of Law and Assurance of the existence and nature of that gift or hospitality.

3. Declaration and Registration of Interests

- 3.1 It is the responsibility of individual members to ensure that the decisions they make on planning and rights of way matters are in the public interest and not in order to further their own private interests. Not only must there

be no actual impropriety but there must be no grounds for suspecting that decisions have been taken for anything other than proper reasons. However, members are prominent members of the community with often well-publicised views on a number of issues. They are also often members of community bodies such as school governing bodies and local charities. Care and common sense is required so that members may play their role in the community.

- 3.2 It is a member's responsibility to observe the guidance on declaring a personal, prejudicial or pecuniary interest as set out in paragraphs 4 to 9 of the Code of Conduct.
- 3.3 The Register of Members' Interests maintained under the Local Government Act 2000 will be updated regularly. Where any changes occur to members' interests, they should be notified to the Director of Law and Assurance as soon as they occur by the member concerned.
- 3.4 Members will need to be aware that simply having a personal interest in a matter to be considered by the Planning and Rights of Way Committee will not automatically mean that they must declare their interest and withdraw. As soon as they have established that they do have a personal interest, they should then consider the objective test of bias, which is; "would a member of the public with knowledge of the relevant facts reasonably think that a member's judgement of the public interest in that matter would be prejudiced." If the answer is "yes" to this question, a member may then have a prejudicial interest. Where this is the case, there are several categories of exemptions which members may be entitled to claim. Alternatively in certain instances, members may be able to obtain a dispensation from the Director of Law and Assurance (paragraph 9(1)(a) of the Code of Conduct). If the member has the benefit of exemption or dispensation, they should still declare their interest but they may participate in the meeting. If no exemption or dispensation applies, the member may exercise his or her right to remain in the meeting and address the Committee to the same extent as members of the public are entitled. After doing this he or she must withdraw from the room where the meeting is being held.
- 3.5 Members with significant property interests or other interests which would prevent them from voting (for example solicitors acting in the property field) should avoid sitting on the Planning and Rights of Way Committee. Members in this position should advise their Group Leaders before nominations for membership of the Committee are put forward.

4. Applications for the County Council's Own Development and Development Proposals Submitted by Members

- 4.1 Applications made by a Cabinet Member for development by the County Council, such as an application seeking planning permission for a new school must be determined in an identical manner to applications made by the general public and the same planning policy considerations applied. The County Council's current practices and procedures achieve this with identical consultation and publicity in relation to the application. Applications for development by the County Council are determined, not by the Cabinet Member concerned, but by the Planning and Rights of Way Committee. Decisions must be made strictly on planning merits and without regard to

any financial or other gain that may accrue to the County Council if the development is permitted.

- 4.2 The County Council has adopted a Delegation Code of Practice for planning applications and rights of way which is set out in the Scheme of Delegation and which gives clear guidelines on when applications will be determined under delegated powers. Provided these are met, there should be no grounds for an allegation of unfairness.
- 4.3 If an application has been made by a member, one of their family or friends then that member should not vote or speak on the application. Equally, a member who has acted in a professional capacity for any individual, company or other body pursuing a planning matter should not vote or speak in relation to an application. The Director of Law and Assurance, as Monitoring Officer, should be informed of all such applications as soon as they are submitted.

5. Lobbying of and by Members

- 5.1 The Nolan Report recognises that in order for the planning system to work properly, sections of the community must have an opportunity to make their views on an application known, and that one way of doing that is through their elected representative. It is not therefore suggested that members should decline any form of contact with either applicants or objectors to a proposal. However, if this contact is not managed properly, where the local elected representative is a member of the Committee, allegations can be made that a member has formed a pre-determined view of the application and is not discharging his or her obligations properly. This can lead to the decision being overturned by the courts.
- 5.2 A member should not favour or appear to favour any person, company, group or locality. Strictly, a member of the Planning and Rights of Way Committee should not make up his or her mind on an issue until all the information has been duly considered and it is time to vote in committee. In practice a member will often begin to form a judgement before that point, but it is important that members should not declare their voting intentions until that point has been reached. To do so without all relevant information and views would be unfair and prejudicial and may amount to maladministration. It should be possible for a member to give support to a particular body of opinion whilst waiting until the Planning and Rights of Way Committee and hearing all the evidence presented before making a final decision.
- 5.3 Individual members should reach their own conclusions on a planning or rights of way matter rather than follow the lead of another member. In this regard, any political group meetings prior to Committee meetings should not be used to decide how members should vote. Decisions can only be taken after full consideration of the officer's report and information and discussion at Committee.
- 5.4 When dealing with the public it is quite proper for members to give factual information; advice as to the process and procedures followed by the County Council; advice about the contents of the development plan; and which officer to contact for further information. Equally it is appropriate for a member to report the public's views either to officers or to the Committee

but it would be wrong to exert pressure on an officer to change his or her recommendation to a committee. If a member is pressed for an opinion on the merits of a planning or rights of way matter it is best practice that any opinion given should be qualified by a statement that a member cannot make up his or her mind until all the information is to hand and that will not be until the Committee considers the matter.

- 5.5 The problem of lobbying can be particularly difficult for a local member who may hold strong views in relation to a planning or rights of way matter in his or her own division; he or she may even have been elected specifically to present those views to the County Council. A local member who is not a member of the Planning and Rights of Way Committee is, with the Chairman's prior agreement, permitted to attend the meeting of the Committee at which a matter is to be determined in order to put forward his or her constituents' views. For a local member who is a member of the Planning and Rights of Way Committee, it is his or her responsibility to strike the right balance having regard to the general rules laid down in the Code of Conduct. It should be possible for such a local member in these circumstances to give support to a body of opinion whilst not advocating a particular outcome for a planning or rights of way application prior to the committee meeting. However, if a member intends to participate in the determination of a planning or rights of way application he or she should avoid leading a campaign or organising support for or against the application or, alternatively, the member should declare a prejudicial interest and not take part in voting on the matter. A member may exercise his or her right to remain in the meeting and address the Committee to the same extent as members of the public are entitled. After doing this he or she must withdraw from the room where the meeting is being held.
- 5.6 A lobbyist may write to members direct without copying the letter to officers. Objections can only be considered where they can be made public. Therefore, where a member intends to rely on the contents of the letter or to make the letter available to the Committee, a copy of the letter should be given to the Director of Law and Assurance and Assistant Director (Highways, Transport and Planning) at the earliest opportunity prior to the meeting of the Committee. This will ensure that the content of the letter can be verified and commented upon in fairness to all parties.
- 5.7 As soon as is practicable, members shall declare at Planning and Rights of Way Committee any lobbying or contact with any person (to the avoidance of doubt, the term "person" includes a group of people or a company) in relation to any application which is to be determined at that Committee.

6. Pre-Application Discussions

- 6.1 In relation to pre-application discussions, it should be made clear at the outset that the discussions will not bind a council to make a particular decision and that any views expressed are personal and provisional, until all relevant information is submitted and consultations on it have taken place.
- 6.2 Advice should be consistent and, when dealing with a planning application, based on the development plan. A written note should be made of pre-application discussions and telephone calls and where material has been left with the County Council; confirmation of its receipt should be given in a

follow up letter. Records of pre-application discussions will be made available to the Committee if requested by the Committee.

- 6.3 It is preferable that members do not take part in pre-application discussions so as to maintain impartiality. Should there be occasions when members are involved, appropriate professional advisors, including a senior planning officer will be present. The involvement of members in such discussions will be recorded as a written file record.
- 6.4 Once the application is submitted meetings between an applicant and a member or members of the determining committee will be inappropriate although exceptionally, officers may arrange site visits for members or for them to attend exhibitions and displays arranged by an applicant to inform the public. Briefings for members on more complex applications will be undertaken by officers.

7. Committee Reports and Decisions Contrary to the Officer Recommendation

- 7.1 In order for public confidence in the planning system to be maintained the public needs to be clear why decisions have been taken and the committee report should be the prime document for this. The committee report must give a clear explanation of the relevant history, where the matter is a planning application the development plan policies which are relevant to the application, and report the views of statutory consultees and other representations. In the case of rights of way matters, the report must also give a clear explanation of the legal tests that need to be addressed. The report must conclude with a firm recommendation which should be fully justified by the rest of the report. This is particularly important where the recommendation is for planning permission to be granted and the proposal is contrary to the Development Plan.
- 7.2 The reasons for a decision taken by committee should be clearly minuted, particularly if it is contrary to the officer recommendation. The Nolan Report makes it clear that there is nothing intrinsically wrong in planning committees not following the advice of officers. The report emphasises that planning is not an exact science and relies for its decisions on the balancing of competing interests. Officers will advise the Committee on how they feel those interests should be weighed. However, provided members take into account all material considerations and ignore all irrelevant considerations it is quite proper for them to weigh those interests differently to the officers. Provided the decision is not motivated by bad faith or is outside the County Council's powers - in which case the Director of Law and Assurance should be informed - then officers are under a duty to support the County Council's decision. If the determination of a planning application results in a public inquiry then officers are required to attend and make the best planning argument they can. If it is clear that members are going to depart from an officer recommendation the Chairman may consider it appropriate to seek officer views on an alternative wording.
- 7.3 Appropriate officers should always attend meetings at which planning applications are to be considered to ensure that planning and rights of way issues are properly addressed and the procedures properly followed.

8. Committee Site Visits

Planning Applications

- 8.1 Site visits may be made at the discretion of the Committee where the Committee is the determining authority and a record should be kept of the reason for the site visit. A site visit may be justified where the complexity or technical aspects of the proposals or public concern at the issues raised is such that members' understanding would substantially benefit from a site visit.
- 8.2 A site visit will be organised by officers and attended by representatives of the Assistant Director (Highways, Transport and Planning) and Director of Law and Assurance. The planning officer will explain the application and the planning issues associated with it and for this reason a site visit to a planning application site will take place following the publication of the Assistant Director (Highways, Transport and Planning)'s report to the committee.
- 8.3 An applicant and his or her planning adviser may be permitted to accompany a site visit and will generally be expected to do so in the case of minerals and waste applications on active sites where arrangements for the safety of the visitors to the site must be observed. The applicant or his adviser may answer questions of clarification and provide factual explanations to the visiting party as a whole or in groups but, in order to avoid allegations of lobbying, not to converse with members individually.
- 8.4 Where the applicant or his or her adviser is to accompany the site visit, a representative of the local parish council, the local member and a representative of each of the bodies of objectors will also be invited to attend to hear what is said and to answer factual questions of the visiting committee. Individual conversations with members are to be discouraged in order to ensure that all parties are treated fairly and equitably. A list of those attending the site visit will be kept by the Director of Law and Assurance.
- 8.5 A decision on an application where a site visit has taken place will be made by the Committee at its properly convened meeting, in public, and not be delegated to the Committee at a site visit.
- 8.6 Members of the Committee may from time to time be invited to attend site visits arranged by other planning authorities. The Assistant Director (Highways, Transport and Planning) and Director of Law and Assurance will advise on the appropriateness of attending. The relevant authority's code of practice for the conduct of the site visit will apply.
- 8.7 Site visits may also be appropriate in the course of local plan preparation when the principles of fairness and equity will be applied. Additionally, as part of members' training, opportunities will be sought to view different types of mineral extraction sites and waste disposal sites, so that members have an understanding of the processes and technical aspects involved.

Rights of Way

- 8.8 Where a rights of way application is to be considered by the Committee, individual members are encouraged to visit the site in question as members'

understanding would usually substantially benefit from a site visit. Members should avoid conversations with applicants if practicable, but if it cannot be avoided, the member should ensure that they only ask questions of clarification or for factual explanations. They should then declare this to the Democratic Services Officer.

9. Public Speaking at Planning and Rights of Way Committee

- 9.1 Standing Order 6.09 allows an individual or a number of individuals to address the Planning and Rights of Way Committee on a planning or rights of way application that is to be considered for determination at that Committee meeting. The total time taken shall not exceed 15 minutes for objectors and 15 minutes for supporters (made up of any combination of representatives from the following groups: applicant, agent or supporters of the application). All public participation will be governed by the Protocol on Public Participation at Planning and Rights of Way Committees (attached as an Appendix).

10. Complaints and Record Keeping

- 10.1 In order that complaints can be fully investigated, record keeping on planning and rights of way matters will be complete and accurate. In particular, every planning application and enforcement file will contain an accurate account of events throughout its life, including a record of meetings and telephone conversations.
- 10.2 Where an application is dealt with under the delegation procedure, a complete record will be kept of the considerations taken into account in determining the application.

11. Information Disclosure

- 11.1 All consultation replies listed in the committee report together with the application documents and accompanying letters or reports submitted by the applicant constitute background papers that are available for inspection and published on the County Council's website following publication of the Committee report - unless such documents contain exempt information as defined by Schedule 12A Local Government Act 1972.

12. Planning and Rights of Way Application Decision Making (at Committee)

- 12.1 Written/visual material may be submitted to the Committee by individuals who have made written representations on an application. However, such written/visual material must be with the Democratic Services Officer at least three clear working days before the date of the relevant Committee meeting so that the Committee can be told of the content of the material and receive considered officer advice. Any written/visual material submitted to the Committee otherwise than in accordance with these arrangements may not be considered by the Committee.
- 12.2 The Chairman will call the Committee to order and will then introduce the Committee business.

- 12.3 The Chairman will introduce each agenda item and shall ask officers for additional information/clarification as appropriate.
- 12.4 Where an application falls to be determined by the Committee, the officers shall explain the application, policies, representations, law etc.
- 12.5 In relation to an application to be determined by the Committee the first three objectors who notify the Director of Law and Assurance that they wish to address the Committee will be allowed to do so for a maximum of five minutes each, i.e. 15 minutes in total.
- 12.6 Three supporters of the application may address the Committee for a maximum of five minutes each, i.e. 15 minutes in total. The speakers may be any combination that represents supporters of the application (and may, for example, include the applicant and/or their agent).
- 12.7 An objector or supporter eligible to address the Committee may exercise their right to speak through representation by another person. (e.g. planning consultant or lawyer).
- 12.8 The Chairman may request the officers to clarify any points raised by objectors or supporters.
- 12.9 The provisions to allow local county councillors to address the Committee will still apply, that is they may address the Committee with the Chairman's prior agreement (see paragraph 5.5).
- 12.10 The Chairman will then open the application under consideration to discussion within the Committee.
- 12.11 At the end of the discussion, the officers will clarify the recommendation of the report or any amendments to the recommendation. A vote will be taken and the vote recorded.
- 12.12 The applicant will be notified of the decision as soon as practicable after the Committee.
- 12.13 The individuals who address the Committee shall be entitled to comment on the draft minute of their contribution to the meeting. The draft minutes will be available as soon as practical on the County Council's website. Individuals will be notified when the unconfirmed minutes have been posted on the website. Should they feel that the final minute is not accurate they shall be given the opportunity to make a written representation asking for a correction, which will be submitted to the next meeting of the Committee for consideration.

13. Planning and Rights of Way Committee Disputes Procedure

- 13.1 If the Planning and Rights of Way Committee is minded to refuse a planning application under Regulation 3 of the Town and Country Planning General Regulations 1992 or grant planning permission subject to condition or conditions that may be unacceptable to the relevant Cabinet Member, a disputes procedure is set out in Standing Order 6.08.

- 13.2 In such cases, the Planning and Rights of Way Committee will not determine the application but will indicate its decision in principle.
- 13.3 The officers of the County Council will try to overcome the objections to the proposal. If, after further investigation and discussion, they conclude that the Planning and Rights of Way Committee's decision is justified, the decision will be implemented. If, on the other hand, they conclude that a re-submission or modification is not appropriate because the original proposal remains the best option, or the condition or conditions in dispute impose an unreasonable demand on the implementing committee, a report will be made to the Planning and Rights of Way Committee.
- 13.4 In the event of the Planning and Rights of Way Committee sustaining its original decision, it will proceed only by way of recommendation to the County Council.
- 13.5 Any recommendation by the Planning and Rights of Way Committee shall include:
 - 13.5.1 The full officer report to the Planning and Rights of Way Committee including the views of the applicant Cabinet Member;
 - 13.5.2 A covering report from the Chairman of the Planning and Rights of Way Committee explaining the reason(s) for its refusal which had not been accepted by the applying Cabinet Member; and
 - 13.5.3 A report giving legal advice/guidance and indicating the views of other consultees, including the district council and any members of the public who have made representations at the Planning and Rights of Way Committee meeting considering the matter.
- 13.6 At the County Council meeting hearing the recommendation from the Planning and Rights of Way Committee the County Council will act as a planning authority under its statutory powers. The Chairman of the Planning and Rights of Way Committee shall introduce the item and the Leader shall respond for the applicant Cabinet Member. The applicant Cabinet Member shall be treated as having a prejudicial interest and shall not participate in the debate nor vote but may remain in the Chamber. Members of the Planning and Rights of Way Committee shall be treated as having a personal interest.

14. Development Plan Decision Making

- 14.1 The role of the Planning and Rights of Way Committee is as a consultee in the preparation process which is otherwise an Executive function subject to the approval of the full County Council.
- 14.2 Comments and advice given to the Executive will be limited to the development management control functions of the Planning and Rights of Way Committee.
- 14.3 Where possible, such comments and advice should be produced during the issues and options stage of the Plan preparation.

Protocol on Public Participation at Planning and Rights of Way Committee

1. Types of application

(a) **The types of planning application where public participation will be considered at the Planning and Rights of Way Committee**

- (i) Minerals Applications
- (ii) Waste Applications
- (iii) Review of Mineral Planning Applications
- (iv) Regulation 3 Applications (where this Council has applied to develop its own land either by itself or with a third party)
- (v) Regulation 13 Applications (Listed Buildings Applications)

(b) **The types of rights of way application/proposal where public participation will be considered at the Planning and Rights of Way Committee**

- (i) The diversion and extinguishment of public footpaths, bridleways, byways open to all traffic and restricted byways and including the creation of footpaths, bridleways, restricted byways and permissive agreements
- (ii) Applications for Definitive Map Modification Orders
- (iii) Applications relating to Access Land
- (iv) Applications relating to Commons and Town and Village Greens
- (v) The conversion of a footpath to a cycle track
- (vi) Gating Orders

2. Who may address the Committee?

- (i) Objectors to an application/proposal
- (ii) Supporters of an application/proposal (includes applicant, agent or supporters)
- (iii) An objector or supporter (representatives from the following groups; applicant, agent or supporters of the application/ proposal) eligible to address the Committee may exercise their right to speak through representation by another person (e.g. planning consultant or lawyer).
- (iv) The local member for an application/proposal

3. Time limits for presentations/order of speakers

- Planning or Rights of Way Officer to present the report (no time limit).

- Objectors to the application (the first three objectors to apply will be allowed five minutes each to address the Committee - details of those objectors may be given to any other objectors who wish to contact those who will be presenting objections to the Committee).
- Supporters (representatives from the following groups; applicant, agent or supporters of the application) - the first three to notify the authority will be allowed to address the Committee for five minutes each.
- The Chairman of the Committee shall be able either before or at the meeting to agree to allow additional speakers if he or she considers it necessary for proper consideration of a major or controversial issue. In doing so he or she shall take account of the need for equity. Such additional speakers will be allowed five minutes each to address the Committee.
- The local member for an application/proposal (no time limit).
- Planning or Rights of Way Officer to deal with any errors of fact or clarification of policy (no time limit).

4. Minutes of the meeting

The individuals who address the Committee shall be entitled to comment on the draft minute of their contribution to the meeting. The draft minutes will be available as soon as practical on the County Council's website. Individuals will be notified when the unconfirmed minutes have been posted on the website. Should they feel that the final minute is not accurate they shall be given the opportunity to make a written representation asking for a correction, which will be submitted to the next meeting of the Committee for consideration.

5. Circulation of written/visual material

Written/visual material must be with the Democratic Services Officer at least three clear working days before the date of the relevant Committee meeting so that the Committee can be told of the content of the material and receive considered officer advice. Written/visual material submitted to the Committee otherwise than in accordance with these arrangements may not be considered by the Committee.