

Clerk's Report re Declaration of Interest – NPSG meeting 01/10/15

Following the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group meeting held on 01st October 2015, it has been commented upon by a member of the public that they considered the declaration of interest made by one Councillor to be inappropriate as they thought the Steering Group should be speaking on behalf of what the Village wants and not expressing their own opinions.

This comment was formally reported to the Clerk on Friday 09th October and whilst the matter was investigated, the Dispensations granted to members of the NPSG allowing them to transact business relating to all sites submitted under the NP Call for Land regardless of location were temporarily revoked.

Upon investigation it was revealed that the remarks were made during the declaration of interest made by one councillor and were established to be as follows:

“I have always accepted that Sugar Lane field would be built on, but I joined the NPSG to prevent 55 houses being built on Jeffries Farm and 80 houses being built in Horsted Keynes.”

Under the HKPC Code of Conduct (as adopted by the full Parish Council on 19/05/15), this declaration was unnecessary, the only requirement being to declare a personal interest in relation to sites at Jeffries Farm / Sugar Lane. However, the declaration made does not actually breach the Code of Conduct and whilst it could be considered inappropriate, it also reflects the views of many within the Village as expressed in the NP Vision:

“Housing within Horsted Keynes has increased by approximately 15% comprising mainly more affordable small and medium sized family properties, generally on developments beyond the current village boundaries.....

.....The new residential developments have been spread throughout the parish”

And also NP Objectives 1 and 7 as published in January 2015:

1. Conserve and enhance the environment of the village in order to maintain its distinct rural identity and outstanding landscape setting.
7. Minimise the adverse environmental effects of new development and provide energy reduction and sustainable energy opportunities for the whole village.

Members of the Steering Group are all resident in this Parish and it is therefore difficult for any member of the Group (either past or present) to be truly impartial if they are to propose a Neighbourhood Plan that is acceptable to the majority of the Community at referendum.

In view of this, the NP process incorporates a number of safeguards to ensure that no one individual can unduly influence the outcome and these are:

- Public community workshops at which the public are asked to provide views / opinions on sites to be included (or not) in the NP. Views sought by questionnaires
- These comments and views used to formulate the NPSG recommendations to the PC on which sites should be included in the NP
- These comments and views used as supporting evidence of site selection at independent examination.
- NPSG recommendations are to be scrutinised by the PC and the final decision on which sites should be included in the NP will be made by the PC at a public meeting – not the NPSG.
- PC Members with personal interests in any site will be excluded from discussions and voting on those sites at all relevant public PC meetings.
- The NP as approved by the PC will then go through a number of formal stages, including
 - review by Mid Sussex District Council,
 - examination by a government appointed, independent Inspector – where both the NP and all the evidence in support of it will be scrutinised in fine detail

- Formal consultation within the community
- finally – referendum and adoption by the community if successful at referendum.

Additionally, the proposed NP must be supported by robust evidence such as:

- NP Surveys
- Sustainability Scoping report
- Site Assessments
- The results of public consultation

The NPSG members are facilitating the NP process and their brief regarding site allocation is to set out the options (based upon the evidence collected) to the Parish Council and then to the Community as a whole. This will enable everyone to understand the options and implications of selecting sites for development and the Community can then indicate which options are acceptable and which are not.

In view of the above, whilst the declaration of interest referred to above does not breach the HKPC Code of Conduct it was ill considered particularly in view of its potential impact upon public perception of the NP process. The Councillor in question has been advised accordingly and reminded of the need to adhere to all elements of the HKPC Code of Conduct, including the Standards of Public Life expected of all Councillors throughout their term of office.

It remains important that NPSG members declare their personal interests at all NPSG meetings to enable members of the public to have the “complete picture” and allow them to interpret discussions and decisions reached by the NPSG based upon a full understanding of the facts. However, Councillors have been reminded that whilst their declarations should be honest and open, all discussions and decisions at NP meetings should be carried out with impartiality.

Finally as a result of the above, the dispensations issued to three NPSG members which were temporarily revoked, will be reinstated with effect from 28/10/15 to allow the NP process to continue. Monitoring will continue and any breach of the specific wording of the dispensation or any section of the HKPC Code of Conduct will be investigated and reported to the appropriate body.

Beverley O’Garra
Clerk
HKPC

27/10/15