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How to lobby my elected representatives?

“Our experience is that politicians and other political movers are very willing to engage, as long as it is done in a sensible and transparent manner.”

Introduction

All major political parties in the U.K are looking for ways to make the planning system quicker, more transparent and easier for the public to become involved in. As it currently stands, the planning system for major infrastructure projects is increasingly struggling to deal with the challenges of the 21st century – balancing economic development needs against protecting the environment.

Planning is about how we plan for, and make decisions about, the future of our cities, towns and countryside. Planning has a long history, even thousands of years ago people will have discussed where to build homes and shelters!

Over the centuries, a more formal way of making these decisions was set up. So when we want to build a new house or someone wants to develop a new shopping centre, your local planning authority is responsible for deciding whether it should go ahead. 'Local planning authority' usually means the district or borough council, not the parish or town council.

Without a planning system, everyone could construct buildings anywhere, or use land in any way they wanted, no matter what effect this would have on other people who live or work in their area.

The views of local people have always been an integral part of the planning process and the case for the community's voice to be heard is clear:

- Involvement leads to outcomes that better reflect the views and aspirations and meet the needs of the wider community in all its diversity.
- Public involvement is valuable as a key element of a vibrant, open and participatory democracy.
- Involvement improves the quality and efficiency of decisions by drawing on local knowledge and minimising unnecessary and costly conflict.

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- Involvement educates all participants about the needs of communities, the business sector and how local government works.
- Involvement helps promote social cohesion by making real connections with communities and offering them a tangible stake in decision-making.

So what is lobbying?

Lobbying is in theory simple. As a local resident you elect representatives to take decisions on your behalf. When the time comes for them to make a decision on which you feel passionately, it is your right to approach them in order for your views to be heard. This in theory should help them shape their opinion, as their job after all, is to represent you when making collective decisions on the future of your community. However, it's not always that easy. This briefing will give you tips on how to get the most out of your elected representatives.

Why is lobbying important?

Won't they just judge the application on its merit? Well yes in principle they will but because your representative is democratically elected to represent the views of constituents, your job is to ensure your elected representative:

- Is informed about the issue
- Understands your position and those of other residents
- Becomes convinced that your position is the one they should adopt.

How you achieve this is reliant on your ability to understand a complex set of rules, how politicians get their information, how to present information to politicians and the relentless pursuing of your elected official.

Know the system

This means understanding all the regulatory and political bodies that can affect the planning process. There are many of them, from Parliament to local authorities, regional development agencies and the EU. You should spend some time looking at the following:

Local Development Framework

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You should definitely research the Local Development Framework (LDF) and, if it's complicated, you may want to ask a planning advisor or a lawyer to draft a memo outlining how the planning application fits into it. It may violate multiple points. If you can show the planning application violates the LDF that makes a very strong case.

Committee Rules

It is important to first determine the rules on the planning Committee that will be deciding your future. Much of the basic strategy depends on this information. Is it a majority decision, unanimous? Can you speak at Committee? When do Members have to abstain? How can you lobby them? What can developers not do? All this information is key to ensuring you are playing within the rules and forcing the developers to do the same.

Know who matters

“One of the commonest mistakes is to misunderstand or be ignorant of the process of decision-making and who really matters.”

Once you have determined the basic rules of the committee, you should start to gather as much information on the committee members as possible. How large are their electorates? How geographically close are they to the planning application? How big are their majorities? What was turnout like? When are they up for re-election? What are the main issues they campaign on? Does a planning committee member have an interest in the development? This may affect their decision and by knowing you can insist they remove themselves from the decision. You need to understand the political landscape in which you will be operating.

You must understand how the planning committee get their information. What are the local media outlets? Who are the reporters and what are their deadlines? How will the campaign be covered and how does the press view the various parties?

It is also important to be persistent, as you may have to wage a long-term campaign to achieve the result you want.

Know your goals

Lobbying should be part of any campaign strategy. You have to go to elected officials with specific ideas.

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If you want to talk about your issues to a politician, think about how to explain it in the context of the policies and the voters that matter to them. There are two important things you need to remember about politicians. The first is what is important to them and the second is their sources of information. Take a minute to think about what are the most important issues in the average planning committee's members mind or any other politician for that matter? Their list of priorities is probably something like the following:

1. How are they going to get re-elected at the next election?
2. Who is going to oppose them in the next election?
3. What issues are they going to challenge them on?
4. How well are they serving their constituents?
5. How should they vote on the planning application before them?

The point is that you and your campaign are pretty low in the average decision maker's list of priorities. All of the other things higher on the list will have much more direct impact on their lives in the short and long term and, with a little attention from them, they will have much more impact on those things.

The second thing to remember is that decision makers are being bombarded with information everyday. They get news on television and the radio, they get reports at work, they get advertisements all the time, and they hear that juicy piece of gossip about the neighbour down the street. Your campaign message has to break through that thick wall of other information. You can guarantee that developers are feeding information to your elected representatives all the time, whether this is details on any amendments to the plans, details on their consultation exercises, figures from polls or questionnaire answers or detailed reports on their exhibitions and increasingly importantly on how the plans have evolved as a result of community input.

So, while you are spending hours and hours, days and days, months and months, thinking about, worrying about, doing something about this campaign, decision makers will give you only limited time and attention. You must not waste it. Your goal is to tie your campaign to their number 1 priority. *How are they going to get re-elected at the next election?*

Developers understand this. That is why they come up with a clear, concise message and spend a lot of money making sure their seen to be negotiating with the community, and with decision makers. If they can tell decision makers that their plans are controversial but well

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supported in the community then they have won. If they can demonstrate community support they are home and dry.

Be useful

“A surprisingly large number of policy decisions are taken in an evidence vacuum.”

I have said this before, but I will say it again, provide information to your elected officials. Government departments are often keen to gain access to information and an on-the-ground perspective, so make yourself available as an expert sounding board when officials want feedback. Government often only conducts research on costs and benefits late in the day. Robust research and compelling evidence go a long way to making your case. You can bet that the developer will be willingly feeding information to the planning Committee and anyone else they identified as important in the decision making process.

Who else should I lobby?

Get in touch with your elected officials. Invite them to a meeting, offer them a site visit so they can see your objections, get your supporters to contact them and remember that they will be looking for votes in the future! The more people get in touch with them, the more likely they are to support your position.

Who are the important political players in the area? How strong are the various political parties in the area? Who are the civic and business leaders that can influence the campaign? Winning the support of a particularly influential leader in the community can often make the campaign much easier.

Tips on Lobbying Tactics

There are many different ways to lobby your elected representatives. All of them have value. What you need to remember is that you hold the power in the relationship. They rely on you and others like you for votes.

Developers will be lobbying these officials and will be providing your elected representatives with information on the project, the benefits and the impact it will have. This is obviously a biased source. Therefore providing them with an alternative source of information is a must. In all but the rarest of cases, these developers will not form part of the electorate, and this is your advantage.

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The key to success lies in your preliminary research into the key decision makers. It is no good spending time lobbying someone who has no influence in the decision making process. Use your political and stakeholder audit to identify the members of the planning committee, your own local councillors and Member of Parliament. Take the time to identify those that will be coming up for re-election soon. These are ultimately your easiest targets as they will be keen to pander to public opinion in the hope this will help them when the time comes for re-election.

Keep the process simple. Start by introducing your organisation, the issue, and your campaign. This can be achieved by:

- Writing a letter
- Sending an email
- Through a phone conversation
- A Visit to their surgery (call their office for times)

A truly successful campaign will use a blend of all four actions to ensure your elected representative is fully briefed on your activities. All politicians want to be kept informed, know how good a job they are doing, and what is troubling you because they need your vote in the next election. Theoretically, your troubles are their troubles – although it may take a little pressure for them to take on board your campaign.

Always close your letters or emails, or any contact for that matter with the line “I look forward to your reply”, or they may not reply. Remember your power is that your representative is obliged to respond to your requests, and listen to your concerns. They will be campaigning for your vote soon enough.

If they are supportive of the issue, invite them to take part in an action and advise local media of their support. Getting even one to commit to supporting you will add weight and credibility to your campaign. It will also increase the likelihood of others joining. Make sure you get any support in writing so that they are tied in to supporting you.

Politicians will try hard not to get tied down to a position. So over time, you may have to start upping the ante to get them on board. A variety of techniques can be used from:

- Getting a letter published in the local paper explaining the issue and your elected representative’s inaction.

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- Organising a public meeting on the issue and inviting your ER – and if they are “unable to attend”, request they send someone else to speak on their behalf or submit a written statement stating their position.
- Pressuring the local media to ascertain their position.
- Get local school children to write letters.
- Speaking to political opponents. They are always looking for divisive community issues that have popular support.