

PRESS RELEASE FROM CPRE LONDON, JUST SPACE, FRIENDS OF THE EARTH and LONDON FORUM OF AMENITY AND CIVIC SOCIETIES

UNDER EMBARGO UNTIL: 18.00 hrs Monday 27 April, 2020

CAMPAIGNERS CALL FOR MEASURES TO SAFEGUARD THE PUBLIC VOICE IN PLANNING

New virtual planning practices risk undermining democracy in planning decisions

Following new legislationⁱ introduced by the Government in response to the coronavirus crisis, campaign groups are today (Monday) calling on local authorities to adopt measures to safeguard the public voice in planning decisions.

Drawing attention to a number of troubling casesⁱⁱ from London and other parts of the country, CPRE Londonⁱⁱⁱ, Just Space^{iv}, Friends to the Earth^v and the London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies^{vi} have agreed a set of key principles^{vii} that they are asking local authorities to adopt to avoid abuses of the planning process. These include:

- The need for fully democratic ‘virtual’ committees to be open to all, with speaking rights for members of the public.
- No decisions should be delegated to closed meetings.
- Best practice should be followed for involving communities, especially disadvantaged communities and those with less access to online technology.

Neil Sinden, Director of CPRE London said:

‘While the planning system has an important role to play in helping the economy after the Covid 19 crisis, we must not undermine the democratic decision-making process. Local community and environmental groups often play a valuable part in informing and improving planning decisions, helping to secure development that is in the wider public interest.’

Lucy Rogers of Just Space said:

‘Covid 19 regulations are being interpreted in ways that exclude public voices, even though citizens’ rights are embodied in all council constitutions. We are calling on Councils to widen participation, not find ways to weaken it.’

Kate Gordon, senior planner, Friends of the Earth said:

‘If present circumstances have anything to teach us it is the need for planning to give greater priority to people, nature, and the environment. It is also vital that communities continue to play a role in decisions that will affect not just their neighbourhood, but the wider environment for years to come.’

Peter Eversden, Chairman, London Forum said:

‘We endorse the goal of keeping Planning going through the lockdown - but not at any price. Public participation is essential, not only to ensure that good decisions are made, but also to sustain trust in the planning process through this crisis.’

ENDS

For further information please contact:

Lucy Rogers, Just Space – 07903 975473

Neil Sinden, Director, CPRE London – 07496 805354 neil@cprelondon.org.uk

Friends of the Earth press office – 0207 566 1649 / 07718 394786 (out of hours – please do not text this number) media@foe.co.uk

Peter Eversden, London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies – 07757 667232
planning@londonforum.org.uk

NOTES

1. Coronavirus Act 2020 Section 78 provides for powers to amend arrangements for local authority meetings.
<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2020/7/section/78/enacted>
2. Borough of Enfield took a major decision in a meeting closed to the public using Covid19 regulations as the reason. In Croydon speaking rights replaced by written statements. Islington, meeting not publicised. Method of voting, speaker rights vary. Manchester City Council: all decisions to be taken in closed meetings by a panel of three
<https://www.placenorthwest.co.uk/news/trio-take-over-manchester-planning-decisions/>
3. CPRE London is part of the national network of CPRE, the countryside charity. It campaigns to save Green Belt, Metropolitan Open Land and other green spaces within Greater London, and is passionate about making London a greener and healthier place for everyone to live, work and enjoy.
4. Just Space is an informal alliance of around 80 community groups, campaigns and concerned independent organisations, which acts as a voice for Londoners at grass-roots level during the formulation of London's major planning strategy.
<https://justspace.org.uk/about/>
5. Friends of the Earth is an international community dedicated to the protection of the natural world and the wellbeing of everyone in it. We bring together more than two million people in 75 countries, combining people power all over the world to transform local actions into global impact.
<https://friendsoftheearth.uk/> @friends_earth
6. The London Forum represents the views and interests of well over 100 amenity and civic societies in London on issues that are important for those who work and live in the capital. The Forum concerns itself with Planning, Development Management, Heritage, Transport, Environment, Waterways and Open Spaces.
7. **STATEMENT** on following page

SAFEGUARDING THE PUBLIC VOICE IN PLANNING IN THE COVID ERA

A joint statement by Just Space, CPRE London, Friends of the Earth and London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies

April, 2020

The new Covid19 regulations for Local Authority meetings risk undermining the community's role in the planning process, as decisions could be made in virtual committees and closed meetings for up to one year.

The way the planning system operates, like so much else, is going through significant change as a result of the coronavirus. It is vital that the process is not distorted in ways which disadvantage the vital role of community groups in informing local planning decisions.

While planning has an important role to play in economic recovery, we have found serious dangers in the way in which some councils are changing their decision-making processes, which could result in long-term damage to the interests of local communities and to the environment.

Our rapid review reveals that Councils are interpreting the new rules for virtual meetings in very different ways. Some are re-assembling their planning committees online, while others will make key major planning decisions in closed meetings or increase delegation to unelected planning officers. The ad hoc access to the democratic process creates an unfair 'postcode lottery' for local communities.

Under normal circumstances major planning decisions are made by a vote in open meetings of elected councillors, with speaking rights for applicants and objectors. Fairness and transparency are fundamental to every Local Authority's constitution and to planning policy. These principles risk being eroded.

We are calling on the Secretary of State and Local Planning Authorities to safeguard the role of local communities in the planning process and ask them to respect **six key principles:**

- 1.** No planning application normally decided by a committee should be decided using delegated or executive powers.
- 2.** Virtual meetings should be reliably live streamed on video, with speaking rights for public objectors / third party representatives, as with normal committee meetings.
- 3.** Councils should produce a report setting out how, under the Covid 19 regulations, they will follow best practice for the involvement of communities, particularly disadvantaged communities and those with less access to technology and broadband.
- 4.** Councils should create, and promote widely, a designated website page giving full information on upcoming meetings and consultations, providing clear guidance to communities and third parties on how to take part.
- 5.** Councils should look to extending deadlines attached to the determination of planning applications and responding to consultations.

6. Any public referenda or votes associated with Estate Regeneration should be put on hold until there is a reliable, democratic way to vote, as has happened with the referenda for Neighbourhood Plans.

The role of Government

The Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) must do more to recognise the important role of communities in decision-making and to highlight the risks of failing to engage local communities. The input and expertise of communities and third parties can be critical to the creation of better, more resilient developments.

We are calling on Ministers to temporarily relax or extend deadlines for the determination of planning applications, to take the pressure off councils while they make the necessary changes to their systems, and to provide further guidance to them.

The pressure to keep the economy moving is not a reason to allow short-term, environmentally-damaging development that we may live to regret.