

Motion: A People's Advocate in Planning Cases

a proposal from Canterbury & Coastal Liberal Democrats (English Constitution Policy Group)

1) This conference notes:

- that there is a perception of a democratic deficit at the first stage of the local authority planning process;
- and that local communities wish to have a greater say about key decisions which affect their lives.

2) This conference believes:

* that it is desirable to increase the transparency and objectivity of the planning process.

3) This conference proposes:

- that "People's Advocates" are funded to represent local community concerns about applications to planning authorities.

Explanation

Transparency, rigour and accountability of planning and building development outcomes are a prerequisite for public confidence. This proposal aims to increase public confidence in the accountability of local authority democracy.

The motion proposes introducing a "People's Advocate" as an option into the process for large local planning applications including housing, commercial, industrial or other infrastructure projects and for "change of use" classifications. The People's Advocate will have access to all council information for that planning application, be given parity with developers in respect of dialogue with the planning authority and be granted equal representation at planning committee meetings.

In order for properly constituted local groups to appoint a People's Advocate, they would have to obtain the endorsement of three councillors of the relevant authority. They could then apply for a "match funded" grant of up to £5,000 per annum from their local council to secure a People's Advocate, who must be a suitably qualified professional, who will be accountable to the awarded group. The group will be free of any fee levy by the council or by the development applicant.

Each planning authority will have a minimum budget of £50,000 per annum for these purposes, with greater sums on a per capita basis for larger district and city councils. The funding will come from central government. Local authorities will publish their reasons about funding and their decisions will be subject to judicial review, to help ensure that awards of grants are not unreasonably withheld.

Our proposal is that there will be a pilot project of 8 selected local authorities in England.

The political pull: why this proposal will have traction with voters

It is a simple, cheap and understandable proposal. It introduces a safety valve into the democratic process. That valve will be needed as more communities find developers proposing significant residential and other building schemes, in accordance with government house-building plans. The proposal shows public authorities in a positive light. It also encourages citizens to participate in local democracy. It is not anti-developer. It would appeal to the grass roots. And, by giving power to local people, goes to the heart of the Liberal Democrat agenda.

Dated: 12 September 2018