

Statement to the Community and Governance Committee by David Orr 14th February 2023

The Lib Dems are known for principled policies around localism and community engagement. You are at the moment implementing Local Community Networks to support those policies.

This is at odds with the controversial proposal today that objectors to a planning application only get one 3-minute slot for all speakers.

This actively disengages communities and limits their voices in an undemocratic way.

Are you seriously proposing that if my neighbour has a single-storey extension, I get 3 minutes to object, while many objectors to a huge urban extension for thousands of homes by national developers, also gets just 3 minutes? If so, then this is absurd.

Why would a Lib Dem administration want to export these draconian speaking limitations from Conservative-controlled Sedgemoor all across Somerset?

You can, of course, ignore the “small p politics” of this and carry on. However, over the coming 4 years, controversial planning application by controversial planning application, every impacted community will come to realise how limiting and unfair these undemocratic proposals are.

Can I respectfully remind you that these will be the same people you will want to cast a vote for you in 4 years' time locally and in 2 years' time nationally.

I have been involved in two planning applications that affected me directly. In both cases, the planning officer's recommendations for approval were overturned by the planning committee after public representations - one was legally unfounded and the other clearly over development when rebuilding from 1 storey to 4 storey.

With this undemocratic 3-minute objectors' limit, I doubt that valid community voices and legitimate views would have rightly prevailed in these cases now.

While planning is a rule-based system, there are still human judgements to be made and that is why we have planning committees with elected councillors to make those wise judgements.

In my limited experience, the time that the councillors on the planning committee take to weigh up applications often exceeds the public objectors' speaking time.

There is a need to avoid repetition and clearly the Chair needs to manage the meetings assertively to keep things moving along. Is there a case for better training and support for the Chairs?

I would suggest to you that a sensible baseline for objectors is a maximum of 5 speakers with 3 minutes each. If statements are pre-submitted, the clerk can check for repetition and length.

For very large urban extensions and/or highly controversial applications, where there are often more than 5 significant issues to address, then the Chair may need to exercise discretion to allow more objecting speakers.