



Balancing act

Facts

A major proposed airport extension, combined with both commercial, retail and a casino development, straddles a district council boundary and a unitary authority boundary. For the district council area, the county council is also the Strategic Planning Authority. The whole of the casino “footprint” and a large part of the runway extension for the airport fall within a single parish council.

Given the nature of the development, there are strongly held views both politically and locally. The parish council has been adamantly and absolutely 100% opposed to the matter since day one; the district council and county council would seem to be more against it than for it, but have, by and large, been keeping their powder dry; the unitary authority is entirely in favour.

The local authorities agreed there would be a series of public meetings jointly attended by officers from the district, county and unitary councils to enable full public discussion through the entire area affected. Whilst robust, these have generally been well-behaved, save for the last one.

The last meeting took place after the decision-making papers to be placed before the relevant decision-making bodies of the district, county and unitary authorities have been despatched.

The papers to be considered by the unitary authority recommended approval and endorsement. The papers proposed to be placed before the county and district council meetings were more neutral, although probably erred more towards opposition than not.

As already indicated, the parish council had already decided to oppose the matter come what may.

The key players

Councillor Animal is a long standing member of the parish, district and county councils. A somewhat volatile character, he has a reputation for being very vocal and aggressive in his contributions at meetings and has had complaints made against him over this (although none have reached formal investigation) before.

Councillor Eagle is Leader of the neighbouring Unitary Authority. He is a single minded individual, committed towards delivering the business - some have described him as steely eyed - or a man not to be messed with.

Councillor Bear is also on the Unitary Authority, but of quite a different character. Somewhat woolly and muddle headed, she is committed to a wide range of social and other causes, and tends to regard party politics - including that of the party to which she belongs - as something of an irrelevancy when pursuing what she sees as the greater good.

Scenario A1: Is there an issue?

At the last public meeting, the unitary authority's director of planning, who had previously represented the unitary authority's as the lead and senior planning officer at all of the public meetings, was unable to attend at the last minute and the case planning officer, a relatively junior officer, attended in his stead. Councillor Animal praised loudly county and district council officers whose reports he said, clearly identified the issues, but was highly critical of the unitary authority's planning officer who he described as "incompetent, a complete idiot, and clearly biased".

Councillor Eagle robustly defended his officer and a full tilt political debate took place during the course of this public meeting, with the two members shouting at each other, pointing fingers and generally engaging in what some may regard as a robust political debate and others might regard as something akin to a street brawl. Whilst no punches were actually thrown, both members ultimately squared up to each other, jabbing at each other with their fingers as well as shouting, and the meeting disintegrated in some disarray following this.

At the decision-making meetings of the district and county councils, Councillor Animal restated his allegations, clarifying them and stating that "unitary authority planning officers were buffoons, incompetent, liars and ultimately dishonest".

At the county council, the chairman of the county council rebukes him and requires a retraction, which he refuses to give, and as a result of that, he is excluded.

Councillor Animal made the same comments at the district council, but no action was taken against him, in the sense that the person chairing the meeting did not take exception against his comments, or have him excluded.

At the unitary authority meeting, which is regarded as being somewhat more of a robust political forum, Councillor Eagle described Councillor Animal as no more than an "over-glorified glove puppet" and "unelectable".

Complaints are made against Councillor Animal and Councillor Eagle by each other and against Councillor Animal by the Chief Executive of the unitary authority in respect of his comments about the officers.

Consideration should be given to the behaviour of both members at both the public meetings and the various decision-making meetings, and what issues of consistency / inconsistency may arise.

What do you think about the circumstance and behaviours?

What are the differences of opinion around your table?

Where are the areas for consistency greatest?