

Protocol for Planning Committee Site Visits

1.0 Background

- 1.1 This protocol is intended to guide members of the Planning Control Committee when considering planning applications in deciding on whether site visits are appropriate and the procedure for arranging and carrying out site visits.
- 1.2 It is also intended to inform other stakeholders with an interest in planning applications, e.g. applicants, objectors and agents, about the purpose and procedures at site visits.
- 1.3 Site visits by the Committee are part of the formal committee process and therefore should be dealt with in a consistent and organised manner. Administrative and procedural arrangements on site should be understood by all taking part so that the process is transparent and fair.

2.0 The Purpose of a Site Visit

- 2.1 Site visits help in enabling Members of Planning Committee to understand more fully:
 - the details of a development proposal in the context of the application site,
 - the surrounding land and buildings,
 - issues raised by interested parties.
- 2.2 Site visits can be useful to identify features of a proposal, which may be difficult to convey in a written report, however they may delay the decision on an application.
- 2.3 In order to help avoid such delays procedures are in place to identify applications where site visits may be desirable. This enables Committee to determine whether site visits are likely to be necessary and for them to be carried out prior to applications being reported to the Planning Control Committee.
- 2.4 When a member of the Committee feels that a site visit will be essential, he/she can either make a request to officers in advance or in exceptional circumstances request the Planning Control Committee to defer the determination of the matter until a site visit has been held. Planning Control Committee is at liberty to consider requests from members of the public or ward members but in doing so should follow this guidance.

- 2.5 Where Planning Control Committee is requested to defer a determination to enable a site visit to take place sound reasons should be given for the site visit and they should be recorded in the minutes.
- 2.6 Site visits that may lead to deferral of an application should only be held where:
- the impact of the development is particularly difficult to visualise, or
 - there is good reason why the comments of the applicant or objectors cannot be adequately expressed in writing, or
 - the proposal is particularly contentious, or
 - there are other justifiable reasons for requiring one.
- 2.7 Site visits should not be undertaken to defer difficult decisions on controversial applications, or when applicants, objectors or constituents request them without good planning reasons.
- 2.8 Site visits are part of the meeting of Planning Control Committee. Councillors intending to declare a personal interest should make this known to the Chair and Planning Officer on site. If the interest is not prejudicial the councillor may attend the site visit. They should ensure that their declaration is duly recorded in the minutes of the meeting when the matter comes before committee for determination. Councillors intending to declare a prejudicial interest and withdraw from the meeting on the matter, should not attend the site visit.
- 2.9 Planning Committee members who fail to attend the site visit will need to consider whether they have sufficient knowledge of the site and the issues arising from the site visit to enable them to take part in determining the application.
- 2.10 The report to committee is published 7 days in advance of the Committee meeting with a view that should members of the committee wish they can undertake individual site visits to view the site from public land.

3.0 Arranging Site Visits

- 3.1 Where the Planning Control Committee considers that a site visit is necessary Constitutional Services will make the necessary arrangements.
- 3.2 The following will be invited to the site visit:
- All Members of the Planning Control Committee
 - Ward Members, however if they wish to speak this will be arranged to take place at the committee meeting.

- If appropriate, members of the Conservation Area Advisory Committee
 - The agent (or, in the absence of an agent, the applicant) will be informed in order to secure permission to access the site and make arrangements to access the site.
- 3.2 Objectors/supporters would not normally be invited to attend a site visit. Any request for objectors/supporters to attend will be considered by and will be at the discretion of the Chair.
- 3.3 A copy of the committee report, where available, plans and where appropriate the Site Visit Protocol will be sent to all those notified of the visit.
- 3.4 While officers will attempt to arrange the visit in advance with relevant parties, there is no right to enter on private land without permission of the owner. Where appropriate officers will obtain prior permission from land owner or his agent for those invited to attend the site visit to enter the land. If permission is not given for members and officers to enter, the site will have to be viewed from the public highway/areas.

4.0 Procedure at Site Visits

- 4.1 The Chair of Planning Control Committee will oversee the conduct of site visits. They will start promptly at the time notified to members and interested persons. The Planning Officer will note the names of all members, officers and invitees present. The Planning Officer will ensure, and if possible reconfirm with the owner or his agent, that all those entering the site as part of the inspection have the owner's permission to do so.
- 4.2 Councillors should either travel to the site at the same time as, or with, the planning officer attending the visit or meet the officer on site. If present at the site before the visit begins particular care should be taken to ensure that they maintain their objectivity. Hospitality or lifts should not be accepted from an applicant or objector as this could be seen to show favour.
- 4.3 Councillors and officers, and other people attending, should ensure that mobile phones are turned off or are on silent during the site visit.
- 4.4 At the request of the Chair, the Planning Officer will describe the proposal to councillors and will display plans or drawings of the proposal. If one is available it is expected that councillors will already be familiar with the planning officer's report. The Planning Officer will indicate matters of fact

- in relation to the proposal and surrounding land which Councillors should take account of.
- 4.5 Members of the Planning Control Committee may ask the Planning Officer for factual clarification of any planning matter relating to the proposal or surrounding land, for example, distances to adjoining or objectors' properties or the location of parking spaces. Member questions should be addressed to the planning officer through the Chair. **At no time during the site visit should councillors debate or comment on the planning merits or otherwise of a proposal. Councillors should not discuss the merits of the application as the proper time for this is at the subsequent committee meeting. To do so might imply that the Councillor's mind is already made up. Even comments on the scenery or locality could be perceived as a comment on the appropriateness of the proposal.**
 - 4.6 **The public right to address Planning Control Committee does not arise until the item is reached on the committee agenda. At no time during the site visit will the applicant, their agent, any objector or any other member of the public be allowed to address councillors. The site visit is not for further representations to be made, however occasionally it may be appropriate for interested parties at the site visit to be asked, through the Chair, to point out important or relevant site features however they should not be encouraged to express opinions.**
 - 4.7 Presentations from interested parties, on no account, should be made. If one is commenced the Chair should halt the proceedings to enable the site visit to resume unencumbered.
 - 4.8 In order to assist in ensuring that Councillors receive the same information, they should keep together in one group with the chair and the planning officer and not break away into small groups.
 - 4.9 At the end of the site visit the councillors should leave the site promptly. If necessary they will drive or be transported to the next site visit where the same procedures as above will apply.
 - 4.10 The Planning Officer's record of Councillors' attendance at the site visit is given to the committee clerk for minute purposes.
 - 4.11 When the application is reported to Committee for consideration and debate the Planning Officer will briefly describe during the presentation of the item, the purpose of the site visit and the main aspects viewed.