

Planning Committee Site Visit Protocol – Text for website and the public

Planning Committee members are sometimes required to inspect a site to gain a greater understanding of its location, physical characteristics and relationship to neighbouring properties or land use. This helps them when making a formal decision on a development management (planning) application. This protocol sets out the normal practice for the arrangement and conduct of formal site visits by the Planning Committee.

Requests for site visits

A site inspection will result from any one of the following:

- A request by a councillor in writing during the time that an application is processed (ideally within the initial 21 day consultation period). Councillors will provide reasons for their request.
- The Head of Service for Growth and Economy or the Business Manager County Planning, Minerals and Waste requires one in the interests of proper decision making.
- Planning Committee calls for a site visit following a deferral of a decision (although this should rarely be necessary given the provisions of 1 and 2).

Conduct of site visits

- Site visits are solely for the purpose of viewing the site, understanding its location and immediate environs to be able to put the development proposal into context, and discussing the facts of the application.
- Site visits will commence promptly at the time provided by the Democratic Services Officer.
- Site visits will be led by a council officer, usually the Business Manager and / or the case officer with the assistance of the Chairman.
- On occasion, officers of other authorities or statutory bodies may be invited (by the Head of Service for Growth and Economy / Business Manager County Planning, Minerals and Waste) to attend a site visit to clarify factual matters (for example Cambridgeshire County Council as the local highway authority).
- Third parties (such as media or the public) are not invited or expected to attend site visits. Members of the Committee will not directly engage any third party person present at the site visit and will address any questions to the lead officer through the Chairman.
- Officers will give a brief presentation on the site, the setting of the proposed development and the specific reasons why the Committee / officers requested a site inspection. They will also advise whether the applicant or objectors have requested that the committee view the site from other locations and how that is to be dealt with.

- Councillors will ask their questions through the Chairman including any requests for specific information from the applicant / agent or any other third party. All Committee members need to ensure that they can hear the officers' presentation and the questions and answers.
- The Chairman will seek confirmation that members are satisfied they have seen everything they need to make a decision and will draw the site inspection to a close.
- Members of the Committee should politely avoid engaging in private conversations with applicants, agents or any other third parties including objectors as this can give the wrong impression to others present or anyone observing the site visit.
- For the purposes of factual record, attendance at a site visit will be recorded by the lead officer including the locations visited.
- As the purpose of the visit is not to debate but simply to establish facts about the site and its surroundings, no formal notes of a site visit will be recorded, other than the attendance and locations visited as noted above.

Planning Committee Site Visit Protocol – Text for our Member agreement. Detailed protocol text for councillors and officers to follow but not be published on the website

Introduction:

1. This protocol applies to both councillors who serve on the Planning Committee and officers who support its functions. The protocol supplements the County Council's Code of Conduct. Both councillors and officers should always refer to the provisions of the Code of Conduct in the first instance.
2. The protocol is intended to guide members of the Planning Committee when attending site visits as part of the development management process. In the interests of openness it is also intended to inform other stakeholders with an interest in planning applications e.g. parish councils, applicants, agents, objectors etc., with regard to procedural matters.
3. It is important that site visits are dealt with in a consistent and organised manner and to ensure that administrative and procedural arrangements on site are understood so that all parties involved in the process are dealt with fairly.
4. For reasons of health and safety members of the Planning Committee will notify the Democratic Services Officer in advance of their intention to attend the site visit. Members should not seek to gain access to a site independently of the site visit.
5. If members are not able to attend the scheduled site visit they should contact the Democratic Services Officer or the County Planning, Minerals and Waste Team at the earliest convenience to see if it is possible to arrange a separate visit. The member will always be accompanied by a council officer usually the BM and / or the case

officer. This visit will also be carried out in accordance with the relevant provisions of the site visit protocol.

6. Members of the Planning Committee should never seek to gain access to a site in relation to a planning application due to be considered independently of an organised site visit. However, for clarification, where a member needs to gain access to a site as part of their duties as a division or ward member this falls outside of this remit.
7. All members, including any who were not able to attend the site visit, are entitled to participate in the making of the decision when the proposal is considered at the Planning Committee meeting.

The Purpose of Site Visits:

8. The purpose of the site visit is to enable members of the Planning Committee to:
 - More fully understand matters of fact relating to a development proposal in the context of the application site and the surrounding land and buildings; and
 - More fully understand issues raised by interested parties when the proposal is discussed at the Planning Committee meeting.
9. There are 3 key points for members of the Planning Committee to note:
 - Site visits are not formal meetings of the Planning Committee and no decisions can be taken at the time of the site visit;
 - Members should always, as far as possible, avoid discussion or other actions during the site visit which could be construed as amounting to bias or predetermination. There should be no debate on the merits of the application which should be left to the formal meeting of the Planning Committee; and
 - The Council's Code of Conduct still applies to members during site visits. Everyone attending a site visit should be treated with courtesy and respect.

Procedure at Site Visits:

10. The Chairman of the Planning Committee, or the Deputy Chairwoman of the Planning Committee / their representative, will oversee the site visits to ensure it is conducted effectively.
11. No decision will be made at a site visit by the Committee and the Chairman will make this clear at the beginning of the visit.

12. The council officers, usually the BM and / or the case officer, will describe the proposal and may refer to matters raised in the committee report relating to the application. It is expected that members will be familiar with the committee report. The council officers will also indicate the matters of fact in relation to the proposal and surrounding land which members should take account of.
13. The Chairman will give third parties (e.g. applicant, agent, local member and objectors etc.) an opportunity to clarify any issues and to identify any features which are relevant to the Committee's consideration and to respond to any questions raised by members. The third parties may not address the members present about the merits of the proposal. If any such attempt is made, the Chairman will then advise the relevant third party to cease and that members cannot consider their comments.
14. The Chairman will invite the members of the Planning Committee to raise any matters of fact relating to the application, such as seeking factual clarification on any planning matter relating to the proposal or surrounding land, for example, distances to adjoining properties or objectors' properties or the locations of parking spaces. At no time during the site visit should members debate the planning merits or otherwise of a proposal. If a member makes such attempt, the Chairman will advise them to cease.
15. Members should keep together in one group with the Chairman and council officers and not break away into small groups.
16. Documents, letters or petitions concerning the planning proposal or the site visit from any party will not be accepted at any site visit. Such documents, letters or petitions should be sent directly to the County Planning, Minerals and Waste Team (planningdc@cambridgeshire.gov.uk) copying in the case officer and the Democratic Services Officer and will be referred to in the report(s) to Planning Committee.
17. Once the site has been inspected the Chairman will declare the visit closed and Members should leave the site promptly. If the site visit is one of several taking place on the same day members will drive or be transported to the next site where the same procedures as above will apply.
18. The council officers, usually the BM or the case officer, will keep a record of when a site visit was held, the locations visited and of those who attended the site visits, including any third parties, and will forward this information to the Democratic Services Officer. This information will be made available for inspection upon request from the Democratic Services Officer.

The Role of Members:

19. Members travelling independently shall meet at the agreed meeting location and shall not engage in any discussion with the applicant and/or agent until the Chairman and council officers arrive.
20. Members may ask questions, through the Chairman, of the applicant and/or agent and any third parties during the site meeting.
21. Members should not enter into discussion of the merits of the proposal with the applicant and/or agent and any third parties including other councillors during the site visit.
22. In order to maintain impartiality and to avoid any impression to the contrary, members should not engage with the applicant, agent or third parties on unrelated matters during the site visit.
23. Members shall conduct themselves at all times in line with the Code of Conduct.
24. If a member of Planning Committee should need to leave the site visit before the end, they should indicate this to the Chairman or council officers so that this can be noted.

The Role of the Chairman:

25. The Chairman must formally open and close the site visit.
26. The Chairman shall ensure that the members inspect the site as one group. He must also ensure that the members see or inspect all relevant matters so they can fully understand the proposal before them.
27. The Chairman must ensure that the site visit is run in a fair, orderly and productive manner. The Chairman must also ensure that all questions and comments are made through him.
28. Before closing the site visit the Chairman will identify, and ensure members are aware of, any matters of fact raised during the site visit that could not be answered fully and would therefore be the subject of further information. This information will be provided to Planning Committee through the council officers as soon as possible so that it can be considered as part of the Planning Committee meeting.

The role of the council officers:

29. They will describe the matters of fact regarding the proposal as made reference to in the Committee report.
30. They will answer any questions raised by members at the site visit relating to the relevant development plan and national planning policies.
31. Officers will act in support of the effective conduct of the site visit in accordance with this site visit protocol document.
32. They will provide any additional information sought at the site visit to the members of the Committee so that it can be considered as part of the Planning Committee meeting.
33. As stated in the 'procedure at site visits section', the council officers (usually the BM or the case officer) will keep a record of when a site visit was held, the locations visited and who attended the site visits including any third parties and will pass this information on to the Democratic Services Officer. This information will be made available for inspection upon request from the Democratic Services Officer.