

**NORTHUMBERLAND**

Northumberland County Council

**PROTOCOL FOR PLANNING  
COMMITTEE SITE VISITS**

**November 2016**

## Introduction

1. Site visits by Planning Committees can be helpful in reaching a decision on issues where site circumstances are fundamental to the decision. However Committee site visits can cause delay and additional costs for both the developer and the Council and should only be used where the expected benefit is substantial.
2. Members have access to any application which is to be determined by a Planning Committee and can discuss this with officers prior to the meeting. Officers will be happy to provide them with any required documents should they wish to visit the site themselves.
3. At the committee meeting officers will present each item with reference to accompanying photographs and maps and can answer any relevant questions. This should alleviate the requirement for committee site visits in the majority of cases.
4. Where site visits are considered appropriate Committee site visits should:
  - focus precisely on the observation of site factors which are relevant to the decision
  - not be an opportunity for lobbying, public address, submission of new information etc;
  - not be used purely as an opportunity to defer consideration (if there is a good reason to defer consideration of an application, this should be done openly at the Committee meeting)
  - involve the whole Committee
  - always involve officer representation
  - be carefully conducted so that councillors cannot be accused of bias towards any of the parties involved
  - be monitored in terms of cost and impact on decisions.
5. A site visit should only be arranged where:
  - a proposal is contentious, or
  - particularly complex, AND
  - where the potential impact of the proposed development is a crucial factor which the Committee may find it difficult to visualise or assess from the plans and photographs made available at Committee and other supporting material.

The purpose of a Committee site visit should only be to gain further information on a specific issue(s) or to assist Members in gaining a better understanding of the proposal.

6. Where a proposal is clearly contrary to national or Development Plan policy it should be refused for reasons of principle unless material considerations indicate otherwise. A site visit will not normally be

appropriate in the absence of any overriding clear and convincing material considerations, except if necessary to decide whether particular local circumstances warrant the inclusion of additional reasons for refusal.

7. No minutes will be taken of the site visit and no recommendation will be made back to the Committee, as the purpose of the site visit is simply to assist in the decision-making process. Members of the Committee should endeavour to attend site visits to ensure they are fully appraised of all the relevant information prior to making a decision on the application concerned but if all Members cannot attend this will not be a reason to delay determination. A quorum does not apply.

### **Pre Committee Site Visits**

8. For major/particularly contentious applications a site visit may be recommended by officers or Members in advance of determination. These are usually complex applications where it is evident from the start that a site visit would be useful and to proceed to Committee without first carrying out such a visit would potentially delay an application unnecessarily. In such cases the relevant officer will make a recommendation to the Planning Chair of the appropriate Planning Committee and the Head of Service that a site visit be undertaken prior to the determination of the application. The Chair in conjunction with the Head of Service will decide if a site visit is necessary.
9. In such cases where it is decided that a site visit is necessary a letter will be attached to the Committee Agenda and Papers formally inviting members to the site visit, although in addition to this all interested parties should be notified of the date soon after it is confirmed to give as much notice of the visit as possible. It is expected that site visits will be conducted on the Monday prior to the Planning Committee on Tuesday. The Committee papers will provide Members with all the information of the proposed application. This information will also be sent to the other interested parties invited.
10. If a Member wishes to propose that a pre-committee site inspection is necessary for an application they should speak to the Planning Chair in conjunction with the Head of Service as soon as practicable requesting that the site visit and reason for it. Proper planning reasons should be given to support the request in accordance with paragraph 5 and 6 of this Protocol. A pre-committee site visit cannot be requested by the applicant/agent, parish/town council or member of the public and members should be mindful of lobbying by objectors and applicants. The Planning Chair and the Head of Service will consider if a site visit is necessary and in such cases that it is they will invite members as set out in paragraph 9.

### **Other site visits**

11. Where there has been no pre-committee site visit the relevant Planning Committee may resolve at committee that a Member site visit is required in respect of a specific planning application or enforcement matter. This can be moved and voted upon in the usual way (moved, seconded, vote) at any time after the presentation of the officer's report. The reasons for each site visit must be established and should accord with paragraph 5 and 6 of this Protocol. The reasons will be clearly recorded in the minutes of the meeting.

### **Organisation of Committee Site Visits**

12. The organisation of the site visit will fall to Democratic Services supported by the relevant planning officers. Officers (from the services listed below) will send invites to the following to the site visits (with accompanying directions etc)
  - all Members of the relevant Planning Committee attached to the Committee Agenda and Papers (actioned by Democratic Services).
  - the Ward Member(s) (Democratic Services). (If an application is sited close to the boundary between county council electoral boundaries, any immediately neighbouring County Councillors affected may also be invited.)
  - up to 2 members of the relevant Town/Parish Council (Democratic Services). (If an application is sited close to a local council electoral boundary/ies, representatives from the councils concerned may also be invited.)
  - relevant statutory consultees, including other NCC departments (Planning Services).
  - The applicant/agent (Planning Services).
13. Other third parties will not be invited to attend a site visit. However, there may be exceptional circumstances where the Chair of the Planning Committee does allow for third parties to attend the site visit. If this does occur then the third parties will be expected to make their own transport arrangements for the visit.
14. No opportunity for speaking will be afforded to any party other than Members of the Planning Committee who attend the site visit unless specifically requested by the Chair of the relevant planning committee in

order to answer questions of fact. This will be pointed out by the Chair at the beginning of the site visit.

15. At least two planning officers should attend a Member site visit, one of whom should be the case officer.

### **Format of Committee Site Visits**

16. For all site visits it is expected that the Members will have considered the Committee Report attached to the invitation to the site visit. The report will have provided Members with a description of the proposal, consultee and public responses and an appraisal of the application identifying the key issues raised by the proposal. There will also be an officer recommendation.
17. On assembling at the site at the time specified, the Chair of the Committee will open the meeting and advise those present of the purpose of the site visit in line with this Protocol and of the procedure to be followed, so that all are aware that it is a fact-finding exercise only and that no decision will be taken until the Planning Committee meeting.
18. Members should stay close together and should not engage in discussion individually or in small groups with others who may be present. Any request for Members to express a view or offer of hospitality should be politely declined as should any invitations for Members to enter any properties.
19. The planning case officer in attendance will describe the development and point out/explain the issue(s) which Members have come to view, making use of relevant plans when appropriate.
20. Members should address any questions of clarification through the Chair to the planning officers present and should be careful not to express any opinion on the relevant planning application.

### **Consideration of a planning matter following a Committee Site Visit**

21. All members of the relevant Planning Committee, including any who were not able to attend the site visit, are entitled to participate in the consideration of the application in the normal manner when it is reported back to Committee. There will be no formal reporting back to the Committee on the site visit.

