

SOUTH OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

PROTOCOL FOR FORMAL PLANNING COMMITTEE SITE VISITS

The purpose of this Protocol

This protocol is intended to ensure that council planning committee site visits are carried out in a well organised, efficient, open and transparent manner in order to ensure that they form a credible and robust component of the main function of the planning committee, which is to make sound decisions in the determination of planning applications placed before it.

The DM manager Vale and DM manager South are responsible for maintaining this protocol and to ensure harmonisation of the protocol between both councils.

Pre site visit requirements.

Prior to the site visit taking place, there are several critical administrative functions that need to be completed to ensure stakeholder's receives timely communications pertaining to the visits, maintenance of attendance registers and to mitigate risks (physical and otherwise) on the day of the site visits.

These functions include:

- The relevant case officer to communicate to all stakeholders (internal and external to the council) the key information relating to the site visit 5 working days prior to proposed date including a full agenda for the day. The invitation to attend outlines the importance of attendance for officers and members and communicates any recognised risks or issues.
- The site visit lead officer to prepare the site visit register detailing the relevant committee members expected to attend (pass to customer service on return to office for scanning and sharing with LDS and corporate strategy).

The purpose of the site visit

The site visit is solely for the benefit of members of the planning committee. It is intended to provide an opportunity for members of the committee to see the site of a planning application, including its surroundings and to visualise the proposed development in context in order to gain a better understanding of any impacts (positive and negative) and ensure that the decision making of the committee is informed with the benefit of having been to the site.

The focus of the site visit

The site visit will generally focus on the application site, but could also involve looking at it from different locations and vantage points both near to and far from the actual site itself. It may also involve looking at it from adjoining land;

particularly where there have been objections from interested parties where members may wish to gauge the degree of alleged impacts for themselves.

Who attends the site visit

The committee will attend the site visit, supported by a lead council officer, and usually the case officer handling the relevant planning application. The ward councillor(s) may also attend the site visit.

In order to gain access to the application site, the applicant and/or their agent will be invited to attend for their particular proposal, along with any other third party deemed to have a material interest upon whose land members may also want to view the proposal from. Such people will be specifically notified for this purpose. If you have not been notified of the site visit, you will not be eligible to attend. It is not mandatory to attend as an interested third party, but if you do not attend after being notified, or make alternative access arrangements, the committee may not view the proposal from your land. Likewise it is not mandatory for the applicant/agent to attend but arrangements must be made for access. The applicant/agent of the site or third parties may not be notified if the site can be viewed from public land.

The general approach

All notified parties will meet at the application site, on highway land where possible, at the agreed date and time, the details of which will have been previously confirmed in writing.

The site visit is a formal meeting and will be chaired usually the chairman of the committee, the vice-chairman, or the committee members will elect a chairman for the site visit, who will start the process off. This will include explaining the purpose of the site visit and the way it will be conducted. This will be followed by a summary overview of the proposal by either the lead officer or the case officer. The chairman will then lead the visit onto the site.

Third parties who attend the site visit will be able to accompany the committee on the application site, on the understanding that the applicant and/or their agent will be able to accompany the committee onto the land belonging to the third parties present. This is in the interest of transparency and openness as to the conduct of the committee. If agreement is not reached in terms of mutual access then the committee will visit each site in the presence of the relevant party only.

The site visit is not an opportunity to make verbal representations to the committee from either the applicant/agent, or any third party in attendance. Any attempt to do this or disrupt the site visit itself will not be tolerated and may result in your exclusion from the process.

All parties involved in the process must show restraint and respect to all parties concerned, and cooperate with the committee when reasonable requests are made that are deemed necessary to complete the site visit.

Members of the committee, through the chairman may seek clarification from the officers, the applicant/agent and/or third parties in relation to particular issues relevant to the proposal to enhance their benefit from the site visit.

Questions asked by the committee will be put such that all parties present can hear both the question and the response.

Planning committee obligations (and ward members where applicable)

Members of the committee will:

- Try and attend site visits organised by the council;
- Avoid, where possible, undertaking independent site visits;
- Treat the site visit only as an opportunity to observe the site and seek relevant information and clarification;
- Keep together as a single group while on site;
- Not express opinions or views to anyone;
- Not have separate conversations with applicants/agents or third parties;
- Not hear representations from any other party, with the exception of the ward member(s), provided these are put through the chairman, and focus only on site factors and site issues;
- Not give any indication as to how they will vote at the meeting;
- Apply the rules in the councillors' code of conduct and code of good practice, and follow this site visit protocol; and
- Treat every person taking part in the site visit with respect and courtesy.

Planning officer obligations

Planning officers will:

- Support the committee on all organised site visits;
- Attend meetings with all relevant documentation and measurement aids;
- Provide a verbal overview of the proposal at the start of each site visit;
- Answer questions and provide clarification to committee members on request, where pursued through the chairman;
- Not have separate conversations with applicants/agents or third parties;
- Not hear representations from any other party with the exception of the ward member(s) provided these are put through the chairman, and focus only on site factors and site issues;
- Focus only on matters relevant to the application proposal;

- Provide at least five calendar days written notification of the meeting point, date and time of the proposed site visits to all interested parties, including the applicant/agent, relevant objectors/supporters and ward members(s) and
- Treat every person taking part in the site visit with respect and courtesy.
- Undertake a risk assessment for the committee to undertake the site visit

Interested parties obligations

Interested parties will:

- Only attend site visits where you have had formal notification of the event;
- Allow all interested parties, applicant/agent onto your land to accompany you, officers, ward members and the committee on the site visit;
- Respond to relevant questions asked by the committee through the officer;
- Ensure it is safe to enter your land for all parties concerned, notifying the case officer at least one working day prior to the meeting of any potential risks or hazards;
- Not attempt to make any verbal representations to the committee or an individual member of the committee at the site visit;
- Not attempt to engage individual officers or members of the committee in conversation; and
- Treat every person taking part in the site visit with respect and courtesy.