

Review of Committee Site Visit Procedure

There is currently no formal procedure by which Members of the Planning Committee can request a Members site visit for a planning application other than by seeking a resolution through the Committee when the item is presented. In exceptional circumstances Officers prepare reports seeking approval for an “up-front” site visit, however, there are no set thresholds for when this happens. There are generally 10-15 site visits undertaken per annum.

The current system creates a number of problems including:

- Deferral of items from Planning Committee for site visits adds delay to decision making
- Residents and applicants attend Committee meetings expecting a decision to be made, it is a wasted trip if the application is then deferred for a site visit
- In the cases for applications with public speaking, the view given from the public speakers is given before a deferral and then there is no opportunity to address the Committee when the application returns for a decision
- Some Members will be barred from voting on applications when they return from a site visit if they were not in attendance when the item was deferred
- Preparing up-front site visit reports cost officer time and results in some inconsistency in the type of applications that are recommended for a site visit
- In the case of up-front site visits, Members are asked to vote on a site visit before the officers report is available and the recommendation may not be finalised
- Generally there is low attendance on site visits

The Planning Committee Review Group as part of its work has agreed for a new procedure to be considered alongside the reduction in the size of the Committee and other process changes.

Suggested alternative procedure

Planning applications are determined by the Planning Committee through the following routes:

- Applications called to Planning Committee by a Councillor, either through the 7-day referral process or through request during the application process
- Applications referred to Planning Committee due to the number of representations received (contrary to the officer recommendation) triggering public speaking
- Applications referred to Planning Committee at the discretion of the Planning Development Manager, applications where the applicant is the Council or an officer of the Council, or developments with strategic implications

In order to meet the objectives identified above Officers propose the following site visit procedure.

Applications referred to committee by a Councillor

- When an application is referred to committee by a Councillor, either through the 7-day process or by request, the Councillor is currently required to give reasons as to why the application should be presented to the committee
- Therefore, at the time of calling the application to committee, the Councillor shall also state whether they consider a Members site visit should be undertaken

- When making a request for a site visit Members must explain why a site visit is required and state what features of the site or development require an on-site assessment, i.e. presence of protected trees, relationships to existing buildings, specific development character traits in the immediate vicinity
- The final decision as to whether to hold a site visit will be for the Planning Development Manager, in consultation with the Chairman of the Planning Committee. This will be discussed during Chairman's pre-committee briefing normally held on the Thursday before Planning Committee
- Provided the reasons for requesting a site visit are clear, and in the opinion of the Chairman of Planning Committee and the Planning Development Manager hold merit, requests for a site visit are likely to be supported
- Members will be advised of site visit items and arrangements on the Friday preceding a Planning Committee meeting.
- The site visit will then be held either on the Monday or Tuesday of the week of the Planning Committee (or the working day before Planning Committee should the committee schedule change) to which the application is to be presented
- Attendance at site visits will be recorded but will not be compulsory and failure to attend shall not prevent a Member voting on an application. The working group felt that at least one quarter of the new committee should attend such site visits. Ward members should be invited to attend as well.
- In the unlikely event that a request for a site visit is declined, this shall not prevent any Member presenting a motion to the committee for a site visit

Applications referred to committee due to volume of representations

- Planning Committee agendas are generally published early on the Tuesday of the week preceding the Planning Committee meeting*
- Members will have until 12pm on the Thursday preceding the Planning Committee meeting to request a site visit for a specific item on that agenda
- Requests should be made to the Committee Manager of Democratic Services (copied to the Case Officer and Planning Development Manager) and should explain why a site visit is required and state what features of the site or development require an on-site assessment, i.e. presence of protected trees, relationships to existing buildings, specific development character traits in the immediate vicinity
- Before requesting a formal site visit Members should consider whether it would be possible to view the relevant part of the application site from public areas and whether this would negate the need for an organised site visit
- The final decision as to whether to hold a site visit will be for the Planning Development Manager, in consultation with the Chairman of the Planning Committee. This will be discussed during Chairman's pre-committee briefing normally held on the Thursday before Planning Committee
- Provided the reasons for requesting a site visit are clear, and in the opinion of the Chairman of Planning Committee and the Planning Development Manager hold merit, requests for a site visit are likely to be supported
- Members will be advised of site visit items and arrangements on the Friday preceding the committee
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- Attendance at site visits will be recorded but will not be compulsory and failure to attend shall not prevent a Member voting on an application. The working group felt that at least one quarter of the new committee should attend such visits. Ward members should be invited to attend as well.

- In the unlikely event that a request for a site visit is declined, this shall not prevent any Member proposing a motion to the committee for a site visit

** Alternative arrangements and timescale may be required to account for Bank Holidays, these will be determined on a case by case basis*

Applications referred to Planning Committee by the Planning Development Manager

- On referring any item to the planning committee for determination the Planning Development Manager may elect to hold a member site visit
- In the event that the Planning Development Manager does not elect to hold a site visit, any member may request a site visit through the process above
- The final decision as to whether to hold a site visit will be for the Planning Development Manager, in consultation with the Chairman of the Planning Committee. This will be discussed during Chairman's pre-committee briefing normally held on the Thursday before Planning Committee
- Members will be advised of site visit items and arrangements on the Friday preceding the Planning Committee
- The site visit will then be held either on the Monday or Tuesday of the week of the Planning Committee (or the working day before Planning Committee should the committee schedule change) to which the application is to be presented
- Attendance at site visits will be recorded but will not be compulsory and failure to attend shall not prevent a Member voting on an application. The working group felt that at least one quarter of the new committee should attend. Ward members should be invited to attend as well.

Failure to follow the prescribed procedure

All requests for site visits should be made through this procedure. Time limits must be adhered to by all parties to ensure site visits can be agreed and arranged. In exceptional circumstances an issue may arise during the debate of the item at planning committee that may necessitate the need for a site visit. Members may still propose a motion to the committee for a site visit, however, they will be expected to explain why it was not possible to have identified the need for a site visit at an earlier stage of the process. Member should not propose a motion for a site visit at planning committee if it could reasonably have been expected to be made in advance.

Conclusions

The new system would deliver the following benefits:

- The new process would remove a cause of delay to the determination of applications
- It would enable better decision making by giving Members an opportunity to visit the site before the presentation and public speaking
- Would provide an improved customer experience by minimising wasted trips to Planning Committee meetings
- Would save officer time and reduce costs by eliminating unnecessary reports for up-front site visits and re-sending application to a committee meeting following a deferral
- Would ensure that Members have equal opportunity to request site visits and would promote consistency in selecting items for a site visit
- Requiring Members to review the committee agenda at an earlier stage may allow other issues or clarifications to be identified at an earlier stage of the process.