



Committee Site Visits – Code of Practice

[Revised July 2013]

Preamble

Site visits by the Planning Committee are expensive in terms of members' and officers' time and have the effect of delaying decisions. They should not, therefore, be sought lightly and without good reason. Members should note that a planning officer will already have inspected the site and for some applications may have taken photographs. Whilst members may not be familiar with a site there will usually be sufficient material displayed at the Planning Committee meeting to enable an objective assessment of the case to be made.

The key principle remains that a site visit must enable the Planning Committee to learn something about the site which could not otherwise be appreciated

Circumstances where a committee site visit may be appropriate

1. Where the characteristics of the site cannot adequately be described in words or by reference to plans. For example, the Planning Committee might wish to experience for themselves smell or noise at a site, or see a particular view. Issues of overlooking or loss of privacy, however, can usually be adequately described in the officer's written report, as can the landscape quality of a site or architectural merits of a building or streetscape.
2. Where the characteristics of a site are unusually complex e.g. spatial relationships between buildings or particular changes of levels.
3. Where the internal features of a building are of particular importance.
4. Where the proposal is of Chichester District-wide significance in terms of its physical scale, architectural merits or economic impact or transport effects e.g. a major urban redevelopment or power-generation plant. The need under these circumstances is for all the members of the committee to appreciate fully the site characteristics before debating the proposal.
5. The Planning Committee will always visit a Housing Exception site (saved policy H9 of the *Chichester District Local Plan First Review 1999*) before debating such a proposal and may visit other sites as appropriate to the circumstances of the case.

Circumstances where a committee site visit is not appropriate

1. As a means of delaying an application e.g. so that a particular member can be present or absent or to enable an applicant or objector to address the committee at a convenient time.

2. Where the local member has failed to familiarise himself or herself with the site characteristics.
3. Where the Planning Committee wishes to avoid or delay taking a difficult or sensitive decision.
4. Where a visit is sought simply to placate a vociferous objector, applicant or parish council or there is a high level of objection or public speakers. Visits should similarly not be sought simply because an application is contentious locally, although such applications may well fall within one of the five categories above.
5. Where the key planning issue is a matter of principle or of policy.
6. Where a visit is sought simply because the Planning Committee will be in the area.
7. Where a visit is sought because of the identity of the applicant e.g. Chichester District Council, a parish council or West Sussex County Council.

Requests for visits

1. Any member of the Planning Committee can request a site visit for an application which is listed on the agenda for a particular meeting. Requests can be made either at the agenda item which deals with withdrawn and deferred applications or during discussion of the application in question. Members will be required to justify the reason for requesting a site visit, bearing in mind the advice in this *Code of Practice*.
2. Requests for site visits are subject to majority voting in the usual way.
3. It is not normally the role of officers to suggest or propose committee site visits.
4. The chairman has discretion to add applications for consideration at the following meeting to the list of those to be visited.
5. The members who propose and second resolutions for site visits will normally be expected to attend those visits.
6. Dates of visits are given in the committee timetable of meetings and will not usually be varied unless there is a specific justification eg to note traffic conditions on a particular day or time of day.

Procedure during site visits

1. Visits are private inspections to gain an understanding of the facts relating to an application. They are not formal meetings of the Planning Committee and they are not open to the public. There are no minutes of site visits. Representatives of the applicant, local groups, the parish council, consultees or third parties will not be invited and cannot attend. If the applicant, agent, objector or other third parties at the site are present on site they will be

requested to wait out of earshot. In exceptional circumstances owners, agents or applicants might need to be present e.g. for security reasons or to provide factual clarification, but such attendance raises obvious probity and Human Rights issues and will emphatically not be normally allowed. This applies especially where the Planning Committee inspects the interior of a building. Members should refrain from detaching themselves from the group and under no circumstances should they talk to applicants, neighbours or third parties. If necessary, the chairman and lead officer will speak to other parties and explain the procedure.

2. Site visits have particular health and safety implications and all those attending should be aware of personal safety hazards. A separate risk assessment for committee site visits has been carried out on a generic basis, but individual sites may have specific risks and advice from the lead officer on health and safety matters should always be followed. This will be particularly relevant with large numbers of people near highways or on construction sites. Personal protective clothing and equipment issued by the officer should be used.
3. Persons present at the visit will be the Planning Committee members, other Council members (at the chairman's discretion) and officers only, unless the chairman determines that it is essential for another party to be present.
4. The chairman will open proceedings and the officer will describe the proposal and explain the site features.
5. Members can question officers and naturally there will be some discussion of the application to assist understanding, but the purpose of the visit is to view the site and surroundings and there must be no debate as to the merits of the application. No decisions on any matter can be reached.
6. The application will then be reported back to the next available meeting of the Planning Committee for debate and determination. Members can express at that meeting their considered thoughts and findings from the site visit.