

Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council

Determination of Planning Applications: Officer Site Visits Protocol

1. An overview:

- 1.1 Site visits by planning case officers form a key part of some development management decisions. However, it is important to note that many applications can be determined without a site visit taking place, either because of the nature of the proposals or the prevailing circumstances of the site itself.
- 1.2 Whether a site visit is needed will be dependent on the individual circumstances of the case and is for the assigned case officer to make a professional judgement on. The guidance below is therefore intended to serve as an indication of what those considerations might be in any given case.
- 1.3 It should be noted that this does not relate to the undertaking of Member site inspections which occasionally take place in connection with applications that will be determined by Planning Committee rather than by officers.

2. Alternative means of gathering evidence

- 2.1 Before establishing whether a site visit is required as part of the assessment process, the case officer will review the application documents and all available information sources, including (but not necessarily limited to):
 - Application submission documents
 - Planning history records held by the Council
 - Web-based mapping systems held by the Council
 - Using digital records such as Google Earth and Street View
 - Requesting additional photographic or video material of applicants/agents
 - Material provided by third parties in making their representations
- 2.2 Where such information sources provide a comprehensive picture of the site and its surroundings sufficient to make a detailed and complete assessment, there will be no need to undertake a site visit. This will be a matter for the case officer to reach a judgement on.

3. When will we undertake site visits and what happens:

- 3.1 Officers will generally carry out a site visit where it is considered necessary to fully understand how it fits into its context and to identify any specific features or

characteristics that cannot be fully understood from the application submission or via desktop means (see Section 3 below).

- 3.2 Wherever possible and practicable to do so, officers will seek to visit sites without entering them, viewing instead from public vantage points. Where this is not possible, arrangements will be made to obtain site access but even then, it is not necessary for an applicant or their agent to attend these site visits unless there are any access limitations or health and safety considerations that require such presence. Officers will not discuss the details of the case with applicants or their agent during a site visit.
- 3.3 Officers consider a variety of different issues during their site visits including (but not limited to)
 - relationships between boundaries and buildings,
 - location of key features such as neighbouring windows and important trees
 - appearance of buildings and surrounding land
 - prevailing land levels and intervening physical features between sites
- 3.4 It should be noted that site visits are not means by which to verify technical matters such as highway safety or drainage.
- 3.5 It is very rare that case officers need to visit third party private land outside the application site itself, even when objecting neighbours have requested this happens. If having had regard to the full circumstances of the application the case officer considers this the only way to establish impact, appropriate arrangements will be made for this to happen.