



**East Suffolk Council
Planning Committee Review
September 2025**

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1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 This review has been undertaken by the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) at the request of East Suffolk Council (the planning authority) after some challenging meetings and has looked at the way that the authority's North and South Planning Committees operate, both in terms of how decisions are made and the experience for those watching or taking part.

1.2 The review focuses on the committee meetings where two specific planning applications were used as examples, and it is intended as a general health check of the way the North and South Committees operate. The review does not consider the planning merits of the applications themselves in any depth..

1.3 Planning decisions are made based on a range of factors, including planning law, national guidance, and the council's local plan. During the review, it became apparent that some of the concerns expressed about how the committees operated may have stemmed from limited familiarity with planning law and the planning system.

1.4 The absence of a solicitor at the committee meetings means that the planning officers have to address issues on planning law and procedures rather than concentrating on the planning considerations of each case. This can result in a single officer appearing to take a more prominent role in the proceedings, and also puts considerable pressure on the officers involved.

1.5 Officer reports are long and are backed up by long and comprehensive presentations at committee, and in the meetings that were viewed, committee members asked a lot of questions. It is possible that, in the knowledge that a detailed presentation will be given, together with opportunities to ask questions, committee members are disincentivised to invest the time to consider the applications beforehand, limiting the consideration of the planning merits to the, sometimes highly charged, meeting itself.

1.6 During the meetings that were viewed the debate centred on the planning issues, in particular highways issues and the impact on neighbours, but planning policy only came to the fore late on in the proceedings when committee members were putting together a motion to refuse. The role of the planning committee is to implement the local plan through the decisions it makes, therefore the debate should have been led by planning policy considerations.

1.7 There was a degree of disruption involving councillors and residents during the meetings of Planning Committee North when considering the application on Valley Farm. . This behaviour was inappropriate and both meetings would have benefited from firmer chairing. The restricted space in the committee room contributed and in future the number of people viewing proceedings in the room should be restricted to a more manageable number.

1.8 The experience watching the meetings online is poor with a fixed camera position and sometimes poor audio quality, but it is understood that new equipment is to be installed shortly.

1.9 The council does not have a separate planning protocol that sets out the standards of conduct, procedures, and expectations that guide how councillors and officers handle planning matters. The authority relies on the Suffolk code of conduct. A planning protocol would provide clearer guidance for committee members and is something that should be considered following the upcoming local government reorganisation. <https://www.eastsuffolk.gov.uk/yourcouncil/lgr/>

1.10 Although this report makes a number of recommendations, there is nothing to suggest from the meetings that were viewed and the cases that were considered that the decision-making process was anything other than sound.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

R1 Have the council's planning solicitor available at committee meetings to address issues on planning law and procedures to enable the planning officers to focus on the planning considerations.

R2 Undertake a review of the length of committee reports and officer presentations at committee to ensure that the level of information that is provided is sufficient, but that both reports and presentations are succinct.

R3 Actively encourage committee members to become involved in the application process at an early stage, whilst still being mindful of predetermination, and to seek advice from officers in advance of the committee meeting. This would help ensure that they are fully prepared, and give officers the opportunity to more fully respond to questions than might be possible during the meeting.

R4 Restrict the opportunity to ask questions of officers at the meeting to one occasion, after the public speakers, and ensure that questions directed to public speakers are restricted to matters of clarification and are not leading questions which can extend speakers' time beyond 3 minutes. This is to encourage committee members to seek clarification on issues they have before the meeting, and to ensure meetings are balanced and operate in a timely manner.

R5 Add a section to the chair's introduction at the start of the meeting briefly explaining the presumption in favour of sustainable development, the requirement to determine applications in accordance with up to date planning policy and the role of planning officers in guiding committee members. This information could also be provided in advance to the speakers. This would serve to remind committee members of these issues, but more importantly make the decision-making process clearer to members of the public. .

R6 Either remove the facility for public speakers to have a visual presentation to accompany their speech, or limit it to a single static image that they can refer to. This is to ensure that there is a sense of natural justice and that new information is not introduced to which the applicants had no prior notice.

R7 Space is limited in the committee rooms, so a restriction should be placed on the number of visitors who are able to watch the meeting in the committee room and an alternative location provided nearby where people can watch the live stream. This would make it easier to manage meetings where controversial applications are being considered and would be in the interests of the comfort and safety of everyone involved.

R8 Undertake further training for committee members to include the importance of up to date policy and having a policy first approach in debate, dealing with professional advice, the implications of losing appeals, and the importance of preparation before meetings.

R9 Following the establishment of the new local authority structure, develop a specific planning protocol to guide planning committee members through the decision making process.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Planning committees are an important function of a council and how they are run affects the image of the authority as a professional decision maker. Planning committee meetings are also held in public and recordings are available to watch later.

2.2 This review has looked at how the Council's North and South planning committees are working, both practically and with good decision making. The review compares the council's planning committees with good practices from other local planning authorities (LPAs) from across the country to push high standards of accessibility and good decision making through the delivery of the committee. The review focussed on the operation of both committees with regard to two specific planning applications, however the review does not consider the planning merits of the applications themselves.

2.3 The Planning Advisory Service (PAS) is part of the Local Government Association (LGA). PAS provides high quality help, advice, support and training on planning and service delivery to councils. Its work follows a 'sector led' improvement approach, whereby local authorities help each other to continuously improve.

2.4 The person appointed by PAS to conduct this review is Raymond Crawford. Raymond has over 30 years experience in Development Management as a case officer and as manager at Hastings Borough Council. Since 2015 he has been working with PAS providing support advice and training to local authorities across England and Wales.

2.5 Recordings of the meetings of Planning Committee North in April and May 2025 and of Planning Committee South in March and April 2025 were viewed, along with supporting documents. The review considers the way the committees operate in general, and the Authority requested that two applications were looked at in more detail as case studies. The applications used as case studies are:

- DC/24/4213/FUL– Valley Farm, Huntingfield. Presented at Planning Committee North
- DC/24/0823/FUL – 39 Mill Lane, Felixstowe. Presented at Planning Committee South

[APPENDIX G Applications and Committees reviewed](#)

Interviews were carried out in person and remotely with key members of staff, planning committee members, other elected members of the Council, applicants' agents, and people addressing the planning committee.

[APPENDIX A List of people interviewed](#)

2.6 All those interviewed were friendly and welcoming and engaged fully with the process and are thanked for providing their honest opinions and feedback.

2.7 This report uses some of the key topics in the Planning Advisory Service Planning Committee Best Practice Self Assessment Toolkit as its framework. In particular it considers:

- Codes of Conduct
- Member Involvement before the meeting
- Accessibility, layout and use of IT
- Chairing skills

- Member officer relationships and attendance at committee
- Officer Reports and Presentations
- Public Speaking

[Appendix C - Committee Best Practice Toolkit \(PAS\)](#)

2.8 Interviews were held with participants from outside the authority; including objectors who addressed the committee and the applicants' agents. How the committee is perceived is important if it is to be regarded as a trusted decision making body, and the snapshot that these interviews provide is valuable.

2.9 Amongst the objectors, and to a lesser extent the applicants' agents, there is a feeling of frustration about the process, particularly with regard to the way the debate progressed. The inability for members of the public to engage in the discussions was a concern for the objectors. Other issues raised in the interviews included:

- A perception amongst the objectors that the committee members were not fully prepared, and that the proceedings were overly dominated by the planning officer and, what they felt were, his personal opinions. The view was also expressed that the planning officer was unhelpful when committee members were trying to formulate a reason for refusal.
- There was a perception that during the site visit to the Valley Farm application site, there was an element of bias; with more time spent with the applicant showing members around the development and less on the areas that were of concern to the objectors. On the Valley Farm site there has been a significant amount of unauthorised development and residents are frustrated at what they see as a lack of action from the planning authority; this has contributed to a degree of scepticism with regard to the enforcement of conditions attached to the permission.

2.10 It is important to stress at this stage that these issues are about how the process was *perceived* by the public, and is not a reflection of the *actual* decision making process. These issues will be considered in the report.

2.11 Many of the concerns raised by those dissatisfied with how the committees operated could be addressed by increasing familiarity with planning law and the workings of the planning system. To assist readers of this report, and to set the procedural and legal context for decision making we have set out some basic principles in Appendix I. These include the presumption in favour of sustainable development and the importance of up to date planning policy, the role of planning officers in the decision making process, the way planning appeals are determined, and the way planning enforcement operates.

[APPENDIX I Basic Principles.](#)

3.0 MEMBER'S CODES OF CONDUCT

3.1 East Suffolk Council does not have its own planning protocol and relies on the Suffolk Code of Conduct shared with several other councils. In addition, within the council's constitution, appendix K - Code of good practice/guidance for members - planning and rights of way provides further advice. (pp 157-167) [Constitution-and-Appendices.pdf](#)

3.2 The code and the appendix address some areas relevant to this review including the importance of respect and the impartiality of officers, but it does not address some of the most important issues surrounding the decision making process for planning applications. Key areas where clearer advice for members would be helpful would be in relation to probity in planning and the question of predisposition as opposed to predetermination, members' involvement before the committee meeting (discussed in part 4 below), and the way site visits are conducted.

3.3 It is recommended that following local government reorganisation the new planning authority draws up a new planning protocol to guide committee members through the decision making process.

Recommendation R9. PAS committee best practice toolkit part 3

4.0 MEMBER INVOLVEMENT BEFORE THE MEETING

4.1 A large number of questions are asked of officers at the meetings, many of which could have been raised beforehand, while still allowing members to come to committee with an open mind. The key advantage of seeking clarification before the meeting is that it allows for more of a discussion than is possible in the committee room, and it also enables officers time to find the answers that are needed if they are not readily available. This allows committee members to come to the committee fully prepared. It is recommended that in the short term committee members are actively encouraged to contact officers in advance of each committee meeting to ask questions and discuss areas of concern, and that in due course appropriate procedures are set out in a formal planning protocol.

Recommendations R3 and R9

4.2 It should not be necessary for committee members to routinely visit application sites, but there are times when a visit can be helpful. The consideration of the application on the Valley Farm site was deferred by Planning Committee North to allow for such a visit. At the time the applications were considered there was no procedure in place to organise a site visit before an application was first considered by committee and they normally only took place when committee members requested one during the meeting. This built a delay into the decision making process. The Strategic Planning Committee in July resolved to make a change to the scheme of delegation to put a procedure in place to allow site visits to be arranged for certain

complex or controversial applications before they are first reported to committee. PAS supports this change.

PAS toolkit part 5

5.0 ACCESSIBILITY, LAYOUT AND USE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY (IT)

5.1 It was not possible to experience any committee meetings in person as part of this review, but four meetings were viewed online. The online experience is not good because, with a fixed camera position and sometimes poor audio quality, it can sometimes be difficult to follow who is speaking. The recordings are not separated into chapters and when viewing a recording it is not possible to skip to an individual application. It is understood that the IT system is soon to be replaced which hopefully will overcome these issues.

5.2 The committees are held in different venues and in one location concern was raised about the limited space and the proximity of members of the public to committee members. Where meetings become heated it can be more difficult to maintain control e.g. when the committee is significantly outnumbered by members of the public protesting. This can be distressing for committee members and disrupts the decision making process. It is recommended that where space is limited, the number of members of the public admitted to the committee room is limited to a manageable number. It would be necessary for space to be made available in another room for the public to watch the proceedings live at the same time. The availability of a separate room would also make it easier for the chairs to deal with disruptive behaviour in the committee room, because anyone removed from the room would still be able to watch proceedings elsewhere and would not be disadvantaged. This may be something that can be fully addressed after the forthcoming local government reorganisation.

Recommendation R7. PAS toolkit part 7

6.0 CHAIRING SKILLS

6.1 The chairs of the north and south planning committees have differing styles with the chair of the Planning Committee North adopting a relaxed and inclusive approach very much ensuring that everybody “has their say”, and focusing on procedural matters. The chair of Planning Committee South takes a firmer approach and engages more with the planning merits of the items being considered. Both approaches are equally valid and have advantages and disadvantages.

6.2 The meetings of Planning Committee North that were watched were disrupted from time to time and it is understood that the chair did appeal to the audience for their cooperation during a break in the recording. The council's procedures do allow chairs to ask disruptive people to leave the room, but it is accepted that this process would, in itself, be disruptive, and could lead to accusations of opinions being stifled. Nevertheless it is important to be clear that planning committees are meetings held in public and not public meetings. The difference is important. In hindsight, it would have been wise for the chair to take a firmer line in this case.

6.3 During the committee meetings that were viewed the process did, at times, become a little confused. This was particularly the case with regard to the sequence of proposing a

motion, it being seconded, and amendments to the motion being discussed before a vote being taken. Although ultimately the voting process was sound, the procedure would benefit from a more disciplined approach. The attendance of a solicitor at meetings would be of benefit here, as discussed in part 7 below.

PAS Toolkit part 8

7.0 MEMBER OFFICER RELATIONSHIPS AND ATTENDANCE AT COMMITTEE

7.1 Most members and officers are of the opinion that they have a good working relationship, although that feeling is not universal.

7.2 East Suffolk Council is unusual, but not unique, in that no solicitor attends the planning committee meetings, and it is understood that this is partly a matter of resources. Planning officers are well versed in planning law and the absence of a solicitor at the meeting does not necessarily impact on the quality of the decision making process. However, it does mean that the planning officers present have to deal with legal issues as well as addressing the planning merits of the applications under consideration.

7.3 This means that the planning officers spend a good deal of time addressing committee members and, as noted in section 10 below, this can give the impression that the planning officers are dominating proceedings. If a solicitor were present the planning officers could focus on giving their professional opinion on the planning merits of the case, and the solicitor could advise of matters of process, such as formulating conditions and reasons for refusal, the management of motions being put forwarded, seconded and voted on, along with advice on the impact of losing appeals. The presence of a solicitor would also support less experienced planning officers who might not be as confident at dealing with legal and procedural matters, and enable them to gain valuable experience at committee whilst ensuring that the process is sound.

Recommendation R1

7.4 For a planning committee to work effectively it is important that there is demonstrable mutual respect between members and officers. This is summarised in section 3 of part 9 of the PAS Planning committee best practice toolkit:

3: Shared understanding of roles

- Members should understand and respect the professional role of planning officers, including the basis of their recommendations.
- Officers, in turn, should understand and respect the democratic role of the planning committee in making decisions, which includes balancing policy, evidence, and local views.
- Constructive challenge should be encouraged - but personal attacks, dismissiveness, or inappropriate comments must be addressed swiftly.

7.5 Respect was evident throughout the meetings, but with one exception during the April meeting of Planning Committee North. This involved the ward member, who was at the time, also vice chair of the committee. The member was closely involved in opposing the application, and, quite rightly, decided not to take part in the consideration of the application and addressed the committee solely in their position as ward member. At the start of the member's speech the probity of planning officers and also the members of the planning committee was questioned. . Other views were expressed about the way various matters had been dealt with that were inappropriate to express at a meeting that was convened to consider a planning application. Any concerns should have been raised outside the meeting and any specific queries with the application process addressed beforehand.

Furthermore, during the meeting the member moved around the room in an attempt to influence the proceedings.

7.6 The suggestion of any question of probity was firmly refuted by the council, and the member apologised at some length at the next meeting. However, these actions were inappropriate, did nothing to progress the consideration of the planning merits of the application, and undermined the credibility of the committee, and potentially the whole council, as a decision making body.

7.7 One area where there appeared to be a lack of clarity was in understanding the role of planning officers, particularly in relation to drafting reasons for refusal. At the initial meetings of both committees, members expressed concerns that they felt needed to be addressed before reaching a decision. As a result, both applications under review were deferred — one to allow for a site visit, and the other to enable further consideration of parking provision.

7.8 When the applications were brought back to committee, some members were inclined to refuse permission. However, they found it difficult to formulate robust, policy-based reasons for refusal that could be confidently defended at appeal. Section 10 below explores how the exchanges between officers and members were perceived by the public. It is important to note, however, that the committee member most directly involved does not share the public's interpretation of those interactions.

7.9 These issues stemmed from a misunderstanding of the officers' professional responsibilities. As explained in Appendix I, once officers have provided their considered advice — in this case, that refusal would likely be indefensible — they cannot then advise contrary to that position. It would be inappropriate for officers to encourage decisions that could expose the council to risk. Their advice reflects their professional judgment, not personal opinion, and was both prudent and in line with their duty to the council.

7.10 The PAS best practice guidance recommends that there should be protocols in place to encourage members to ask questions before the committee meeting itself. In these particular cases it is surprising that those members who had been minded to consider refusal at the first meetings do not appear to have taken the opportunity between the meetings to discuss their concerns with officers. The members would not have fettered their discretion when considering the proposals but they would have been better prepared for the second meeting. It is recommended that the advice to committee members is clarified and that they are actively encouraged to discuss applications with officers and seek advice and clarification before attending the committee.

Recommendation R3

7.11 Members have all had planning training, and there is a detailed programme in place dealing with both basic induction training and regular sessions on specific subjects such as heritage and ecology. This is good practice, and is to be commended. Some members expressed the view that the initial induction training in 2023 was somewhat overwhelming and focussed on technical matters but lacked practical advice on balancing issues and making decisions.

7.12 While most planning committee members clearly understand their role there are some notable exceptions and it is recommended that further training is provided. Areas where some members might benefit from further advice would be on how to deal with the professional advice that is received and how to deal with objections from residents, along with further stress on the importance of the debate being led by policy. PAS could assist with training if wished.

Recommendation R8

8.0 OFFICER REPORTS AND PRESENTATIONS

8.1 The reports provided to the planning committees by officers are detailed and quite long. One committee member commented that they sometimes found it a challenge to find time to read all the documents in the relatively short time between publication and the meeting. The reports are followed up at the committee meeting by a long and detailed presentation and two opportunities for committee members to question officers, first immediately after their presentation and then again after the public speaking. The running order is set out in the next section.

8.2 It is possible that, knowing that a comprehensive presentation will be given, and several opportunities to ask questions, coupled with a large report pack, could be acting as a disincentive for some committee members to commit time to fully considering the details of the applications beforehand. It is important that committee members approach the meeting with an open mind, and have spent time beforehand to consider the planning merits of the applications to be determined away from the sometimes febrile atmosphere of the meeting. Raising questions with officers before the meeting enables them to consider the issue fully and give a measured response and fully explain their reasoning which is not always possible at the meeting.

8.3 It is recommended that questioning of officers at the meeting is limited to one point in the proceedings, and that a review of the length of planning committee reports and the length of officer presentations at planning committee is undertaken to ensure that the balance is correct. Members should be actively encouraged to raise questions and discuss issues with officers before the meeting.

Recommendations R2 and R4

8.4 Part of the role of planning committee members is to scrutinise the advice that they are being given, and it is right that they should sometimes challenge what they are told. However, in the meetings that were viewed there seemed to be, amongst some committee members, a reluctance to accept the information provided. This did not affect the final decision but, if challenged, this could potentially be interpreted as an indication that they had not come to the

meeting with an entirely open mind. This was also the case with the information given by the applicants' agents as discussed below.

9.0 PUBLIC SPEAKING

9.1 The procedure for public speaking at committee is as follows:

1. Introduction by Planning Officer (or relevant Officer for rights of way applications);
2. Questions from Members of the Committee for Officers in respect of the proposal and locality;
3. Questions from Members of the Committee for Officers in respect of third party representations
4. Representations by objector (objecting to the recommendation);
5. Representations by relevant town or parish council (in exceptional circumstances the Chairman may allow more than one parish council to send a representative by prior agreement where a development proposal is of such magnitude that it affects several parishes);
6. Representations by applicant or representative;
7. Ward Member(s); (maximum of 5 minutes each)
8. Officer clarifications following public speaking and any further questions from Members of the Committee for Officers;
9. Planning Committee general debate

Parts 2, 3 and 8 were added in late 2024

9.2 When the public speakers are addressing the committee they can provide a series of slides to accompany their speech which are operated by council officers. The slides are not made available to the applicant or their agent beforehand and there is the potential for the slides to introduce new information which the applicant or their agent would not have reasonable time to respond to. The fact that the slides are operated by officers lays them open to the accusation that they are not timing them correctly as was the case at one of the meetings reviewed.

9.3 In the interests of balance and natural justice it is recommended that either the facility to present slides is withdrawn, or it is restricted to a single static image that the speaker can refer to.

Recommendation R6

9.4 Planning committee members are invited to ask questions of the public speakers, and this is helpful in understanding the issues being raised, but it is important that this is carefully managed by the chair. It is important that the questions that are asked are only points of clarification, and not leading questions which could, potentially, just serve to allow the speaker a longer time to address the committee. Questions worded in such a way as to encourage a particular response, could be seen as an attempt by members to elicit a statement to support a view that they already held, and therefore that they had not come to the meeting with an open mind.

9.5 As highlighted in Section 7 of this report, it is important that planning committee meetings are run in a respectful way. As with the information from officers, there was sometimes

a reluctance from committee members to accept information provided by the applicants' agents. It is right that Members should look critically at the information they are given, but they should treat the public speakers with a level of respect. On one occasion one committee member stated that they simply did not believe the speaker, the inference being that they thought they were lying. This comment was not helpful, and could be seen as an indication that, by not accepting the information, the councillor had predetermined the application,

10.0 PUBLIC PERCEPTION

10.1 It is important that the planning committee is seen as a reliable and trusted decision making body, and the way it is perceived by residents is important if they are to have confidence in the system. Paragraph 2.9 of this report lists some areas where local residents expressed concerns about their experience at the committee.

10.2 The members of the public interviewed all commented that they found the process frustrating, citing the inability to engage in the debate and a feeling that their views were not being fully considered. These feelings are at least in part a result of a lack of familiarity with the planning system, and the council's committee procedures. It would be helpful if more information were provided to speakers in advance of the meeting. East Suffolk Council hold town and parish forums twice a year providing advice on, and assistance in planning procedures and this is to be commended. However, there still seems to be a level of misunderstanding with regard to how the planning system in England and Wales operates and also how the council's planning committees function.

10.3 At the start of each meeting a helpful statement is read out explaining the purpose of the meeting and the way the meeting will be run, making it clear that it is a meeting held in public rather than a public meeting. It is recommended that a few sentences are added to explain briefly about the presumption in favour, the primacy of policy, officers' role and the need to be able to put forward a robust case to defend any appeals. This would help clarify the system for members of the public and act as a reminder to planning committee members.

Recommendation R5

10.4 There was a perception amongst the members of the public who were interviewed that the committee members were not fully prepared. This was not really evident from the recordings viewed, but the fact that committee members ask a lot of questions could give that impression. Also, it was evident in the second meetings of both committees that committee members who were minded to refuse permission found it difficult to draft a reason for refusal when there had been ample time between the meetings to seek advice from officers and give that careful consideration without predetermining the applications.

10.5 A view was expressed by residents that the meetings were dominated by the planning officer and, what they felt were, the officer's personal opinions. It is true that the planning officer takes an active role in the meetings advising committee members. However, the statements are their *professional* advice rather than personal opinions. In the meetings the officer guided committee members to a safe decision that could be defended by the council if challenged. In the absence of a legal officer, it falls to the planning officer to deal with questions on the legal position and procedures in addition to advising on the planning merits of the proposals. It is understandable that this could appear to the public as a very powerful position. It is

recommended elsewhere in this report that a legal officer attends committee so that the planning officer only addresses issues of planning policy and the planning merits. If this approach is adopted it should change the perception of the planning officers' role.

Recommendation R1

10.6 It was felt by some interviewees that planning officers were unhelpful when committee members were trying to formulate a reason for refusal. The majority of planning officers are members of the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI). As explained in Appendices D and I, these planning officers are bound by the RTPI code of professional conduct, and they are required to advise committee members in their decision making to the best of their professional ability. If, in their professional opinion, a refusal of permission would not be a safe decision it is their duty to advise committee members accordingly. Officers who are not members of the institute are bound by the council's own code of conduct. It would be wrong for officers to encourage committee members along a path towards a decision that could not be defended on appeal. The actions of officers in the meetings that were viewed were prudent, professional and entirely appropriate.

[Appendix D - Royal Town Planning Institute Code of Professional Conduct](#)

[APPENDIX I Basic Principles](#)

10.7 As discussed above, in both cases where applications were deferred, when they were considered again, members who were minded to refuse permission found it difficult to draft suitable policy based reasons to justify their position. Having set out their advice, the planning officers were not in a position to recommend reasons for refusal that they did not believe could be defended. This led to some exchanges that some members of the public found uncomfortable, but which could have been reduced, or avoided altogether, if the planning committee members had discussed the cases and taken advice from officers in between the two meetings. Moving forward it is important that planning committee members are actively encouraged to discuss cases with officers and ask questions before the meeting. For clarity, although some members of the public felt uncomfortable about the exchange between one particular committee member and the planning officer, and indeed made reference to bullying, the committee member involved did not share their misgivings and volunteered that they find the planning officer involved to be helpful and supportive.

Recommendation R3

10.8 PAS has no direct experience of the site visits, but the fact that some members of the public felt that their concerns had not been properly considered shows that such visits need to be very carefully organised to avoid such misgivings. In the longer term it would be helpful to include guidance for planning committee site visits in a dedicated planning protocol.

Recommendation R9

10.9 The applicants at the Valley Farm site have undertaken a good deal of unauthorised development work and this has undermined any trust that may otherwise have developed between them and the local community. The perceived lack of enforcement action is understandably frustrating for the residents, but as explained in Appendix I, the normal procedure where unauthorised development is identified is first to seek a planning application which is then considered on its merits, setting aside the fact that it has already been built. It is

only if permission is refused that formal enforcement action would be taken. There is a House of Commons briefing paper which explains the procedure.

[Appendix E](#)

10.10 Given the unauthorised work that has been undertaken on the Valley Farm site it is understandable that there is a level of scepticism amongst residents with regard to the enforcement of conditions attached to the permission, particularly in relation to numbers of guests and noise. All planning authorities rely to a greater or lesser degree on residents drawing breaches to their attention, and this would be difficult for residents who would have no right to enter the Valley Farm site. However, if there are issues over noise at an event, and these are drawn to the attention of the environmental protection officers at the time, this would provide the opportunity to alert planning officers to check on the scale of the event in relation to the planning conditions, albeit after the event.

11.0 GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

11.1 This review was instigated after some challenging committee meetings, and has looked at two meetings of both the north and south planning committees focussing on one application from each committee. In each case committee members had received detailed reports setting out the planning issues, and this information was backed up by detailed presentations at committee, and in one case a site visit. Committee members heard from a number of objectors and the applicants' agents and asked a considerable number of questions. In both cases they went on to discuss at some length the issues that were of concern to them, in particular parking and highways issues and the likely impact on neighbouring residents. In the case of Planning Committee South, members secured additional parking provision as a result of their scrutiny and deferral and the north committee agreed to additional conditions.

11.2 Although this report makes some recommendations for improvement, members of both committees thoroughly considered the planning issues surrounding the applications before them and had sufficient information to make sound planning decisions. Understandably some people involved in the process are not happy with the decisions that were made, but this does not mean that the process was flawed.

11.3 Anybody wishing to challenge the decisions on a point of law are able to do so through the Judicial Review process, but it is understood that a challenge to the Valley Farm reached the position of a Pre-Action Protocol letter but proceeded no further.

11.4 During the discussions, and in the information submitted, some issues were raised about the more general planning application process which fall outside the scope of this review. However, in the interests of completeness these questions were put to the Council and their responses are included in appendix H. Following an interview, Cllr Ewart provided a detailed pack of information setting out concerns, and setting out a list of 8 questions. Many of the issues raised have been addressed in this report, but for completeness these are also addressed in Appendix H

[APPENDIX H. Responses to other questions raised](#)

12.0 NEXT STEPS

12.1 This report sets out a number of recommendations to improve the way the north and south planning committee operate at East Suffolk and PAS are available to provide further assistance and support both in person by contacting Martin Hutchings martin.hutchings@local.gov.uk and through the website <https://www.local.gov.uk/welcome-planning-advisory-service-pas>

Raymond Crawford

October 2025

APPENDICES

Appendix A - list of people interviewed

Appendix B - Probity in Planning (PAS)

https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/34.2_Probity_in_Planning_04.pdf

Appendix C - Committee Best Practice Toolkit (PAS)

[Planning committee best practice self-assessment toolkit | Local Government Association](#)

Appendix D - Royal Town Planning Institute Code of Professional Conduct

<https://www.rtpi.org.uk/membership/professional-standards/code-of-professional-conduct/read-the-code-of-professional-g-Enfconduct/>

Appendix E - House of Commons Library Planning Enforcement Briefing 2024

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn01579/>

Appendix F - National Planning Policy Framework Paragraph 11 - The Presumption in Favour of Sustainable Development

Appendix G Committees and applications reviewed

Appendix H Responses to other questions raised

Appendix I Basic planning principles

APPENDIX A List of people interviewed

Name	Interviewee type
Matt Bostock	Representative for Wilderness
Cllr Mike Deacon	Ward Member and Chair of Scrutiny
Cllr Sarah Plummer	Chair of Planning Committee North
Joe Blackmore	Planning Manager (Development Management), East Suffolk Council
Chris Bally	Chief Executive Officer, East Suffolk Council
Chris Bing	Head of Legal and Democratic Services and Monitoring Officer, East Suffolk Council
Iain Robertson	Senior Planner and Case Officer, East Suffolk Council
David Blackmore	Chair Huntingfield Parish Council
Cllr Mark Packard	Cabinet Member for Planning and Coastal Management, East Suffolk Council
Ben Woolnough	Head of Planning and Building Control, East Suffolk Council
Mr Edward Watson	Public Speaker at PCN
Rosie Roome	Agent for 39 Mill Lane
Cllr Stuart Bird	Felixstowe Town Council
Cllr Julia Ewart	Ward Member
Cllr Stephen Molyneux	Assistant Cabinet Member for Planning
Mr Mellish	Public Speaker at Planning Committee South
Cllr Mike Ninnmey	Member Planning Committee South, Substitute Planning Committee North
Cllr Paul Ashdown	Member Planning Committee North, Substitute Planning Committee South
Cllr Katie Graham	Former Member of Planning Committee North, Substitute Planning Committee South

APPENDIX F. Extract from NPPF

The presumption in favour of sustainable development

11. Plans and decisions should apply a presumption in favour of sustainable development.

For **plan-making** this means that:

- a) all plans should promote a sustainable pattern of development that seeks to: meet the development needs of their area; align growth and infrastructure; improve the environment; mitigate climate change (including by making effective use of land in urban areas) and adapt to its effects;
- b) strategic policies should, as a minimum, provide for objectively assessed needs for housing and other uses, as well as any needs that cannot be met within neighbouring areas⁶, unless:
 - i. the application of policies in this Framework that protect areas or assets of particular importance provides a strong reason for restricting the overall scale, type or distribution of development in the plan area⁷; or
 - ii. any adverse impacts of doing so would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits, when assessed against the policies in this Framework taken as a whole.

For **decision-taking** this means:

- c) approving development proposals that accord with an up-to-date development plan without delay; or
- d) where there are no relevant development plan policies, or the policies which are most important for determining the application are out-of-date⁸, granting permission unless:
 - i. the application of policies in this Framework that protect areas or assets of particular importance⁷ provides a strong reason for refusing the development proposed; or
 - ii. any adverse impacts of doing so would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits, when assessed against the policies in this Framework taken as a whole, having particular regard to key policies for directing development to sustainable locations, making effective use of land, securing well-designed places and providing affordable homes, individually or in combination⁹.

⁶ As established through statements of common ground (see paragraph 28).

⁷ The policies referred to are those in this Framework (rather than those in development plans) relating to: hal sites (and those sites listed in paragraph 194) and/or designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest; land designated as Green Belt, Local Green Space, a National Landscape, a National Park (or within the Broads Authority) or defined as Heritage Coast; irreplaceable habitats; designated heritage assets (and other heritage assets of archaeological interest referred to in footnote 75); and areas at risk of flooding or coastal change.

⁸ This includes, for applications involving the provision of housing, situations where: the local planning authority cannot demonstrate a five year supply of deliverable housing sites (with the appropriate buffer as set out in paragraph 78); or where the Housing Delivery Test indicates that the delivery of housing was substantially below (less than 75% of) the housing requirement over the previous three years. See also paragraph 232.

⁹ The policies referred to are those in paragraphs 66 and 84 of chapter 5; 91 of chapter 7; 110 and 115 of chapter 9; 129 of chapter 11; and 135 and 139 of chapter 12.

APPENDIX G Applications and Committees reviewed

Committee Reports and Meetings of Planning Committee North (PCN) and Planning Committee South (PCS)

[DC/24/4213/FUL](#) – Valley Farm, Huntingfield. Presented at Planning Committee North (PCN)

[DC/24/0823/FUL](#) – 39 Mill Lane, Felixstowe. Presented at Planning Committee South (PCS)

Committee reports:

[CMIS > Meetings](#) - PCN April 2025

[CMIS > Meetings](#) - PCN May 2025

[CMIS > Meetings](#) - PCS March 2025

[CMIS > Meetings](#) - PCS April 2025

APPENDIX H. Responses to other questions raised

Query about whether the Valley Farm application was classed as a major or a minor application	Council's response: The previous applications for Blyth Barn were minor applications as it involved less than 10 dwellings and less than 1000sqm in floorspace – it was therefore a minor application. The most recent application was no longer for 'dwellings' so its status was based on floor area which had increased to 2147sqm. It was therefore a Major application. It was registered as a Major application from the start and consultations carried out for that status.
Query about the late publication of comments from Anglian Water	Council's response: Anglian Water commented on the application after the Planning Committee. They are not a statutory consultee but generally only take an interest in major applications. They later withdrew their objection when they were updated on information which they had already directly received and agreed with the developer

Questions raised by Cllr Ewart:

“Enforcement” “Why has enforcement been abandoned in favour of retrospective approvals? Does this represent best practice or governance failure?”
PAS response: This has been fully addressed in the report and appendices. The planning authority has been following accepted best practice.
“Oversized Development” “Who authorised the transformation of a small farmstead into a deconstructed hotel and nightclub in a rural village?”
PAS response:

The local planning authority has been exercising its powers to decide the applications put before them. It is appropriate to consider retrospective applications where necessary.

“Transparency”

“How can withholding revised drawings and reports from Public Access be justified?
Is it acceptable that the Environmental Plan was uploaded only hours before the hearing?”

PAS response:

The Public Access software is a tool to facilitate public consultation, sound planning decision making is not reliant on Public Access. In the case of the Valley Farm application the planning committee members appear to have had all the information they required to make a sound decision.

“Site Visits”

“Why did officers advise that a site visit was unnecessary for Blythe Barn?
Shouldn’t councillors, not officers, decide site visit necessity?”

PAS response:

It should not be necessary for committee members to routinely visit application sites. In the case of the Valley Farm application councillors did decide that a site visit was necessary and the application was deferred to allow this to happen

“Committee conduct”

- “Should chairs and senior officers be permitted to silence ward councillors and dominate debate?”
- Should declarations of visits and hospitality be mandatory?
- Should Committees be trained to scrutinise conditions in detail rather than rely on officer trust?”

PAS response:

- It is important that planning committees are well chaired and at times it is appropriate that the chair intervenes to maintain order. In some cases disruptive people could be asked to leave the meeting room and East Suffolk has adopted procedures for this. The report suggests that at times Planning Committee North could have benefitted from firmer chairing.
- It is a matter for individual councillors to decide whether they should declare an interest in a particular case. A councillor might have prior knowledge of a site without that interest being prejudicial, or relevant to the application.
- All the members of East Suffolk’s planning committees have had training. It is appropriate that committee members scrutinise officers’ advice, but for a committee to function properly there needs to be a level of respect and trust between all those taking part. It is right that committee members trust officers.

“Political accountability”

- “Why did portfolio holders fail to engage with ward members?”
- Why did the Portfolio Holder never once discuss Case 4213 despite repeated requests?
- Is it acceptable that councillors must spend personal allowances to obtain independent advice?”

PAS response:

- The first two questions need to be addressed to the individual concerned. However, portfolio holders normally deal with the executive function of the service they take responsibility for and it is not normally appropriate for them to be directly involved in the decision making process for planning applications.
- There is a misunderstanding here about the role of officers. The Council’s planning officers are employed to give their unbiased professional advice to councillors and they are bound by the RTPI code of conduct which states “*Members [of the Institute] must exercise fearlessly and impartially their independent professional judgement to the best of their skill and understanding*” (Appendix Id). That advice is independent of the interests of the applicants and is based on planning policy as required by planning law
- If councillors on a committee wish to commission separate professional advice, for example seeking counsel’s opinion on a point of law, this is a collective decision which would need to be agreed through an appropriate formal procedure along with the use of public money. That is not the situation where an individual councillor, who is not taking part in the decision on a particular application, takes their own decision to seek different advice to that being offered by council officers. It would not be appropriate to use public funds to support a campaign group or individual opposing a particular development.

“Statutory consultees”

- “Are agencies such as Anglian Water, EA, and Historic England being misrepresented?”
- Was the Health and Safety Executive properly consulted?”

PAS response:

- This review has not identified any misrepresentation. It is for committee members to balance the planning issues.
- This appears to be referring to allegations in the submission under the heading “Workforce and Safeguarding” These are not planning considerations and have no bearing on the determination of the planning applications on the Valley Farm site.

“Public Trust”

- “How can confidence be rebuilt when parish councils now refuse to speak, convinced that committees will not listen?”
- Is it acceptable that residents are left to act as “their own vigilantes” in defending the planning system”

PAS response:

- No evidence has been put forward that this is a view shared across the town and parish councils in the area. The council does have town and parish forums providing guidance to those bodies where these issues could be raised.
- It is not clear what this is referring to, where local residents are acting in such a way, or where residents more generally feel that the planning system needs defending. Some basic principles which underpin the way the planning system in England and Wales operates are set out in Appendix I. The question of planning enforcement is discussed in the report.

APPENDIX I Basic Principles

THE PRESUMPTION IN FAVOUR OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

I.a The presumption in favour of sustainable development is set out in paragraph 11 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) which is one element of the legislation governing planning decisions. [Appendix F. Extract from NPPF](#). The presumption in favour has been embedded in legislation since the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, act following the second world war. Put simply it means that, unless there are very clear, policy backed reasons to refuse permission in the public interest, then planning permission should be granted. Where there are no policies to back a refusal, it is not for the applicant to justify to the planning authority that permission would be granted, it is for the local planning authority to justify why, in the public interest, they would be justified in withholding permission.

THE IMPORTANCE OF POLICY IN DECISION MAKING

I.b Planning applications should not be considered in isolation, but in the context of an up to date local development plan which sets out the local planning authority's vision for the future of the area, and the question is "Does a development fit in with that vision?" The NPPF states that "for decision-taking this [the presumption] means: c) approving development proposals that accord with an up-to-date development plan without delay". The paragraph goes on to explain that where the local development plan is not up to date the application needs to be considered in the context of the policies in the NPPF. The key point is that a local planning authority must approve development proposals that accord with up to date policies. This means that the role of elected committee members is not to consider whether or not they personally like a scheme, or whether it is popular amongst the local community, their role is to assess the scheme against up to date policies and where they scheme accords with those policies permission needs to be granted. Debate at committee should therefore start with the policy position, and centre around whether or not the development is policy compliant. [Appendix F. Extract from NPPF](#)

THE ROLE OF PLANNING OFFICERS

I.c Planning officers play a key role in the consideration of planning applications, both through powers delegated to them to make certain decisions, and also through preparing reports to planning committees and providing professional advice to members as they consider those applications. Planning officers do not act in isolation, and before an application is brought to a committee there will have been detailed discussions and a consensus reached on whether committee should be advised to grant permission, or whether they would be justified in withholding permission. Their advice is based on their training and professional experience, and where, in their professional opinion, it is likely that an appeal against a refusal of permission by the council would be likely to be successful, it is right that they make this view clear to elected members.

I.d Officers are bound by the code of professional conduct of the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) [Appendix D - Royal Town Planning Institute Code of Professional Conduct](#) Paragraphs 11 and 12 of the code of conduct state:

11. Members [of the Institute] must exercise fearlessly and impartially their independent professional judgement to the best of their skill and understanding.

12. Members [of the Institute] must not make or subscribe to any statements or reports which are contrary to their own genuine professional opinions, nor knowingly enter into any contract or agreement which requires them to do so.

There may be occasions where committee members interpret policy differently to officers, but in those cases, planning officers are not in a position to assist committee members in drafting a reason for refusal where, in their professional judgement, that decision would be unsound. In many areas of life the professional advice that you receive might not be what you want to hear, but that does not mean the advice is unsound. Setting aside the RTPI code of conduct, it would be wrong for council officers to encourage planning committee members along a route which they feel would be unreasonable or unsafe. Refusing permission where it is likely that permission would be granted on appeal gives false hope to objectors and extends the period of uncertainty. The granting of permission on appeal can have significant implications for a planning authority.

APPEAL DECISIONS AND DESIGNATION AS POORLY PERFORMING

I.e When refusing permission it is important to take into account the potential for an appeal against that decision to be lodged, and the likely outcome. Local planning authorities are judged on their performance, in terms of the speed of decision making, but also on the quality of their decisions, based on the results of planning appeals. Where an authority loses too many major appeals, that is to say where too many decisions are allowed on appeal, an authority can be designated as poorly performing and applicants given the option to submit applications directly to the Planning Inspectorate. In these cases the local planning authority loses the fee income and loses control of the decision, but still has to undertake a considerable amount of work in the planning process. It also has reputational damage for the authority. East Suffolk has a good record on appeals, but because of the relatively small number of major applications the percentage of successes can change rapidly.

APPEAL DECISIONS AND COSTS

I.f At an appeal where it is decided that a planning authority has acted unreasonably in refusing permission, there is a risk that they could have an award of costs against them. This would not be a type of fine, but the appellants recouping their costs accrued in fighting an appeal. In some cases costs could run to hundreds of thousands of pounds, in addition to the planning authorities own costs in fighting an appeal. While committee members should not feel forced into making a decision which they truly believe in because of the risk of costs, it would be reckless to pursue a course of action which could have significant implications for the ability of the authority to carry out its normal functions. A key area here is the need to provide policy backed evidence to back up a reason for refusal. This can be an issue where the council's professional advisors do not support a refusal, for example on traffic or highway safety grounds. It is only right that officers provide firm advice to members in these situations.

PLANNING ENFORCEMENT

I.g Turning to planning enforcement, although the law does allow for a planning authority to serve a Stop Notice to require unauthorised work to cease on a site this should only be used in the most extreme of circumstances, for example where irreparable harm is being done to something of nature conservation importance. The presumption in favour of sustainable development is significant here, and before formal enforcement is progressed, the correct approach is to invite a retrospective planning application. It is only if that application is refused that enforcement should be undertaken. The process is summarised in a House of Commons briefing paper from 2024 [Appendix E - House of Commons Library Planning Enforcement Briefing 2024](#)

I.h This process can seem very slow because there is the right of appeal against a refusal of permission, and also the issuing of an enforcement notice, and it can be frustrating to local residents who might see a planning authority as being ineffective, but it is, nevertheless, the way that the system operates.