

REPORT TO:	ENVIRONMENTAL AND DEVELOPMENT SERVICES COMMITTEE	AGENDA ITEM: 10
DATE OF MEETING:	11 AUGUST 2022	CATEGORY: RECOMMENDED
REPORT FROM:	ALLISON THOMAS – STRATEGIC DIRECTOR (SERVICE DELIVERY)	OPEN
MEMBERS' CONTACT POINT:	STEFFAN SAUNDERS. HEAD OF PLANNING AND STRATEGIC HOUSING, TEL: 07971 604326	DOC:
SUBJECT:	AMENDMENTS TO THE PLANNING APPLICATION VALIDATION PROCESS	
WARD(S) AFFECTED:	ALL	TERMS OF REFERENCE: EDS03

1. Recommendations

1.1 To agree the amendments to the planning application validation process as outlined in the main report.

2. Purpose of the Report

2.1 To provide additional detail regarding the issues around planning application validation and to seek the Committee's approval to amend this process with a view to reducing the application processing timescales.

3. Detail

3.1 Currently the system of planning application validation is time consuming for officers and is a source of frustration for applicants and agents alike. The current system involves different officers to validate applications depending on type. Technicians for householder, tree, certificate of lawfulness and larger home extension applications. For all other application types, the technicians input the application (rename documents, plot etc.) and then put in a queue to be assigned to an officer. The officer then checks for validation and following this the actual work on considering the merits of the application commences including notifying neighbours, sending out other consultations, visiting the site, negotiating amendments, discussing with colleagues, and then writing the application for a decision under delegated powers or a recommendation to Planning Committee.

3.2 This system was designed at a time when overall application caseload was at a level

which allowed this validation process to be undertaken within a week or so. With the volume of cases being processed currently, it is not uncommon for the validation process to take several weeks and at times when the technician team is understaffed it has taken well over a month. From here, if amendments are needed to make an application acceptable it becomes a near impossibility to get a decision out within the eight-week target. Also, applicants are understandably frustrated when the first contact they get is to undertake some changes to an application that they submitted several weeks ago.

- 3.3 It is, therefore, recommended to switch from this system to one of 'self-validation.' This would be similar to schemes applied elsewhere, whereby an agent can apply to be on a list of 'approved' agents. This would be similar to other schemes, such as approved building inspectors. This list would be kept within the Planning Service and once on it, when an application was submitted from that agent, it would bypass the validation process outlined above and would instead go straight into the queue for allocation to an officer.
- 3.4 On current timescales for validation, this would save between three to four weeks on average. It would assist in allowing the technicians to focus on several other tasks including being the first point of contact for incoming phone calls. It would also have a significant time saving for the planning case officers who spend significant amounts of time validating applications, which could otherwise be spent on considering the merits of an application rather than checking if the various documents have been submitted. Frustrations around the validation system have been cited as an issue with most of the agency planners who have been working at the Council over the previous year, and in two cases as it has been the main reason for their leaving before the end of their contract. Time delays around the overall processing of applications has also been the main source of complaint from applicants and the time spent on validation often forms part of their complaint.
- 3.5 It will be necessary to maintain the need to have all relevant documents submitted with an application. The Council has on its website the list of national and local validation requirements and the agents who submit most applications to the Council are familiar with this. The case officer will also still give the same scrutiny to the application, but this will happen more quickly. If it later transpires that a necessary document or detail has not been submitted, then it is proposed to have a system of three separate invalid applications (or strikes) until the agent in question is removed from the list for a period of three months before they can re-apply to go back on. Training in validation requirements will be offered to all who want to go on the list, but following a removal, it will be a requirement of those who wish to go back on to undertake the training after the three months.
- 3.6 This will have several benefits in addition to the time savings. Currently all agents know that their application will be checked and if it is found to be missing something needed, this will be picked up and they will be told what to do to put it right. This can give rise to applications being sent to the Council without the same care and attention that would be needed with the extra incentive of getting it right first time. In addition, it will be commercially advantageous for agents to be on the list. They will be able to advise potential clients that this will have time savings for them to get a decision. It is also anticipated that the vast majority of agents who submit applications to the Council

will want to be on the list. This will also mean some time savings compared to the current system for those not on the approved list.

- 3.7 This scheme will also be applied in a supportive and collaborative way. There is a good incentive for officers to make this work. As such, if a minor detail is missed this can often be picked up in an informal way whereby the officer will call the agent and advise that a dimension (or other detail) is missing and ask them to add it. This can often be done in a few hours and will not need for the application to be invalidated and then amount to one of the three 'strikes.' It is also proposed that as with the current system of delegation the case officer, if deciding an application is invalid will need approval from a team leader on the first and second occasion. For the third and final one leading to exclusion from the approved list for three months, this will need Head of Service or Strategic Director sign off. This will encourage offers to deal with matters in an informal way, but also if there are consistent omissions these can still be addressed.
- 3.8 It is also proposed to publicise these changes widely to get a high number of agents to join as possible. It will also be necessary to review this within six months and report any difficulties or unexpected consequences to Committee.

4. Financial Implications

- 4.1 None associated with the changes.

5. Corporate Implications

Employment Implications

- 5.1 Beneficial. It will free up officer time to focus on the merits of applications.

Legal Implications

- 5.2 None.

Corporate Plan Implications

- 5.3 It is anticipated that application processing times will be reduced. This quicker determination of applications (in allowing policy compliant development to take place sooner) will be consistent with a number of Corporate Plan themes. These include:
- to enhance biodiversity across the District (Our Environment).
 - to improve public spaces to create an environment for people to enjoy (Our Environment).
 - to promote health and wellbeing across the District (Our People).
 - to influence the improvement of infrastructure to meet the demands of growth (Our Future).
 - to enable the delivery of housing across all tenures to meet Local Plan targets (Our Future).

Risk Impact

5.4 There are no significant risks.

6. Community Impact

Consultation

6.1 No external consultation. This has been discussed with officers within the Planning Service and there is widespread support for these proposals.

Equality and Diversity Impact

6.2 None.

Social Value Impact

6.3 Beneficial: the more timely determination of planning applications will lead to wide ranging benefits such as the provision of housing, jobs and environments enhancements through policy compliant planning applications across the District.

Environmental Sustainability

6.4 Beneficial: to secure the protection of environmentally sensitive areas and nature conservation enhancements through the planning application process.

7.0 Conclusion

7.1 The validation changes will result in improvement to application processing times and customer service,

8.0 Background papers

8.1 List of local validation requirements.