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Service standards for planning applications

Applicants and agents have told us that what matters most is a speedy and consistent service. In response, we have developed our service standards that we follow when processing planning applications to enable quicker decision making and provide greater certainty on how and when decisions will be made.

Many applications are already submitted to a high standard, which helps us make decisions more quickly. However, some applications still arrive with missing information or issues that require additional work to resolve. This can add time and cost to both applicants and the planning service, and places additional pressures on resources. By ensuring applications are complete and accurate from the start, we can provide a faster, more efficient service for everyone.

This document explains what applicants can expect from our planning service, including how we assess applications, timeframes for decision-making, and how we aim to ensure a consistent and transparent process.

By setting out these standards, we hope to support better quality applications, reduce delays, and improve outcomes for everyone involved.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The way we provide our planning service, for the wide range of individuals and groups that actively use, or are impacted by them, lies at the heart of all we do. The extent of our services, their cost, timeliness, consistency, and quality are critical to the delivery of our vision for the planning service 'to create places where people, business and nature can thrive.
- 1.2 Our processes and service delivery standards have evolved over time, shaped by a wide range of external and internal forces, such as the rise of digital-enabled services, responding to customer preferences, and changes to national legislation and performance measures, through to local policy and organisational choices, such as how our constitution and teams are structured. More recently, the primacy of cost savings has driven many of the decisions around service delivery.
- 1.3 How individual service users and officers use and interpret our processes and standards also has a significant impact on how they are perceived to be performing. The professionalism and experience of our staff, and the wider groups of individuals and teams that support our service delivery, are our most valuable assets. We need to be sure that our service standards and processes support our staff in being able to maximise the time they are spending on applying their professional skills and knowledge to 'add value' to the development proposal or service user experience.

This will also be key for driving continuous improvement in our systems and processes to ensure they meet stakeholder needs.

1.4 By clarifying and simplifying our processes and service standards, we have an opportunity to improve efficiency, reduce unnecessary work, strengthen confidence in the service, and deliver better outcomes for both officers and service users.

1.5 We will continue to:

- review, simplify, and change our processes if necessary to ensure they are efficient and effective, enable our service users to self-serve where this is possible, and match and direct the skills and professionalism of our staff to the tasks which most benefit from this input
- review, simplify, standardise, and publish any updates to our service standards so that our staff, Members and service users understand what services we offer and how we will deliver these
- ensure we have the business improvement processes in place that allow us to invest in the right systems and digital service users of the planning service require and expect.

1.6 This document addresses the second of these action areas, setting out a reviewed and simplified set of service standards against which our staff can offer a consistent service-user focussed delivery which match expectations. **The goal is to drive up the quality of applications at first submission and to achieve, efficient processes leading to timely, consistent decision making, making best use of the skills and experience of our teams.**

1.7 It is timely to publish our updated service standards now as a new regime of planning service delivery priorities and performance targets is being promoted by Government. We also need to continue to respond to service user requirements, and further improve the timeliness, consistency, and quality of our services, whilst ensuring good value-for-money.

2. Service standards for outline, full and reserved matters applications (variations may apply to major applications)

2.1 The following standards will be used in the assessment and determination of outline, full and reserved matters applications. (Variations to these service standards may apply for major planning applications and applications submitted by accredited agents and to those applications affected by Biodiversity Net Gain - BNG.)

No.	Description	Lead
1	Applications will be determined within the statutory 8 weeks for minor applications/13 weeks for major applications /16 weeks for applications requiring Environmental Impact Assessments /16 week (planning guarantee) period for determination unless a longer period (extension of time) has been agreed in advance with applicant in accordance with prevailing national guidelines or the application is to be determined in accordance with a	Case Officer

	timeline set out in a Planning Performance Agreement. To achieve this the following standards will need to be applied	
2	Applications will be determined based on the submitted application and will be determined at the earliest appropriate opportunity following the expiry of any statutory (or Statement of Community Involvement) consultation/notification period. The case officer will review the consultations list at an early stage to check all the correct consultations have been initiated.	Case Officer
3	Unaccompanied site visits will be undertaken for most applications without appointment. In a minority of cases there may be no need for a visit where for example there have been a recent previous application or pre-app visits and/or where the submitted application details, together with an assessment of relevant other information (such as the site history, and spatial data, and consultation/notification responses) do not indicate a risk that unusual/unknown site or surrounding factors are likely to need to be taken into consideration. If it is proposed that a visit is not carried out this should be agreed by the supervisor.	Case Officer
4	For all applications, the case officer (in discussion with their supervisor and/or Team Manager as necessary) will establish at the outset their anticipated determination date and likely decision route. Where necessary, interim target milestones will be identified to ensure this can be met. Progress against these milestones should be reviewed at every case load review. Timings (and the reviews of these) should include consideration being given to whether the application will need to go on the Circulated Schedule, and if so the likelihood of a 'call in' to committee.	Case officer, supervisor
5	Communication from those submitting their views on an application should be via the online Public Access Consultee Access (PACA) system. Case officers will not be in a position to respond to queries or telephone calls from those submitting their views on an application, except in the most exceptional cases, as agreed by the case officer's supervisor/Team Manager.	Case Officer, supervisor
6	Similarly, correspondence will not normally be entered into between the case officer and the applicant/agent, unless an amendment is requested by the case officer. If a planning agent is used, any communication will be with the agent. To ensure applicant assessments are coordinated, correspondence from the applicant/agent must be sent to the case officer and not to specialist officers directly.	Case Officer, Applicant/Agent
7	Those formally consulted (not just notified) on an application must submit their views by the consultation deadline using the designed format (e.g. template) and method (e.g. online) for responses. Any re-consultation responses must also be submitted by the consultation deadline. Where a consultee response has not been received by the deadline the case officer will make an assessment as to whether	Consultees

	it is possible to nevertheless determine the application in the absence of the response.	
8	Based on the principle that the 'case officer is in charge', a rounded, balanced assessment of the issues arising from the application and views will be formed by the case officer, indicating whether the application should be recommended for approval, refused, or that amendments should be sought, (based on the procedures set out in the National Planning Policy Framework - NPPF.)	Case officer
9	<p>The council is not under an obligation to request or accept amended plans. In the interests of efficient and timely decision making in most cases the council will therefore proceed to determine an application solely on the basis of the originally submitted scheme, without negotiation.</p> <p>However, when in the view of the case officer, the determination timescales are sufficient to enable an amendment to be requested, considered, and determined, the following standards will apply:</p> <p>For non-major planning applications, where the case officer considers a minor amendment to the scheme would result in a change in recommendation from refusal to approval, at the discretion of the case officer, one amendment request may be made.</p> <p>For major planning applications, where the case officer considers an amendment to the scheme would result in a change in recommendation from refusal to approval, up to two amendment requests may be made by the case officer.</p> <p>Unsolicited (i.e. applicant or agent proposed) amendments will not normally be accepted, and applicants/agents should in all cases check first with the case officer before taking this course of action. It is not recommended that applicants commission new surveys / reports / drawings unless specifically requested by the case officer to avoid abortive work and costs.</p> <p>Amendment submissions should be made as a single comprehensive submission pack addressing all requirements in full, including any 'knock-on' implications arising from the changes. Piecemeal and multiple submission over an extended period will not be accepted.</p>	Case officer
10	<p>When the case officer has requested an amendment, the response from the applicant/their agent must: -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -confirm agreement to an Extension of Time -be returned by the specified deadline -must be accompanied by a statement identifying the changes made and confirming that any changes are consistent on all drawings 	Applicant/Agent

	<p>Amendment submissions should be made as a single comprehensive submission pack addressing all requirements in full, including any 'knock-on' implications arising from the changes. Piecemeal and multiple submission over an extended period will not be accepted.</p> <p>If an Extension of Time is not agreed, the amended plans will not be accepted and the application will be determined as originally submitted, and within the original time period.</p>	
11	<p>Whilst ensuring compliance with any statutory requirements, further consultation or notification of amendments will be at the discretion of the case officer. Any undertaken will be targeted in extent and solely to address matters raised by the amendments, and by exception, with a specified deadline for responses.</p> <p>Where a consultee response has not been received by the deadline the case officer will make an assessment as to whether it is possible to nevertheless determine the application in the absence of the response.</p>	Case Officer
12	<p>The public file will be regularly kept up to date by the case officer so that the progress of the application is visible to all.</p>	Case Officer
13	<p>If there has been no pre-application submission, or the submitted application does not take account of the advice provided at pre-app stage, the case officer will move to determine the application without further reference to the applicant/agent.</p> <p>Where, within the previous 6 months, a pre-app decision has been issued advising of likely success as a courtesy, a minimum of 2 working days prior to a proposed refusal of an application the applicant / agent will be advised, with an outline of the reasons, and offered the opportunity to withdraw the application.</p> <p>This is not a negotiation stage and further correspondence, or reassessment will not be entered into.</p>	Case Officer
14	<p>For major applications a minimum of 5 working days prior to a proposed granting of an application with conditions the applicant / agent will be advised, with a draft of the proposed conditions. Pre-commencement conditions will be agreed in accordance with the Pre-commencement Regulations 2018 (as amended).</p> <p>The decision whether, and which, conditions to impose is a matter for the case officer (or planning committee) to decide.</p>	Case Officer

3. Service standards for pre-application submissions (including major applications)

3.1 The following standards will be used in the assessment and determination of pre-application submissions.

No.	Description	Lead
1	Pre-application submissions will be determined within the period specified for determination unless a period for extension has been agreed in advance with applicant. To achieve this the following standards will need to be applied	Case Officer
2	Assessment will be based on the submitted pre-application and will be determined at the earliest appropriate opportunity. The assessing officer will not be able to become involved in designing any proposals. Amendments will be sought in line with the pre-app process as detailed on the pre-application charging schedule.	Case Officer, Applicant/Agent
3	Correspondence will not normally be entered into between the case officer and the applicant/agent, unless otherwise agreed by exception, the case officer's supervisor/team leader. Other than for householder pre-apps, once a pre-application decision is issued any further advice or discussion will require the submission of a second pre-app. Site visits for pre-apps are only carried as detailed in the pre-application charging schedule.	Case Officer, Applicant/Agent
4	Responses will be made using the relevant template, based on the nature of the application (type, scale)	Case Officer
5	For major/more complex pre-application proposals where it envisaged a more iterative process may be required, the Planning Performance Agreement process should be used.	Applicant/Agent

4. Service standards for prior approval, discharge of condition (DOC), and non-material amendment (NMA) applications (including those relating to major sites)

4.1 The following standards will be used in the assessment and determination of prior approval, discharge of condition and non-material amendment applications.

No.	Description	Lead
1	Assessment will be based on the submitted application and will be determined at the earliest appropriate opportunity, within statutory time limits. Amendments will not be requested, except in exceptional circumstances, and any revisions proposed would need to be the subject of a new submission, with a new fee, if appropriate For DOC applications the case officer will not normally	Case Officer, Applicant/Agent

	request amendments or enter into negotiations, but will determine the application on the basis of the submitted details.	
2	Correspondence will not normally be entered into between the case officer and the applicant/agent, unless otherwise agreed by exception, by the case officer's supervisor/Team Manager.	Case Officer, Applicant/Agent
3	Those formally consulted (not just notified) of an application must submit their views by the consultation deadline using the designed format (e.g. template) and method (e.g. online) for responses.	Consultees
4	Where a DOC application is refused outline details of what the applicant/agent will need to do in order to enable the condition to be discharged will be provided.	Case Officer