

7 January 2022

SENT BY EMAIL ONLY

Dear Sir/Madam

RE Potential delays to validation of planning applications and other matters

Firstly, I would like to wish you a happy new year, and I hope that you have had an enjoyable Christmas.

I am writing to planning consultants, architects, developers and others who frequently submit planning and related applications to Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (TWBC).

As many of you know, TWBC Planning Services has for a number of years operated a Technical Team which assesses the validity of applications, issues decision notices, and undertakes various tasks related to appeals, correspondence, requests for pre-application advice etc.

The culture of TWBC Planning Services is one of providing officers with experience and potential to develop, so that colleagues are able to take opportunities to progress their careers, either within the Service or elsewhere.

This has been particularly the case with the Technical Team, where six Technical Officers have progressed to become Planning Officers in recent years.

2021 was one of our busiest years ever in terms of planning applications and enforcement complaints: the Technical Team performed very well, and in the autumn was validating applications within 48 hours of them being received.

In late 2021 several officers moved on from the Team to become Planning Officers at TWBC or at other near-by local planning authorities. Whilst this is of benefit to the planning profession as a whole, it has meant that the Team's resources are reduced whilst we recruit to replace those officers who have progressed.

Arrangements are in place so that Development Management officers are assisting the Technical Team, but it is likely to mean that there will be some delays to the validation of planning and related applications until - potentially - the end of March 2022.

We absolutely recognise the huge importance of assessing the validity of applications swiftly to ensure as smooth and efficient development management process as possible, and your (understandable) desire to understand how quickly an application will be assessed.

Given the above, it will be essential that our resources and time are used most efficiently. Customers' ability to talk to officers in the Technical Team (and wider) by phone is an important and valued aspect of our service, but it is time intensive. Therefore for the period of January – March 2022 the following page of the website will be updated at the beginning and middle of each week to show the date of receipt of those applications which are currently being assessed:

<https://tunbridgewells.gov.uk/planning/news/news-items/2022/january/planning-validation-updates>

I would be grateful if applicants and agents were to firstly look at the website and to only telephone or email the Technical Team regarding a submitted application if there are particular concerns or you are uncertain when your application will be assessed for validity. This will greatly assist the Technical Team in focusing on, and assessing, the submitted applications.

For similar reasons, I would also request that (again for the period January – March 2022) that if you receive a letter setting out that an application is invalid that you respond to that by email (to planningvalidation@tunbridgewells.gov.uk) rather than telephone.

We will continue to prioritise those notifications which are “time limited” and mean that consent will be granted automatically if a decision is not issued within the time limit.

Developers’ and Planning Agents’ Forum

I am conscious that we have not had a Forum for a considerable period of time. Given the need to focus on the issues set out above, and the Local Plan Examination (please see below), it is proposed that the next Forums will be held on 21 June 2022, and 18 October 2022.

I would be grateful if you could please set out your preference (one per organisation) for this to be a) in person at the Town Hall (Covid permitting), b) virtual by Teams or c) virtual by Zoom by emailing agentsforum@tunbridgewells.gov.uk by 31 January 2022.

Local Plan Examination

As you’ll know, TWBC submitted the Local Plan 2020 – 2038 on 1st November 2021. Details of the appointed Inspector and Programme Officer, together with future updates on the Examination, are and will be provided here:

<https://tunbridgewells.gov.uk/planning/planning-policy/local-plan/examination-of-the-local-plan>

I thank you, and your clients, in advance for your patience and co-operation, and look forward to working with you in 2022.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Baughen', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Steve Baughen
Head of Planning Services