

Minutes of Agents Forum 28th November 2006

Present:

Council Officers

Mark Berry	Head of Planning
Jacy Yates	Senior Planner
John Robinson	Planning Officer
Claire McAlister	Planning Officer
Nic Pettifer	Planning Officer
Nigel Eveleigh	Acting Head of Planning Policy
Susie Peck	Planning Policy Officer

Robin Vaissiere Regional Account Manager DCLG Planning Portal

Agents

Mr. J. Cavilla	
Mr. R. Clarke	
Mr. J. Draper	
Mr. P. Elkins	P.D. Elkins Drawing Services Limited
Mr. D. Erricker	
Mr. A. Mannington	
Mr. M. Marriott	
Mr. R. Najim	
Mr. I. Stagg	
Mr. B. Townsend	Huggins Edwards & Sharp
Mr. I. West	EPS
Mr. N Wigg	

General welcome and introduction by Head of Planning, Mark Berry.

Presentation by Robin Vaissiere from the Planning Portal:

- Is agent's responsibility to copyright or password protect plans when published on website, although may be possible for local authority to apply watermark.
- Plans should preferably be submitted in A3 format.
- To convert CAD to PDF files, look at www.cutepdf.com or www.pdfactory.co.uk
- For further information visit www.planningportal.gov.uk.

Breakout into groups. Discussion on:

Positives about Epsom & Ewell Planning Department

- Opportunity of easy communication with planning officers, by phone or face-to-face meet - “among the best for quick information” (cf some other authorities where you have to give 48hours notice).
- Fewer validation problems than other Councils – cf authorities where applications sent back for trivial validation issues which could be sorted out by phone or email.
- Opportunities for pre-application and post application discussions with case officer welcomed, meetings easy to arrange.
- No questionnaires currently sent out to agents.

Negatives...

- Supplementary Planning Guidance “Householder Applications: Design Guidance” is too rigidly enforced (this view was not unanimous however)
- Policy interpretation is different by different officers; there is a need for greater consistency of approach. Combination of objective and subjective criteria. Is there formal design training?
- Advice from “duty officer” is not always followed through to the decision (even when a delegated case). Decisions sometimes vary at Planning Committee.
- Deadlines – general appreciation of the pressure on Councils to deliver decisions within set timeframes, but sometimes the contact with agent is too late in the cycle to allow any change to the scheme – the alternatives are refusal or withdrawal. Applications sometimes refused for things that could be easily put right (acknowledged as being common to all authorities)
- WS Plans staff difficult to get hold of (not as “available” as Council staff – part time); one agent actually makes request that application dealt with directly by E&E for this reason.
- Site visit protocols – could a call be made to the applicant by the planner to ensure access can be gained to view property? Turning up without an appointment risks a wasted journey and can upset applicants if, for example, access is gained to a neighbour’s house to view (who may be an objector); the *perception* may be that the council has been unduly influenced by them.
- Certificates of Lawful Development/Lawfulness should be processed quicker.

- Delayed validation (delayed registration experienced at other authorities).
- Registration process of informal enquiries.

Things to be gained from Agents Forum:

- Open discussion
- Sharing of experiences
- Improving personal contact and communication between agents and officers
- Get more approvals, quicker (by seeking appropriate amendments)
- Understanding how we do our job
- Informal advice

Parking permits to be arranged for attendees of future Agent Forum meetings.

Meetings to be held quarterly at Epsom Town Hall, weekday early evening.

Next meeting February/early March 2007.

Suggested agenda:

- Introduction of 1APP
- New validation criteria, as discussed at www.planningportal.gov.uk/england/government/en/1112201229069.html
- Update on the Local Development Framework