

Planning Policy Committee – 23rd June 2022 - Agenda Item 5**Question submitted under Standing Order 30 from Councillor O’Driscoll**

A resident of Tandridge has approached me and advised they have put in a planning application which has taken five weeks to acknowledge and is still 19th in the queue to receive a letter of acknowledgement at the time of submitting this question. I feel this is completely unacceptable as it gives our residents a lot of uncertainty around whether they can trust our planning department to deliver the best service for our residents.

Could an explanation be given as to why it is taking so long for Tandridge to process planning applications and what steps are being taken to reduce the staff turnover in the planning department?

Response from the Interim Chief Planning Officer

To clarify one matter ...whether a planning application is submitted electronically to the Council through the planning portal, or as hard copy by post, the standard procedure in both cases is that an acknowledgement letter is sent out straight away. This letter contains a Council application number. The letter has also been recently amended to refer to the backlog of applications awaiting validation so applicants are aware of the current situation.

Unfortunately, the Planning Department’s validation team do have a backlog of applications awaiting validation. This is due to both staff changes within the Planning Department and the increased number of applications being received. Consequently, there has been a delay in sending out letters confirming (or not) that a particular application is valid and giving a determination date and this may be what is being referred to by the complainant who has contacted Cllr O’Driscoll.

Steps are being taken to urgently reduce the number of applications awaiting determination, including:

- increasing the number of validation officers from within existing staff numbers in the Planning Department;*
- recruiting a new validation officer for which there is existing provision in the Planning Department staffing structure and budget; and*
- retaining an interim validation officer, pending the completion of training of transferred or new validation staff members.*

In general terms, within the Development Management team over the last two months, staffing levels have improved. The number of planning applications being handled by individual planning officers has fallen sharply. This means that applications are being determined more quickly. While there are no reasons to be sanguine, the situation is steadily improving, both in terms of interim / temporary and permanent planning staff recruitment.

What this Council is facing, like other Councils across Surrey, is an acute shortage of experienced Development Management planning officers. Every effort is being directed at recruiting new, permanent planning staff, including new initiatives to attract potential candidates. Other short-term initiatives to reduce the number of applications awaiting determination are also being tried to make individual officer caseloads more manageable still.

Supplementary question from Councillor O'Driscoll

It's really positive that we are managing to recruit more staff, but have we got a timeframe for the validation officers?

Response from the Interim Chief Planning Officer

One is already in post – the individual was transferred from another position in the Development Management team in the last few weeks. There is one vacancy as a result of placing a former validation officer on a career path (planning assistant) who expressed an interest in becoming a planning officer. This reflects a wish to work towards 'growing our own' professional staff as much as possible and to encourage those who aspire to progress and become professionally qualified. So, we have this one permanent validation officer post to fill which is currently occupied by a temporary member of staff. With all the changes going on within the Council as part of the overall transformation project, I have discussed with the Chief Executive the desire to fill it with someone currently working elsewhere within the Council who might otherwise be made redundant.