

Briefing Note – Electronic Consultation with parish Councils and Planning Panels

Background

The Council as Local Planning Authority is obliged to introduce electronic working in dealing with planning proposals. For a number of years the Government set targets for receiving applications and displaying of information online and developed a system for rating Local planning Authorities in terms of their ability to work electronically.

Applicants no longer have to submit paper copies of applications, and the Government through its Planning Portal has a programme of actively encouraging and supporting electronic-only submissions. Over 40% of applications to City of York Council are received electronically.

Budgetary constraints have led to the reduction in budgets relating to printing and postage of documents. The submission of applications electronically has increased the costs and registration delays as ironically the Council must print off copies for reception and distribution to consultees.

Officers have worked with consultees to reduce or eliminate the use of paper consultation. Parish Councils (PCs) and Planning Panels and (PPs) are now the only external consultee still receiving paper copies of applications (although there are a number that are already operating this way).

Discussions with PCs and PPs have been taking place for over 4 years regarding the transition to electronic consultation. Events have been held to explain the options and the Planning Portal has been involved in explaining how the transition can be undertaken. Survey work has been carried out in 2010 to assess the readiness of this consultee group to receive electronic consultation.

E planning Process

The process involves notifying consultees via an email of the receipt of an application in the relevant area, and providing a link to the applications documentation on the Public Access system. Documents can be downloaded, printed at smaller sizes or viewed via projector on large displays. Because the application is hosted on line, the documents can be viewed at any time by various parties i.e. plans do not need to be passed between members of a group before a meeting. The sending of the consultation notification electronically eliminates the delay in

receiving the documents and so ensures that the full 21 day consultation period is available to the recipient organisation.

To assist with e-consultation, applicants have been asked to ensure that any paper plans are wherever possible submitted on A4 or A3 sized document, and that key dimensions are clearly labelled on drawings. In addition, scale bar labels are being attached to drawings so that whatever size a plan is printed at the dimension of a development can be calibrated.

Recent Activity

Whilst the move to e consultation has been discussed with PC and PPs for a number of years, it was announced in January last year by the Assistant Director for City Development and Sustainability (in writing to all Parish Councils), that the Authority would be looking to cease paper consultation with external consultees by June of this year. A significant factor in the decision is the relocation to West Offices building in early January 2013, where electronic working will be employed throughout the building and space for storing, printing and collation paper documentation will be minimal. At that stage paper based consultations will need to have been all but ceased.

E-consultation has been achieved with all groups including Civic Trust, York natural Environment Panel, with the exception of most PCs and PPs. A number of concerns have been raised by PC and PP representatives since the announcement which was reiterated earlier this year.

It is recognised that not all PCs and PPs still do not have the facilities to be able to either print copies of plans for consideration at meetings or have equipment to display plans electronically i.e. via laptop and projector. Previous activity has sought to assist with obtaining such equipment. Other initiatives are therefore underway to assist further, such working with library services regarding the availability of rooms and equipment for Parish Council meetings, and with PCs regarding the loaning/sharing of equipment between them to minimise costs.

It has also been agreed by the Assistant Director City Development & Sustainability, that the implementation of e-consultation would be phased, initially involving smaller scale and householder applications initially (which would be easier for the consultee to print off on A4 or A3 size if needed), to be rolled out to other types of applications once the system became established.

To assist with these initiatives a further survey was undertaken to understand the current position for each PC and PP in terms of facilities available, perceived issues and concerns with e-consultation, and preferred options. The questionnaire results have now been received (as appended) and are currently being assessed.

Public Access Website

In recent months there have been a number of issues and problems with the uploading of planning documentation onto the Public Access system. Following a restructure of the Directorate to centralise the support functions (including that from the Development Management team), and a reduction in the number of staff, compounded by the loss of experienced members of that team, there have been difficulties in terms of the time taken to register applications and the completeness of the documentation displayed. Given that the e consultation system is reliant on the expedient and accurate uploading of application documentation, this has created difficulties in being able to offer reassurances required to PC and PPS. A number of measures have been implemented to address the issues including:-

- A member of the general admin team has been trained to input information and is assisting.
- An apprentice has been taken on to help with other planning admin tasks to alleviate pressure on the team.
- A temporary member of staff has been taken on to replace the member of staff who left.
- Overtime working, including staff giving up parts of their bank holiday break, has taken place.

In addition

- Recruitment for replacing the member of staff who left has taken place and a person appointed.
- Authority has been granted to increase the staff of the inputting element of PPU.
- Recruitment for this post has also taken place and the incumbent should be in place shortly

Next Steps

In light of the difficulties that have recently been experienced, it has been decided to delay the implementation of the first phase of electronic consultation with PC and PPs for a period of 3 months, to allow the issues to be fully resolved. This will also allow the results of the survey to be analysed and for work to continue on assisting PCs and PPs in preparing to receive e-consultation. Those that have adopted e-consultation process have said they are happy to support the principle, subject to the resolution of the current problems.

Alternative Arrangements

Several PCs have suggested that they would prefer to pay a small charge to receive copies of applications on paper rather than electronically. This may well address some of the costs issues involved in the process for the Council, but would still result in a dual (electronic and paper) based consultation process. However if it could be managed so as to involve a relatively small number of cases then this may be a viable option.

For larger schemes it is suggested that given the applicants are usually more prepared to provide additional copies as may be required, the Authority would still be able to issue (or make available to collect) hard copies for PCs and PPs.

Another option adopted at other authorities is to reduce the amount of documentation sent out, so as to involve essentially the large scale plans and larger reports/assessments. This has reduced the volume of printing at those authorities and the postage costs, but again it retains a dual consultation system and leaves PCs and PPS having to 'knit' back together the applications once both the paper and electronic elements have been received.

Conclusion

The Planning Authority is obliged pursue the use of electronic consultation, which given the pressure on resources is beneficial in terms of postage, printing costs and staff time. The implications for PCs and PPS have long been recognised and discussions to raise awareness of the move to electronic working were first held several years ago. The relocation to West offices in approximately six months means that this has become more imperative.

Given the recent issues with uploading documentation to and viewing from the Public Access system, the migration to e consultation for PCs and PPs is not now envisaged until September/October. In the meantime work will continue to ensure that PCs and PPs are supported in making provision to accept e-consultations.