

Changes in Dorset Council planning procedures

This is the message sent to DAPTC as a result of the discussion at the last meeting:

Broadmayne Parish Council has some serious concerns about changes to planning application procedures which Dorset Council has introduced this year. These appear to limit the capacity of the general public to find out about planning applications and hence to decrease the likelihood of them being able to make comments when an objection has a direct impact on their local environment. Broadmayne Parish Council has direct experience of the problems this can cause because a few years ago the then WDDC failed to notify two immediate neighbours of a fairly significant extension to a property. Those neighbours would have objected but they did not find out about the proposal until after permission had been granted at which stage nothing could be done. As a result of this, Broadmayne Parish Council adopted its own protocol for neighbour notification which involves hand-delivering letters to the neighbours. We believe this is a far more reliable method of communication than site and press notices and online publication because few people will actively scan websites on the off-chance that a planning application which may affect them has been posted.

We first became aware of these changes via an update from Dorset Council (entitled Find out what's happening with the Dorset Local Plan, dated 8th June this year) which included the following statement under the heading of 'Other planning news':

Neighbour notification letters

In line with the Council's agreed Statement of Community Involvement, from 1 July onwards we will no longer be sending neighbour notification letters for planning applications, unless these are specifically required by legislation.

All applications will continue to be publicised via site notices, and press notices will also be used where required by law. Details of all applications will still be published online, and we will continue to consult statutory organisations and town and parish councils.

This change will mean that we continue to meet our statutory requirements, applications continue to be publicised via site notice, and the planning teams can focus on clearing the backlog of planning applications.

Further to this, examination of the new version of the Statement of Community Involvement, dated December 2020 (see here: <https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/planning-buildings-land/planning-policy/dorset-council-local-plan/evidence/december-2020-updated-dorset-council-statement-of-community-involvement.pdf>)

reveals that in some circumstances applicants and agents may be asked to erect site notices, which seems to offer the potential for misuse by unscrupulous developers.

Finally, it has become apparent that Parish Councils are no longer being notified when a planning permission has been determined. It is a very laborious process to check whether or not applications have been determined but the grant of permission is something which we monitor carefully. We need to know the date of the grant of permission and also the conditions attached as it often the case that we need to follow-up developer activity with the enforcement officers. This change has been introduced at a time when Dorset Council is promoting working together with parish and town councils.

We appreciate that these changes have been introduced to allow the planning officers to clear their backlogs but by decreasing the availability of information about applications they are severely limiting the capacity of the public to participate in the process. Do you think this is something which DAPTC could take up with Dorset Council?

This is the reply from Neil Wedge, CEO at DAPTC:

Apologies for not responding sooner – I've gone out to a few other members on this across the Dorset Council area to see how it is impacting them and to check who knows what? To us it feels like it has been snook out under the radar so I wanted to see what Clerks' views were to understand the issue further.

It's fair to say there are some larger councils who know all about this and whilst it's inconvenient – they are getting on with it and it's just business as usual. For some smaller councils some are completely in the dark and for others, it is presenting some challenges.

Having stood back and looked at it – I'm inclined to see what can be done practicably to help councils adapt to the new arrangements and potentially provide some training with things like the planning portal so that everyone feels comfortable finding out decisions etc. Having to put your own notification system in and letters appears excessive, but I fully understand why you took this course of action. I'm going to speak to DC to see if they can join up with us to help do some training to get around the potential issues.

I appreciate this potentially means a little more work in the short term but it may help going forward – possibly that could include some training for councillors too. I'll let you know of the outcome of my chat with DC Planning.

This is good feedback and no doubt an area some will not yet fully appreciated so thanks for raising it.

See Appendix 3b for the response from Dorset Council.