

NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE COUNCIL

PLANNING COMMITTEE

IMPLEMENTATION OF AN AGENTS ACCREDITATION SCHEME

1. OBJECT AND KEY POINTS IN THIS REPORT

- 1.1 To inform the committee of the outcome of consultation with agents in order to assess the level of interest in an accreditation scheme, and to seek approval to adopt an amended scheme.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 2.1 A report to the committee on 10 February 2010 set out the basis and background to an agents accreditation scheme where, in order to acquire accreditation, agents will have to sign up to a code of practice based on the quality of information submitted with a planning application.
- 2.2 Members were in agreement with the principle of the scheme providing consultation with agents was carried out and the level of interest expressed justified the viability and implementation of such a scheme.
- 2.3 An initial consultation was carried out with selected agents suggesting the following code of practice, relating solely to householder applications:
- The application must be submitted online.
 - The maximum size of individual documents should be 5mb.
 - Supporting documents and attachments should be in pdf format.
 - The correct fee must be paid.
 - Payments for applications must be made electronically either via the Planning Portal or by telephone payment to the Planning Department at the time of submission.
 - Applications must adhere to the national and local validation checklist.
 - No drawing should be larger than A1 and must include a scale bar and drawing number.
 - All drawings must indicate original paper size, for example A1, A4 etc.
- 2.4 The response to the above proposal was disappointingly low and following discussion with agents at the Customer Forum on 27 May 2010 it was evident

that some felt disadvantaged due to several of the requirements in the draft code of practice.

2.5 A further consultation letter to a wider range of agents, taking into account agents' suggestions, was sent on 8 July 2010. The draft code of practice was re-drafted as follows:

- The scheme be enlarged to include all minor applications – not just householder proposals.
- Applications can be submitted either online or in paper form.
- If submitted online:
 - the maximum size of individual documents should be 5mb; and
 - supporting documents and attachments should be in pdf format.
- The correct fee must be paid at the time of submission:
 - Payments for online applications should be made electronically via the Planning Portal.
 - Payments for paper applications should be made by cheque or by telephone payment to the Planning Department.
- Applications must adhere to the national and local validation checklist.
- No drawing should be larger than A1 and must include a scale bar and drawing number.
- All drawings must indicate original paper size, for example A1, A4 etc.

2.6 The outcome of this consultation was much more positive with a total number of 11 agents expressing serious interest in taking part although a high proportion of these still had one major concern: that payment must accompany the application.

3. OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

- 3.1 Do not promote the scheme any further and carry on with the validation process in its current form.
- 3.2 Adopt the code of practice suggested in the letter of 8 July 2010 (as set out in paragraph 2.5 of this report).
- 3.3 Amend the code of practice as set out in paragraph 2.5 to allow payment of the application fee to be received no later than 24 hours following the submission of the application.

4. ANALYSIS OF OPTIONS

- 4.1 Certain agents are clearly interested in pursuing an accreditation scheme and voted for its implementation at the Customer Forum in May 2010. By not agreeing a code of practice acceptable to both sides the council would be missing an opportunity to work closer with agents providing benefit to both sides and leading to a closer working relationship.
- 4.2 Widening the scope of applications to be considered under the scheme to include all minor applications as opposed to being exclusively for householder applications attracted more interest, which would appear to make the scheme viable. Three applications without errors would still have to be submitted by an agent prior them being accepted onto the scheme.
- 4.3 Whilst continuing to promote the electronic submission of applications, allowing for paper submissions as well would encourage agents without computer expertise or access to scanning/drawing packages to join the scheme. There is also the possibility that once they were in the scheme they could be encouraged to go down the electronic route.
- 4.4 Relaxing the timescale for fee payment to up to 24 hours after the submission of the application would overcome the final obstacle identified by most agents. Failure to comply with this during the accreditation process would result in the application being processed in the normal way. This would also happen if it occurred following successful accreditation, with only two errors being permitted within any one year before accreditation was withdrawn.
- 4.5 Not implementing the scheme would remove the opportunity to try and reduce the volume of invalid applications received.
- 4.6 The suggested option is that put forward in paragraph 3.3.

5. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (FINANCIAL, STAFFING, PROPERTY, IT)

5.1 Financial

- 5.1.1 The implementation of a successful accreditation scheme should help to make the processing system more efficient, thereby resulting in some staffing cost savings.

5.2 Staffing

- 5.2.1 Use of staffing resources should be more effective with less invalid applications needing to be processed/resolved.

5.3 Property

- 5.3.1 No implications.

5.4 IT

- 5.4.1 No implications.

6. OTHER IMPLICATIONS (STATUTORY, ENVIRONMENTAL, DIVERSITY, SECTION 17 – CRIME AND DISORDER, RISK AND OTHER)

6.1 Statutory

6.1.1 No implications.

6.2 Environmental

6.2.1 No implications.

6.3 Diversity

6.3.1 No implications.

6.4 Section 17 – Crime and Disorder

6.4.1 No implications.

6.5 Risk

6.5.1 No implications.

6.6 Other

6.6.1 No implications.

7. OUTCOMES OF CONSULTATION

7.1 Consultation has taken place with agents and their views are covered in the report.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 Adopt the amended code of practice as set out in paragraph 2.5 of this report but include a further amendment to allow fee payment to be made no later than 24 hours following submission of the application.

8.2 Agents who have expressed an interest to be invited to attend a training event prior to the scheme going 'live' on 1 January 2011.

HEAD OF PLANNING

Church Square House
SCUNTHORPE
North Lincolnshire
DN15 6XQ
Author: Lynda Morton
Date: 26 August 2010

Background Papers used in the preparation of this report

Report to Planning Committee 10 February 2010
Letters to agents dated 13 April 2010 and 8 July 2010

Contact: Mike Welton
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E-mail: Mike.welton@northlincs.gov.uk
Contact: Lynda Morton
Telephone: 01724 297496
E-mail: Lynda.morton@northlincs.gov.uk

Date: 13 April 2010

Dear Sir/Madam

Fast Track – Planning Agents Accreditation Scheme

North Lincolnshire Council is proposing to introduce a new scheme to help both planning professionals and the local planning service to speed up the registration and processing of householder planning applications. There is no promise of faster decisions. The scheme is promoted on the basis of quality and partnership between the planning authority and applicants/agents. On the 10 February 2010 the Planning Committee agreed in principle to undertake such a scheme if agents were agreeable.

The Development Control team receive a high percentage of “invalid” applications due to the lack of information or incorrect detail that is submitted with them. This invariably causes delay for the applicant and much of it can be avoided. Examples of the reasons for invalidation are:

Certificates incorrectly completed.

No agricultural certificate.

Incorrect fee or no fee at all (this does not invalidate the application but the 8 week period for determination will not commence without the correct fee)

Correlation issues between existing and proposed elevations/floor plans

Lack of information required by validation checklists for particular types of application.

Incorrectly scaled drawings.

It is hoped that by working closer together it should be possible to overcome these issues with resulting benefits to both sides. The support team would not have to spend time checking for errors and contacting agents to rectify them and you as agents would hopefully receive your decision quicker. We understand the concerns raised by planning agents regarding invalid applications and we have prepared a scheme to try to help alleviate the problem. This forms the basis for a Code of Practice and you will find a copy of the checklist enclosed with this letter.

In return for signing up to the Code of Practice, the Development Control Team will ensure that your applications are received by the Planning Case Officer within 24 hours of receipt and we will endeavour to determine the applications within six weeks, as long as they remain applications that can be determined under delegated powers.

Please have a look at the enclosed document and if you are interested in joining the scheme there is a reply form for your convenience. If you have any queries please contact myself or Lynda Morton, whose contact details you will find at the top of this letter. I hope you will feel that the scheme has merit.

Yours faithfully

Mike Welton
Head of Planning

Contact: Mike Welton
Telephone: 01724 297492
Contact: Lynda Morton
Telephone: 01724 297496
Email: planning@northlincs.gov.uk

8 July 2010

Dear Agent

Planning Agents Accreditation Scheme

I have written to some of you previously concerning the above proposal. For those of you who have not been contacted I have enclosed a copy of the original letter to make you aware of the scheme and its aims.

Following discussion at the Customer Forum on 27 May 2010 it was evident that some agents felt disadvantaged due to several of the requirements in the Code of Practice. What I am wanting from you now is an expression of interest based on suggested changes to the original scheme which are as follows:

- Enlargement of the scheme to include all minor applications.
- For the time being at least to allow paper submissions as opposed to insisting on electronic submission.

A key element to reducing invalid applications is receiving every aspect of the application at the same time – and that must include the fee.

I have attached an amended Code of Practice which contains the new proposals and the level of interest received from agents will determine whether the Council proceeds with the scheme.

I would appreciate a reply from you by the 31 July, 2010 indicating whether or not you wish to take part in the Accreditation Scheme as now put forward.

Yours sincerely

Mike Welton
Head of Planning

NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE COUNCIL

PLANNING COMMITTEE

**IMPLEMENTATION OF AN AGENTS
ACCREDITATION SCHEME**

1. OBJECT AND KEY POINTS IN THIS REPORT

- 1.1 There is a continual desire to improve the quality of submission and overall efficiency of application processing. This report sets out the basis and background to an Agents Accreditation Scheme where, in order to acquire accreditation, agents will have to sign up to a Code of Practice based on the quality of information submitted with a planning application.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 2.1 The planning department still receives a high percentage of planning applications which do not contain sufficient detail to be able to validate them immediately upon receipt. Considerable staff time then has to be utilised contacting agents to request additional documentation. This invariably leads to delays on the outcome of the application as the period for consultation/determination cannot start until the application is complete and has been validated.
- 2.2 Common examples of reasons for incompleteness are:
- (i) forms not completed correctly;
 - (ii) certificates not completed;
 - (iii) missing details on drawings;
 - (iv) no site location plan;
 - (v) incorrect fee;
 - (vi) no design and access statement;
 - (vii) lack of information required by validation checklists.
- 2.3 A scheme for the accreditation of planning agents was a recommendation of the Killian Pretty Review final report published in November 2008.

‘Recommendation 13 – Local planning authorities and other bodies should provide greater encouragement and recognition to those agents who prepare good quality applications on behalf of their clients, in order to drive up the standard of applications submitted.

This could be encouraged by:

- RTPI, RICS and RIBA identifying opportunities to encourage good practice for large scale applications;
- the introduction of an “Accredited Agents” scheme by local planning authorities for householder and other minor development schemes. Early indications from a pilot study suggest such schemes can encourage higher quality applications, which in turn lead to faster decision times and more efficient use of local authority resources.’

2.4 Agents wishing to join the scheme and who have successfully undergone the accreditation process could expect to see the following benefits:

- a) Applications registered on the council’s planning application system would be sent directly to the case officer within 24 hours of receipt of the application by the council.
- b) North Lincolnshire Council will endeavour to determine these applications within six weeks as long as they remain as a delegated application under the council’s approved scheme of delegation.
- c) Agents would receive a formal certificate of accreditation which could be used to encourage applicants to select them. It could also be placed on their letter heads, business cards etc and a list of accredited agents could be displayed in the Planning reception area.

2.5 If such an approach was supported and it was decided to proceed with an Agents Accreditation Scheme it could be based on schemes currently used successfully by other local authorities. Appendix 1 sets out the basic details of the scheme currently operated within Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council.

3. OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

3.1 Contact local agents to ascertain the level of interest in becoming accredited and implement the scheme according to a strict agreed accreditation process.

3.2 Carry on with the validation process in its current form.

4. ANALYSIS OF OPTIONS

- 4.1 The possible introduction of such a scheme was discussed with a group of agents at a recent Development Control Customer Forum. It was felt that the scheme would be of benefit to both sides and lead to a closer working relationship. In return for signing up to the Code of Practice, the Development Control support team will ensure that applications are received by the case officer within 24 hours of receipt and they will endeavour to determine the application within six weeks, as long as they remain applications that can be determined under delegated powers. At no stage during the process of accreditation are there guarantees for agents on the scheme that applications will be given preferential treatment. In terms of consideration/policy etc they will be treated exactly the same as any other application.
- 4.2 Agents would benefit from such a scheme as they would be able to market/advertise themselves as being Accredited Agents by the local authority. Any application submitted by an Accredited Agent will still be subject to normal assessment/consideration against council and national planning policies and does not mean the scheme will always be recommended for approval.
- 4.3 Initially, only householder applications would be used for the scheme. In order to become accredited, agents would have to submit three householder applications to be validated in the normal way by the support staff. If all three applications conform fully to the checklist then the agent will be given accreditation status.
- 4.4 Agents would be removed from the scheme if:
- they ceased to trade or operate;
 - on two occasions within any one year the householder applications submitted under the terms of the scheme were found to have significant errors in them in relation to the agreed list;
 - the accredited agent is deemed to have brought the Fast Track Accreditation Scheme into disrepute.
- 4.5 Pre-application discussion with case officers plays an important part in the whole process (as with any type of application) and errors and omissions can often be dealt with at a very early stage before an application is submitted. The Accreditation Scheme should encourage agents to use pre-application meetings to help them avoid an invalid application being received which would threaten their accreditation.
- 4.6 Invalid applications have always been a very time-consuming part of the application validation process, using valuable staff time which could be better used working on valid applications. Not implementing an Accreditation Scheme would allow the current situation to continue and

an important opportunity to be able to work more constructively with agents for the benefit of both parties would be lost.

5. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (FINANCIAL, STAFFING, PROPERTY, IT)

5.1 Financial

5.1.1 The implementation of a successful Accreditation Scheme should help to make the processing system more efficient, thereby resulting in some staffing cost savings.

5.2 Staffing

5.2.1 Use of staffing resources should be more effective with less invalid applications needing to be processed/resolved.

5.3 Property

5.3.1 No implications.

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6. OTHER IMPLICATIONS (STATUTORY, ENVIRONMENTAL, DIVERSITY, SECTION 17 – CRIME AND DISORDER, RISK AND OTHER)

6.1 Statutory

6.1.1 No implications.

6.2 Environmental

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6.3 Diversity

6.3.1 No implications.

6.4 Section 17 – Crime and Disorder

6.4.1 No implications.

6.5 Risk

6.5.1 No implications.

6.6 Other

6.6.1 No implications.

7. OUTCOMES OF CONSULTATION

7.1 None.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 8.1 That the introduction of an Agents Accreditation Scheme be agreed in principle.
- 8.2 That local agents be consulted to ascertain their interest in taking part in the scheme.
- 8.3 That the results of the agents consultation be reported to the Committee together with final details of the proposed scheme before being implemented.
- 8.4 That any agreed scheme be reviewed 12 months after initial introduction.

HEAD OF PLANNING

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Background Papers used in the preparation of this report

The Killian Pretty Review – Final Report published November 2008

Doncaster Accreditation Scheme