

## SUPPLY OF DATA TO PARISH AND TOWN COUNCILS BY ELECTRONIC MEANS

### 1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 It is a requirement of the Town and County planning legislation that Parish or Town Councils can ask to be informed of every planning application received in their area. The District Council must then inform them in writing indicating the nature of the development and identifying the land to which it relates. Where such notification is given the Parish or Town Council has a statutory 14 days in which to comment before the application can be determined.
- 1.2 For many years a much enhanced consultation arrangement has been offered to Town and Parish Councils in the New Forest. The weekly Parish list fulfils the statutory notification requirement but they are given at least 21 days to comment. In addition, for many years the District Council has obtained or copied an extra set of the application forms, plans and supporting information and supplied these to the Parish Council for their use. More recently a briefing note on the main issues raised by the application has been prepared by the case officer and supplied to the Parish and Town Council and Ward Members at an early stage to help guide their deliberations.
- 1.3 Obtaining, copying and posting large volumes of paper is an expensive and time consuming process. More and more documents are now being transmitted electronically, including the submission of planning applications, and converting them to paper is at the District Council's expense. In addition, from next April, associated with the introduction of new national standard application forms we will no longer be able to ask for extra copies of the plans to supply to Town and Parish Councils. They will all have to be copied at the District Council's expense.
- 1.4 This report looks at how the existing level of service could continue to Town and Parish Councils without incurring extra costs on the District Council as the number of electronically submitted applications grows and the new national rules are introduced next April. This is principally about supplying planning information to them in electronic form.

### 2. AVAILABILITY OF PLANNING DATA ON THE WEBSITE

- 2.1 For several years the application forms and submitted plans associated with all current planning applications have been available to view on the Council's website. This enables many of our customers to view and assess a proposal without the need to visit our offices to view a hard copy of the plan. Several Parish and Town Councils use these web images to project plans for councillors to see during their Planning Committee meetings.

- 2.2 Over the next year it is proposed that New Forest District Council substantially expands the amount of planning application information it includes on its web-site. The intention is that all planning documents will be uploaded including reports submitted with planning applications, consultation replies, letters of representation, officers reports and the decision notice. In practice the whole planning file will be available electronically to view on the internet. As the incoming information will be scanned or transferred as soon as it arrives in the office, this electronic file will be an up to date record of the state of an application at any point in time.
- 2.3 This proposal will have many benefits. One of the main ones is that people wishing to see the whole planning file will no longer have to travel to Lyndhurst. Another is that people commenting on the application will be able to see all of the documents received at the point of their deliberations. This should benefit Town and Parish Councils who have often wanted to know if a specific consultee, very often the Highway Authority, has commented before they make their decision. The move to e-consultations and the availability of the full planning file on the Council's website are in line with national e-planning targets that all local planning authorities are being required to meet.

### **3. USE OF RESOURCES**

- 3.1 The changes set out in Section 2. above will require significant staffing resources to scan, transfer and upload the incoming planning data onto the electronic file, which can be viewed, on the website. No bid has been made for extra resources to achieve this change because of the difficult financial climate in which the Council is operating. It is intended that it will be achieved by redeploying existing staff and a key component of this is reducing the number of paper copies we produce, copy and issue. This will affect all of our consultees, both internal and external, who will be directed to our website to obtain copies of current planning applications. Progress depends on our ability to redeploy existing resources but ideally we would introduce this change from next April when the new national planning application form becomes mandatory.

### **4. TOWN AND PARISH COUNCILS**

- 4.1 From initial discussions at various liaison meetings it appears that a number of Town and Parish Councils will have some difficulty with this approach. They are concerned about some Parishes not having the necessary equipment or expertise to deal with electronic consultations or to print off paper plans if this is the way they wish to continue to conduct their meetings.
- 4.2 The Head of ICT Services wrote to Town and Parish Clerks on 7<sup>th</sup> September 2007 in order to explore the potential for using ICT to assist with collaborative working. This letter was followed up with a telephone survey. A copy of the letter is attached at Appendix 1.

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Of the thirty seven town and parishes consulted the responses break down as follows:

- 16 Town/Parish Council's are willing to work with NFDC using ICT to better effect provided that we can offer the necessary financial assistance to provide equipment (PC and projector) and technical assistance in the form of training and support.
- 5 Town/Parish Councils already work in this way e.g. to display planning applications at meetings.
- 6 Town and Parish Clerks did not respond nor could they be contacted in time for the report.

4.3 At the meeting the responses of the Parishes can be discussed along with the assistance the District Council may be able to give them to deal with more consultations electronically.

4.4 The main purpose of this report is to gain some guidance on this issue from elected members. There are a number of broad options:-

4.4.1 Push ahead with the changes, complying with the statutory requirements and leaving Parish or Town Councils to make arrangements to view paper plans which will still be available in the planning office.

4.4.2 Similar to option 1 but assisting Town and Parish Councils with the equipment and training they would need to operate the new system. A phased approach to implementation could be adopted if this was appropriate.

4.4.3 Not changing the existing system of consultation with Town and Parish Councils but seeking extra staffing resources to make more electronic information available to other users of the planning system.

4.5 These options can be discussed and expanded on at the meeting.

## **5. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 Providing more information on the internet will reduce the need for some people to travel to the planning office in Lyndhurst to read the planning file.

5.2 In some cases people will have more information available to them, for example from statutory consultees, at the point at which they are making their comments. This would assist in more informed decision making.

## **6. CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS**

6.1 None directly but care will need to be taken with some of the additional information we publish on the website, for example signatures will be blanked out from letters of representation we receive from individuals.

## **7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1 This depends on which option is selected. In option 1 (4.3.1) there is no financial implication as staff resources can be redeployed to achieve the desired changes.
- 7.2 In option 3 (4.3.3) between 0.5 and 1 FTE of the clerical support would be needed to do the extra scanning work if existing practices need to be maintained. There would also be a need for a significant increase in paper budgets as far fewer extra copies will be provided voluntarily. Overall the budgetary implication is £15 – 20,000.

## **8. CONCLUSIONS**

- 8.1 The way we consult on planning applications needs to be modernised with far more information being transmitted electronically as opposed to on paper. This can be a cost neutral change but only if our main consultees accept that new ways of doing things need to be adopted. Parish and Town Councils are by far the largest group involved and receive details and comment on nearly all of our 2,300 planning applications per year.

## **9. RECOMMENDATION**

- 9.1 Member views are sought.

### **For further information please contact:**

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### **Background Papers**

None.

«Title»  
«Address1»  
«Address2»  
«Address3»  
«Address4»  
«Address5» «Postcode»

My Ref: KC/RY

Your Ref:

7 September 2007

Dear «Salutation»

As part of New Forest District Council's drive towards continuous improvement we are looking at options to improve the way in which we work with Town and Parish Councils. One area that we would like to explore is the way in which you are provided with information and the means by which we receive feedback to consultations, on proposals, application and in some cases the delivery of services.

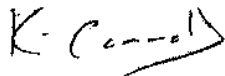
We are keen to enhance the council's web site to provide direct access to services (e.g. reporting an incident such as an abandoned vehicle or fly tipping incident). We are also considering providing access to the council's "internal" information repository (an intranet) known as *Forestnet*. This system holds an up-to-the-minute telephone directory, useful maps and other information that you might find useful.

In order to plan the project properly and to gain your input to the exercise we would first of all like to determine your current capability to access and use the internet. Over the coming weeks my colleagues, Tina Seabrook and Chris Redman will be in contact with each Town or Parish Council to conduct a brief survey to ascertain this information and to collect any other information that you think might be helpful to bring about the objective of work more closely using information and communications technology.

I really would encourage you to participate in this exercise as greater information sharing and improved communications will deliver benefits to all concerned. In the meantime if you should have any queries then please contact me on 023 8028 5712 or via email at [ken.connolly@nfdc.gov.uk](mailto:ken.connolly@nfdc.gov.uk).

Thank you in anticipation of your help with this exercise.

Yours sincerely



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