

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 1

Councillor Josh Williams to ask the Chair of the Planning Applications Committee:

Planning Website Technical Problems

When a new planning application is loaded to the Council's planning website, residents are invited to submit comments, in support or objection, and these are usually displayed for other residents to view, read, and consider when making their own comments. These are published online so that local residents can see what others are saying and submit their own thoughts. They also give residents the assurance that their views are being seen and heard in the planning process.

Back in March residents contacted me to say that they couldn't see their responses to important planning applications loaded online. I contacted the Council and was quickly told that it was a technical issue that would be easily resolved. Since then I've been told that the problem is more complicated, and planning applications are still waiting for many comments to be loaded and viewed on the Council's website.

Can the Chair please tell us how many applications have been affected by this issue, what has been done so far to resolve the problem, and when residents' comments will again appear on the planning portal?

REPLY by the Chair of the Planning Applications Committee (Councillor Lovelock):

Many seeking to comment on planning applications do so using the Council's website in response to letters or notices seen inviting comments, in support or objection.

These comments are then usually made available for other residents and the applicant to view, read, and consider on the website.

However, this does not happen instantly unlike when putting a comment on to Facebook or Twitter. When submitting comments residents are told in acknowledgement:

“Thank you for your comments. They will be registered and passed on to the case officer who will take them into account when a decision is made on this proposal. However, because of the large number of comments we receive, planning officers will not normally reply to the points raised”.

The registration process normally involves:

- verifying that the comments relate to the correct application reference
- checking that the correspondent has not provided information about themselves or the applicant that would mean the Council would breach data protection guidelines if we were to publish them - there is case law on this
- checking the comments do not contain offensive or slanderous content
- redacting comments provided to remove any signatures or other personal data - such as email addresses

The planning technical support team try to carry out all the relevant checks and redactions so that they can be loaded up for public viewing normally within 2 days. However, can take longer when staff are on leave or when there are significant volumes of comments being submitted, such as with the Reading Golf Club application being presented tonight, which required officers to process the 3,000 or so comments received.

In addition to this work, with the change to IT provider there is a problem with the necessary software that loads up comments. The work around is to convert all comments to pdf format but this takes more time. As for how many applications have been affected by this issue, Officers have checked and it is believed to have been around 150.

IT services are working on solving the problem but it will need the system to be upgraded. In the meantime, all new documents and comments are being converted and uploaded as PDFs.

Officers are concentrating on doing this with new and current applications as comments come in and are leaving the processing of comments on older applications until the issue is resolved unless they receive a specific request in which case the comments can be converted and re-uploaded directly.

The Planning Manager is also looking to change the acknowledgement message to manage expectations by stating that submitted comments may not be viewable for a number of working days but to be reassured that the comments will be seen by the case officer and will be taken into consideration.