

31 March 2020

Dear Planning Applicants and Agents

As we are all adapting to the rapidly developing situation regarding Covid-19 I wanted to advise you of our current business continuity arrangements for managing planning applications. You will appreciate that as an organisation we are understandably focussing on protecting lives, providing community leadership, ensuring business continuity and preparing for recovery.

Currently staffing numbers in Planning are at a level where we can provide a full service, but this will need to be kept under review as and when some of our officers may have to self-isolate.

In general, officers have been advised to minimise face to face contact and to primarily engage with customers via e-mail. All planning officers have been deployed to work remotely. Whilst they should be contactable in the first instance by email, they will be happy to have face to face contact with you over Skype/Teams where this is appropriate; we have held some significant pre-application meetings in this way.

The majority of our planning processes are paper-less and so can be carried out remotely. Most applicants already apply to us electronically and are therefore already aware of the benefits of this and are unlikely to be affected. In the current circumstances, paper submissions cannot be prioritised. Applications made through the planning portal or electronically submitted will assist us in keeping the service delivering for you.

Clearly, if staffing numbers are affected in the coming weeks, either because individuals need to self-isolate or are required to support other critical front-line service delivery across the Council we may need to introduce new procedures, including delaying the determination of applications for a time.

For applications already in the system we will process as normal, albeit with some changes to our operating processes. On 18 March 2020, at an Extraordinary General Meeting of the Council, Members determined to cancel all forthcoming Planning Committees, and through the Managing Director to myself a Chief Planner, constituted full delegated powers. Applications that had been scheduled to go to Planning Committee in the coming months will now be determined under these delegated powers, under a new model of engagement with Members on the decisions we intend to take.

Site visits by officers will be carried out on a risk assessed basis and following the principle of minimising contact, and officers will be the final judge in whether a site visit takes place. If you are an applicant you can help us by positively responding to any requests for additional photographs of sites if that can help the assessment of proposals. Anything you can do to front load your application with such information will again assist us in assisting you.

As you would expect, we will continue to engage with stakeholders and consultees in line with the procedures set down in legislation. We will work closely with technical colleagues such as Historic England, the Environment Agency, Natural England and Highways to minimise any potential delays, however, they will equally be facing their own operational challenges.

I trust that this information is of assistance. If there are any queries please do not hesitate to contact me via planning@rbwm.gov.uk. Further information as ever can be found on the planning pages of our website, and you can make applications via the planning portal at www.planningportal.co.uk

Thank you for your understanding whilst we deliver our services and support our communities in these challenging times.

James Carpenter MRTPI
(Interim) Head of Planning