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Issue Summary

"Problems with public access to the planning system.

Issues raised included failure to notify Parishes of applications and the difficulty of identifying applications within the parish; the difficulty of reading some of the plans online. Please could performance statistics also be provided for the length of time taken to process applications within the District."

(1) Failure to notify

We are aware that two applications were omitted from notification to Catshill and North Marlbrook Parish Council as being within their area and also did not appear on the first production of a 'weekly list'.

The reasons are:-

Changes to Development Control process

Recent changes to the process of recording planning applications released a mandatory link to the underlying address gazetteer that ensured Parish and Ward details necessitated no manual intervention.

The Parish / Ward details are provided by the underlying addressing system, created as part of Council's 'Spatial Project' in 2008 to automate labour-intensive operations across all Council functions (looking at paper maps held in various offices to identify the Parish or Ward for a site).

However, the recent change made to speed up the processing of applications for 'new sites'; that is, 'Land at', result in no Parish or Ward details for a minority of applications where a site is not property specific. These had previously been subject to internal delays whilst the gazetteer records were created by the Council's Street Naming / Numbering team, thus delaying registration / validation of applications.

The result of this is that no individual notification letter templates contained the Parish details and therefore none were issued for the two applications in this instance. It should also be noted that it can be legitimate for some sites not to have a Parish and therefore not considered an unusual situation.

The failsafe of the 'Weekly List'

To safeguard the notification process, a weekly list of all valid planning applications requiring Parish Council consultation is issued.

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This lists all relevant applications irrespective of the presence of Parish details and is designed to trap the possibility of individual notification failure as well as widen publicity of the applications.

However, the production of this list trails actual receipt of applications by a period of seven days to allow for the completion of any validation by Development Control case officers.

Unfortunately, the two applications in question fell outside of the seven day period due to a back-to-back Bank Holiday situation (reducing 10 working days into 4) and slower than usual validation on one case.

The Solution Implemented

Having been made aware of the notification failures, the following steps have been taken:

1. The Development Control Operations Manager will be reminding all case officers regarding the importance of timely validation and the consequences of failure to notify Parish Councils.
2. The process of producing the weekly list has been changed to be as flexible, but timely, as possible and as late as necessary (to encompass any trailing validation) without relying on a specific time period.

This means no undue delays in publicising applications which is a situation that could give rise to residents making enquiries to the Parish who would be unaware of details.

The Development Control Operations Manager is monitoring the validation process in conjunction with the Business and Administration Supervisor to ensure 'Validation' remains as timely as possible within resource.

(2) Difficulty in identifying applications within the Parish

It is uncertain what is exactly meant by this statement. However, as explained above there is a process in place, in addition to our 'Public Access' system, to draw both residents and Parish councils attention to applications.

Bromsgrove District Council's primary means of identifying the Parish associated with an application is the underlying Gazetteer Management System (GMS) for any property within our district.

For those applications where development has not taken place; that is, Land at, Playing field, etc., that have not been linked to a property (and therefore includes no Parish details) or who's underlying GMS record does not contain Parish details, it

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requires a formal process of adoption. The adoption process is the responsibility of the Street Naming / Numbering team and subject to ratification by the Local Land and Property Gazetteer (LLPG) and National Land and Property Gazetteer (NLPG), Royal Mail and Emergency Services.

The timescales for this process are therefore not within the control of the Local Planning Authority and the weekly list forms the only way to publicise the applications with reliance on local knowledge.

Health Warning

If the issue relates to the existence of certain types of application then there are instances where, as a matter of procedure, Parish Councils are not invited to comment.

These are mainly Article 21 (approval of conditions applications), extensions of time and Certificate of Lawfulness applications (future use). We have tried to educate the Parish Clerks / Executive Officers to be mindful of the type of application if they discover records in Public Access that have not been included on weekly lists or individual notifications.

(3) Difficulty of reading some of the plans online

The method of viewing plans online is Public Access.

This is a combination of two back-office systems, Caps 'Uniform' containing the textual data regarding planning applications and Anite 'Iclipse' Electronic Document Management system (EDMS) which contains images of the scanned documents associated with an application.

It is 'Iclipse' that primarily dictates the sizes of scanned images, speed of access, etc., etc.

Unfortunately given the current economic climate it is unlikely that Bromsgrove can justify replacement of the document imaging system, nor that this would resolve some issues presented by the Parish / members of public ICT configuration, including Broadband supplier.

It was highlighted at the commencement of electronic consultation that Parishes could apply for a lottery grant to assist with ICT and details were distributed by the Development Control Operations Manager. However, the Local Planning Authority cannot guarantee the success of a 'pitch' for lottery support which needs to be shown to be in the interest of general public assistance and not just for planning applications.

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During periods of difficulty we have been prepared to send documents as .PDF (Adobe Acrobat) files to Parish Clerks / Executive Officers via e-mail to assist with preparation for meetings. Whilst we are embarked upon examination of our processes, including consultation, this is one of a number of methods that will be examined whilst bearing in mind resource implications.

It should also be borne into consideration that appointments can be made to view paper files at our offices by emailing planninghistories@bromsgrove.gov.uk. Where this is a working file, the case officer will be asked to make the file available at the earliest opportunity.

If a Parish has questions relating to the size and scale of development these can also be directed to the case officer for assistance.

(4) **Please could performance statistics also be provided for the length of time taken to process applications within the District.**

We currently provide application performance information internally and in quarterly returns for the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG). There is no reason why the information cannot be shared with Parish Councils in an existing format which does not require additional resource.