



Press release

For immediate release

Council takes action to tackle planning application backlog

Somerset Council is changing the way its Development Management service works to deliver improvements. In the short term, this means that the Council is seeking to free up case officer time to reduce the current high volume of work-in-progress.

Over the past few years, the volume of planning applications received by Somerset Council has increased significantly and the current workload at Somerset remains high. This has resulted in delays in the determination of planning applications. Somerset Council would like to apologise for any inconvenience caused as a result and are taking a range of actions to reduce the backlog which has been created.

From **Monday 28 July**, Somerset Council will launch a 12-week period of specific critical action focused on reducing this backlog which will have an impact on the level of service delivered. This is necessary to make future service delivery better.

Measures introduced during this 12-week period will include:

- Asking customers, Members and applicants not to chase for updates to allow the time created to focus on decision making. Application progress can continue to be tracked online.
- Planning officers reducing attendance at events or meetings that don't support the objective of reducing the backlog.
- Only accepting amendments to applications in limited circumstances.

- Only undertaking essential site visits.
- With a high volume of applications failing validation, applicants will only be given one chance post submission to provide the required information within 14 days. Full pre-application guidance remains available on our website and this needs to be followed.
- Strict adherence to the call-in criteria (when applications are brought in for committee discussion) as set out in the constitution.
- A new triage approach being introduced when applications are first received to speed up decision making.
- Planning teams having “all in” office-based days to support the above.

Teams will review progress after 12 weeks to determine the next steps or if any of these measures need to remain in place.

Somerset Council is aware that these measures are not ideal, but it is taking critical action now to tackle the immediate issues. This will allow the council to put longer-term plans in place.

The backlog has been caused by a number of issues including difficulties in recruitment and staff retention due to the current challenges; ways of working (there are currently multiple ICT systems in planning following unitarisation – a solution to this is being investigated); and complexity, as there is rarely a simple answer to questions in planning.

The public website will shortly be updated to reflect these temporary changes.

Cllr Mike Rigby, Portfolio Holder for Economic Development, Planning and Transportation said:

“This is an incredibly complex problem to solve, and we recognise that this critical action will impact on our residents. But it is necessary to bring work in progress down to a more manageable and sustainable standard and to make Somerset’s planning service a great place to work for current colleagues and prospective employees, and, most importantly, to improve our offer to our communities.

“These actions are aimed at improving our reputation with service users in the future and we ask for patience while we put these measures in place. It is a critical phase of a much wider programme of work to drive positive change in our service.”

This wider programme of improvement work in the Planning service will be taking place through 2025 and 2026 and be ongoing.

The aims of this wider programme of improvement include:

- Building better and more productive working relationships with agents and applicants' planning applications to Somerset Council.
- To build a consistent, effective operational management approach to enable all parts of the service to communicate effectively and using automation wherever possible to drive efficiency.
- To deliver good quality and faster service for customers.
- To create a more professionally rewarding, attractive place to work for planning staff to tackle issues around recruitment and retention.

ENDS

For more information, please contact the Press Office on 01823 355020 or email pressoffice@somerset.gov.uk.

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