

London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies letter to Councils re on-line planning meetings

Dear

I am writing to you on behalf of London Forum, the umbrella organisation for well over 100 amenity and civic societies across London – see www.londonforum.org.uk. The Coronavirus pandemic has challenged borough Planning Departments, and together with our member societies, London Forum has reviewed how well each borough is responding. Our overall assessment can be seen [here](#) on the London Forum website.

Our initial concern was that the public participation might be a casualty of the transition to online planning. This led to the development (jointly with TCPA, Just Space and others) of a 6-point charter on Safeguarding the Public Voice in Planning, which, for example asked borough councils to confirm that all planning applications that would previously have gone to the Planning Committee will continue to do so. We are pleased to report that all but a handful of boroughs have confirmed this last point and many have expressed their overall support for the charter.

Our second greatest concern has been the quality of information on Council websites. Although most Councils have most of the information that community organisations and individual residents need to participate in the modified planning system somewhere on their websites, it is often hard to find and/or spread out over unconnected locations. For example, in many cases one has to leave the Planning Service pages and re-enter via “Democracy” to find out about Planning Committee meetings – scarcely intuitive. Some of these problems pre-date the Coronavirus outbreak.

This email is addressed to the Cabinet/Executive member with responsibility for Planning, and to the Head of Planning Service or to the official at Director/Assistant Director with responsibility for Planning. We urge you to review the relevant pages on your website, and to make whatever changes are necessary to make sure that they are easily accessible, comprehensive and easy to understand.

Having reviewed the websites of all boroughs, we attach a template for what we consider to be best practice; we hope you will find this useful. Paragraphs in *italics* involve policy commitments that some boroughs may be unwilling to make (e.g. allowing objectors to speak at virtual committee meetings, or committing to take controversial applications to the Planning Committee). Boroughs that have endorsed the 6-point charter, should be happy to include these sections.

We recognise the great efforts that officials and elected representatives are making to sustain a fair and timely planning service through these difficult times. London Forum and our member societies will continue to play a constructive role in identifying and communicating best practice across the London boroughs, and in ensuring that community groups and residents can continue to play a full part in decisions that have a long-lasting impact on our neighbourhoods.

With best wishes

Paul Thornton

Vice-Chair, London Forum

Template for effective Council on-line planning meetings follows:-

Changes to London Boroughs' Planning Systems

Getting the message across

Most, if not all London Boroughs have now posted information to their websites about the changes made to the Planning Service in the light of the Coronavirus pandemic. We recommend that:

1. This information should be directly accessible via the "Planning" tab on the "List of Council Services" page, **and** via the "Planning" tab on the "Service Disruptions caused by Coronavirus" page.
2. All the relevant information should be on a single webpage, except that relating to the Planning Committee. There should be a clear link from the former to the latter.

Our recommendations for the content of the main information page are shown below. Sections in italics may involve policy changes in some boroughs. They are in effect in some boroughs, and are consistent with London Forum recommended practice.

Template for the Information Page

Changes to the Planning Service during the Coronavirus outbreak

Our Development Management Team is continuing to run a 'business as usual' service as far as possible during the COVID-19 outbreak.

We are still open and accepting, validating and registering all types of planning applications, although we are asking applicants and agents to work with us to enable some of the usual processes involved in determining an application to be carried out.

Correspondence by post

While the Council is still receiving post, there may be delays in delivery to the Council and receipt by the Planning Department. Therefore, we would strongly encourage you to use electronic means instead.

Duty Planner service

There is no on-site duty planner service at present for householder pre-application advice. The Council's contact centre is extremely busy as present and therefore we would encourage you to use our [website](#) to answer any queries you have

Pre-application advice

We will continue to offer a pre-application advice service, using virtual meeting platforms such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom for small, medium and major proposals. For householder pre-application advice we are offering a written response service rather than our usual face to face service, and we are aiming to get a short response to you within 28 days.

Notification of planning applications

The Council is required to publicise certain types of planning applications and other related consents by way of a site notice in at least one place on or near the land to which the application relates for not less than 21 days. In light of the Government's advice regarding staying at home and social distancing the Council is unable to put up site notices at this time.

Therefore, we are emailing the site notice, for those applications, to the agent/applicant and asking them to put up the site notice. The notice must be placed on or near the land to which the application relates, where it can be easily seen, for a period of at least 21 days. This can be in the window of the property if it can be seen from the street. If it is put up externally, for example on a lamp post, fence etc, it should be laminated, or placed in a clear plastic folder/wallet.

If you put up the site notice, you **must** send to the Council a photograph of the site notice in situ, clearly showing where it has been placed, to the planning case officer.

Consultation letters are being sent to neighbouring residents as usual by post. *In addition Ward councillors and community groups are receiving weekly lists of all newly registered applications, and are being encouraged to bring them to the attention of those most affected.*

Enhanced consultation for major applications

For major applications, the applicant is encouraged set up a micro website with 3D images of the proposal to serve as a focal point for engagement (or re-engagement) with residents, community groups, ward councillors and other local stakeholders. It should be possible to post comments and also see the applicant's response on the micro site.

Viewing planning applications

The Council's Planning Offices are closed to the public and therefore it will not be possible to view applications in person. Applications can be viewed on-line, via the [Council's planning search webpage](#).

Commenting on or objecting to planning applications

add relevant text about length of consultation period, and how to submit objections. Add text to the effect that comments and objections will be considered beyond that date, up to the point that the application is determined

Assessment of planning applications

Planning Officers are no longer able to carry out site visits for planning applications. Therefore, the case officer will be asking the applicant/agent to submit photographs of the site and neighbouring properties *and a live video 360 degrees of the whole site and context.*

If we receive any objections to proposals, we will be asking objectors to also submit photographs and a live video. We will be using these submissions in combination with google earth/street view to view the site in context.

If, from the details we receive from applicants/agents and neighbours, we are concerned that this will not enable a sufficient assessment of the proposal, then unfortunately we will have to delay the determination of the application and ask applicants/agents to agree an extension of time until such time that we can carry out a site visit in person.

Click [here](#) to see the limits on the types and size of files we can receive.

Where we are able to, the Council will continue to assess and determine planning applications. *There is no intention to extend the use of delegated or executive powers; all planning applications that would previously have gone to the Planning Committee will continue to do so. Information about Planning Committee meetings and how to take part can be seen [here](#)*

Section 106

We are continuing to negotiate s106 heads of terms and agreements virtually and are able to seal and issue agreements whilst working remotely. If you have any queries over s106 agreements please contact your planning case officer or the s106 monitoring officer.

.....probably on a separate webpage...

Planning Committee

The Council is now holding virtual Planning Committee meetings using < Zoom/YouTube / MS Teams>, and we shall continue to do so. Please check [here](#) for the dates of future meetings. Details of committee and speaking arrangements will be notified to those that have made representations. The Council is taking all appropriate precautions to maintain the safety of the public, officers and Members. We will be live-streaming meetings so you do not need to attend in person. Webcasts will be available [here](#) live, *and for xx months afterwards*

Objectors and supporters/agents/applicants can register to speak in the normal way; you will be able to do this via [this link](#). If you were planning to register to speak but would rather not do so online, you can submit a written objection which will be read out by a Council Officer. Please email this to <email address>.

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