![Northumberland County Council logo]

Planning Agents Newsletter

Edition 1: November 2022 (by email only)

Introduction

The Planning Service is keen to engage more with all our service users and to do so, we will be introducing a regular newsletter which we hope you will find useful. Our aim is to keep you informed regarding what we are currently working on and of any changes that may affect you.

This first edition of the newsletter has been distributed to all Planning Agents that have submitted an application to us in the past 12 months (and anyone already registered on our Agents Forum) in order to reach as many eyes as possible. To avoid sending unwanted emails, all future editions of this newsletter will be distributed to the Developer and Agents Forum members only so if you wish to continue to receive these you will need to register and join (see section 6 below). They will also be made available on the Planning News section of our website.

This edition of the newsletter provides information on the following:

1. New validation procedure introduced to encourage valid applications first time.
2. Local Information Requirements updated July 2022 and new online Planning Constraints Mapping tool added.
3. Common invalid reasons to avoid.
4. Update on other service initiatives in progress.
5. Contacting Planning Officers – 01670 numbers removed.
6. How to get involved with the Developer and Agents Planning Forum.

We appreciate your support and hope by introducing the following changes you will all start to see a faster, more effective service.

Best wishes

Rob Murfin
Director of Planning

1. New validation procedure introduced to encourage valid applications first time.

We receive over 5000 applications each year and **over 40% of these are invalid**, many due to missing or incorrect National requirements. Dealing with invalid applications takes a considerable amount of resource to go back to applicants/ agents and request the information and then regularly chase up. This is particularly the case when there are multiple reasons why the application is invalid and can often take months to resolve. This double handling and inability to move the application through the system significantly impacts our ability to process new applications and results in delays.

Following various discussions with planning managers, the validation team and other authorities, it was felt that **if an application has 4 or more errors it should be returned and closed** as it demonstrates that the applicant or agent has not referred to our validation checklist. It is an inefficient use of our resources to check for further missing requirements given these are clearly stated on our Checklist and can be viewed prior to submission. As such **the return letter will list the first 4 invalid reasons we come across – however <u>there may be more invalid reasons which the applicant/agent will need to check for in order to avoid any re-submission being classed as invalid again</u>**. We will continue to work with applicants and agents to make applications valid where there are less than four errors and, in these instances, send out invalid letters. Where information is provided within the time stated on the letter the application will proceed, if not it will be closed off.

Other authorities have taken tougher approaches to reduce invalid applications such as introducing charges, but we felt this change is proportionate. It gives the applicant/ agent time to go through the validation checklist, re-submit a valid application and encourages valid applications in future. It also allows those applications submitted as valid first time to be processed and passed on for a decision in a timely manner.

We strongly encourage everyone to read any invalid/return letter thoroughly. If you have any questions the Validation Officer named at the top of the letter should be your first point of contact. Please treat our Officers with the same respect you would expect to receive.

2. Local Information Requirements updated in July

As you know, the submission of a valid application for planning permission requires compliance with national information requirements and provision of local information requirements (reflecting the material planning considerations relevant to our area). A Local Planning Authority is required to review their local list at least every 2 years.

Following input from statutory consultees and a period of public consultation our **new online Planning Application Validation Checklist went live in July 2022**. It contains details of both national and local requirements, explains which documents should accompany your application and how to meet our requirements. If you have the checklist saved, **please ensure you are using the up-to-date version**.

View the Validation Checklist at www.northumberland.gov.uk/validationchecklist

Note 13. Coastal Change Vulnerability Assessment	⊕
Note 14. Daylight and Sunlight Assessment	⊕
Note 15. Ecological Checklist, Surveys and Assessment (NOTE: this is required for the majority of applications including householders)	⊖

What is it?	When is it needed?	Why is it needed?
Ecology Checklist: This must be submitted with your application. The aim of the checklist is to help you understand whether or not you need to submit an ecological assessment, and if so, the scope of it. Submitting the checklist with your application demonstrates an assessment of your development has been made. **See Appendix A – Ecology Checklist (Word document)**	**Required for:** • All applications not listed below. **Not required for:** • Purely internal works. This includes change of use of any building (other than agricultural buildings, bridges, tunnels, mines, kilns, icehouses or similar underground structures) • Window / door replacement (including skylights/rooflights/velux/dormer windows)	To understand the ecological issues associated with a development and avoid delays in determination, create a better scheme and avoid breaches of legislation.

What criteria must it meet to be valid?

Ecology Reports
- the title must state the document is/includes an Ecological Impact Assessment / Bat (and Barn Owl) Survey;
- a statement on the front cover must make it clear if the report a) reveals the location of badger setts, and/or b) reveals the nesting sites of birds of prey vulnerable to illegal persecution;
- surveys should have been undertaken within the past two years; and
- surveys must not state they are a 'draft' version, they must be a 'final' version.

Nutrient Budgets
- the title must state the document is/includes a Nutrient budget; and
- prepare your budget using the most recent version of the calculator.

How to prepare / further guidance

Ecology Report
The Ecology Checklist provides guidance on how to prepare an Ecological Impact Assessment/Bat Survey. The Planning Authority may require an Ecological Assessment to be submitted at a later stage if it becomes clear that important ecological features may be affected by your proposal.

Why is it essential to refer to the Validation Checklist?

It is in everyone's interest to get applications validated but **it is the responsibility of the applicant/ agent to check the requirements are fulfilled prior to submission**. We cannot process your application unless the mandatory national and local requirements have been provided and are correct. Any application that does not meet these requirements will be made invalid or may be returned to you. An application will only be passed to a Case Officer when it is complete (valid). You can avoid delays and help us deal with applications more efficiently by familiarising yourself with this list and checking your application prior to submission.

Why can't the information be conditioned?

Statutory consultees and members of the public cannot make their comments and **the Case Officer cannot determine the application until they receive all the relevant information** which is why we ask for documents at the point of submission. Documents supplied later during consideration of an application create delays and additional work.

What has changed?

Planning Constraints Map tool created
A new online map tool has been added to help you check if any constraints apply to your site/proposal before you submit an application e.g. conservation areas, protected open space, nutrient neutrality catchments. This map has a screening function that enables you to draw your site area, see a list of constraints that apply to your site and compare this information with the Checklist to see if further documents should be supplied to make the application valid. A link to the Planning Constraints Map is provided a relevant points throughout the new Validation Checklist.

New requirements introduced

An Ecological Checklist (a self-assessment form **required for most applications**), Fire Statement, Coastal Change Vulnerability Assessment, Nutrient Budget, Sequential Test, Healthy Planning Checklist along with Mine/Ground Gas Protection are some of the new requirements introduced following feedback from our statutory consultees or as a result of national requirement changes that came into force since our previous checklist.

Some requirements reduced and exemptions made clearer

We have listened to feedback from the consultation combined with comments from the experiences of our Validation Team and have taken a proportionate approach to the information requested. Yes, it is more detailed than our previous Checklist however this also means it is more specific. Requirements have been reduced where appropriate and exemptions have been added with the aim of making it clear whether a document is required/not required by application type but also by proposal type/scale. Some requirements have been left to the Case Officer to request following validation in order to avoid asking for expensive reports up-front when they may not be required.

Quick Reference Checklists added

We realise it is a large list so to help you interpret it and save time we have also produced some Quick Reference Checklists by application type e.g., Householder Planning Permission (with or without Listed Building Consent/Demolition), Lawful Development Certificates, Tree Works/Hedgerow Removal Notices, Listed Building Consent/Demolition in a Conservation Area, Removal/Variation of a Condition/Non-Material Amendment/ Approval of Details Reserved by Condition (discharge). (Outline and Reserved Matters will be added next week). They are available on the main Validation Checklist page at www.northumberland.gov.uk/validationchecklist

The Checklist will not be provided as a downloadable document

We have found that some applications were invalid because the agent referred to an old version of the Checklist they had saved. Providing the information in a web page format means the latest version is always used and it meets changes to accessibility standards.

3. Common invalid reasons to avoid

The diagram below shows the main reasons for invalid applications.
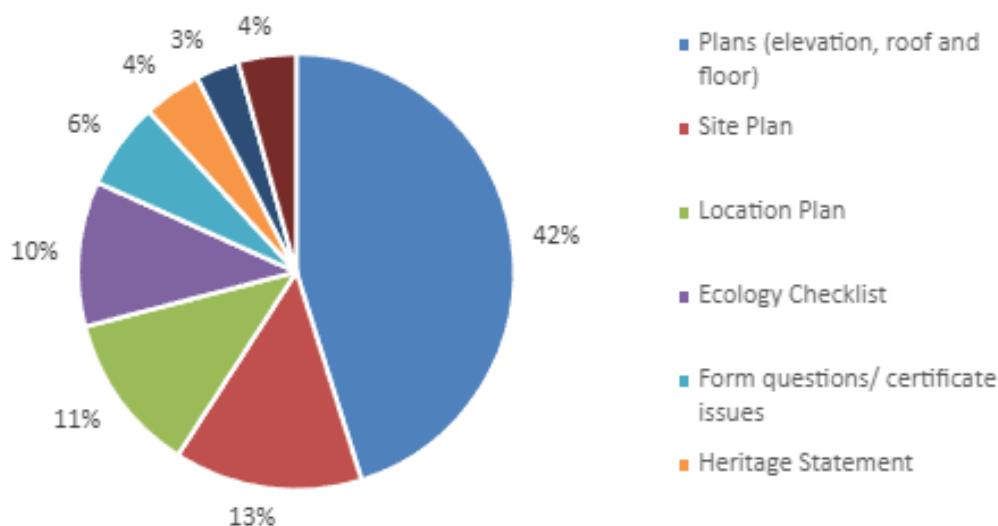
We encourage you to check your submission closely against the new Validation Checklist. It contains a list of criteria that documents must meet to make it valid. www.northumberland.gov.uk/validationchecklist

42% of Plans (elevation, roof or floor plans) are invalid

This is normally due to a missing scale bar or a North arrow (where required), or because they do not measure to the scale/paper size stated. Scale bars provide us with a specific measurement so we can check the drawing is consistent with the scale stated and not distorted by copying/printing/resizing, it must match the scale stated on the drawing. A North arrow helps us get our bearings (especially with a complex layout), marry the correct elevation with the floor plan and check they have the correct labelling e.g., East, West etc This is checked at validation in order to prevent delay during the decision-making process. Any plans should be clear and measurable so we can maintain an accurate register. Please see Note 8 of the Validation Checklist for further detailed requirements.

13% of Site Plans are invalid

This is often because only a proposed site plan is submitted, and we often require an existing site plan in addition. It can also be because they do not measure to the scale/paper size stated or are missing a North arrow – this is a national requirement. Please see Note 4 of the Validation Checklist for further detailed requirements.

11% of Location Plans are invalid

These are mainly invalid due to issues with the red line boundary or because they do not measure to the scale/paper size stated. We have produced some guidance which includes advice on how to avoid the three most common mistakes on location plans. As a decision relates to the area within the red line boundary it must be correct. Please see Note 3 of the Validation Checklist for further detailed requirements.

10% of invalid applications are missing Ecology Checklists

This is required for most applications (including householder), the purpose is to help applicants self-assess whether they need to submit any ecological information with their application. Helping applicants understand the need for any such information at an early stage is particularly important because many surveys can only be undertaken during certain times of the year and identifying survey requirements late in the day can lead to many months additional delay. See Note 15 to obtain a copy of the Ecology Checklist.

4. Update on other service initiatives in progress

- Work is underway to introduce a **Development Management Charter** which will set out our processes and service standards, so it is clear what service users can expect from the Planning Service.
- We are developing a new **Enforcement Strategy** that outlines the manner in which the Council will undertake its planning enforcement function and ensure effective enforcement within Northumberland.

- We have also been reviewing our **Pre-application Service** as we recognise that a good Pre-App offers significant potential to improve both the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning application system and improve the quality of planning applications and their likelihood of success. We are currently reviewing the types of Pre-application advice we offer and developing new service standards that clearly set out what will be provided, and timescales involved.

It is our intention to share these with you in due course and ask for feedback.

5. Contacting Planning Officers

Please note that all the 01670 office numbers have now been removed as many Officers are now working from home or are often out on site so you may wish to update any contact details you currently hold.

The Case Officer will be in contact if there is any additional information required prior to the determination. Can we please ask that you only get in contact if absolutely necessary by calling 0345 600 6400. Customer Services will take a message and log it with the correct Team/Case Officer to respond. Officers will aim to respond within 3 working days and resolve with 10 working days. Where it is clear at the outset that an extended period will be necessary to respond, the Officer will advise. Please include any application reference, Case Officer name and your email address with your message so we can provide an informed response. Thank you for your patience.

6. How to get involved with the Developer and Agents Planning Forum

Effective communication is never one way, and we encourage you to get involved with our Developer and Agents Forum. It provides an opportunity for us to meet face to face, keep you updated and for you to provide feedback. If you would like to join our Forum and receive future newsletters, updates and information on upcoming Forum meetings please complete the Developer and Agent Forum - registration form.

We look forward to working with you and hope to see you at our next Forum meeting.