

Item No. 12.	Classification: Open	Date: 7 March 2023	Meeting Name: Cabinet
Report title		Response to Environment and Community Engagement Scrutiny Commission's report: 'Streamlining planning applications for retrofit and renewable energy' (November 2022) heard at 6 December 2022 Cabinet	
Ward(s) or groups affected:		Borough wide	
Cabinet Member:		Councillor James McAsh, Climate Emergency and Sustainable Development	

FOREWORD - COUNCILLOR JAMES MCASH, CABINET MEMBER FOR THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

More than half of the carbon emissions cuts that are needed to reach net zero rely on people and businesses taking up low-carbon solutions. The Planning division is responding to this by providing new planning services that will reduce carbon emissions within the borough by supporting residents in implementing renewable energy and retrofitting projects on their homes.

In practice this means that we now make quicker decisions on planning applications for renewables and retrofitting projects, so residents can implement their projects quicker. Furthermore, the Planning division now offers a new free of charge planning advice service for renewable energy and retrofitting projects so that residents can understand if their project needs permission, and better understand design and heritage issues, providing better certainty that saves time in the planning application process.

In addition, Southwark planning service is leading the country in developing an innovative planning digital tool that assist our residents to understand whether their project need planning permission or not. The free of charge digital tool, 'Find out If you Need Planning Permission', is now live on the Planning division's website and available for all to use. The Planning division website is also consistently updated to better signpost our new services and provide clear guidance.

These changes make our planning services easier to understand and improve access to expert planning advice which saving residents time and money. We are actively reducing the barriers to the implementation of domestic renewable energy projects to tackle the climate emergency in our borough. This in turn contributes to our overarching objective of doing all we can to make the borough net zero by 2030.

RECOMMENDATION

1. That Cabinet notes the officer responses to the eight recommendations made in the Environment and Community Engagement Scrutiny Commission's Scrutiny Review Report: [Streamlining planning applications for retrofit and renewable](#)

[energy](#)' (November 2022) that was prepared by Southwark Council's Environment and Community Engagement Scrutiny Commission and heard at Cabinet meeting held on 6 December 2022 (Item 26).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

2. This document sets out officer responses to the eight recommendations made in the Environment and Community Engagement Scrutiny Commission's Scrutiny Review Report: [Streamlining planning applications for retrofit and renewable energy](#)' (November 2022) heard at Cabinet meeting held on 6 December 2022 (Item 26).
3. Following the adoption of the Southwark Plan (2022) in February 2022, the Environment and Community Engagement Scrutiny Commission initiated a review of the planning services at its meeting on 18 July 2022, and completed the review at a second meeting on 11 October 2022.
4. The purpose of the review was to consider how planning guidance and services could be streamlined and improved to help residents deliver renewable energy technology and retrofitting projects that achieve carbon savings. The review aligned with the council's declaration of a Climate Emergency 2019 and its ambitious borough target to do all it can to reach net zero by 2030.
5. Two meetings were held with officers who provided verbal information and two written reports that detailed the service improvements the planning service is currently undertaking to support the deployment of domestic renewable and retrofit projects:
 - Report 1: [Domestic renewable energy and heating systems and Planning](#) - (18 July 2022 Meeting)
 - Report 2: [Domestic Renewables – Follow up briefing](#) - (11 October 2022 Meeting)
6. In summary the service improvements outlined in the written reports included:
 - The launch of the '[Find Out If You Need Planning Permission](#)' free online tool to check whether the proposed works would need planning permission
 - Free of charge pre-application advice for domestic renewable or retrofit projects, saving £103 (Householder. Lawful Development Certificate) or £206 per application (Minor), depending on the type of planning application required for the project
 - How the planning service now identifies planning applications for domestic [renewables](#) at the point of submission and 'fast tracks' them to make a quicker decision within 42 days instead of the standard 56 days
 - Confirmation of the preparation of new formal planning guidance relating to [renewables](#) and retrofitting in Supplementary Planning Documents
 - Improved [interim](#) guidance being prepared for the planning website.

7. Officers continue to engage with residents on these themes and recently attended a community retrofit event on 23 January 2023 that was organised by the Herne Hill Forum. Officers took part in a panel discussion and a question-and-answer session to provide expert planning advice on domestic renewables and retrofitting to ~50 residents.

KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

RESPONSE TO REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

8. The eight recommendations regarding planning guidance and services arising from the Environment and Community Engagement Scrutiny Commission report of 6 December 2022 have been addressed below.

Recommendation 1. Planning advice will be presented clearly and in plain English with any acronyms explained.

9. The use of Plain English is best practice in Planning. Officers employ the principle in all published planning advice and guidance to ensure it is as easy as possible to understand. Guidance that is written in documents that are published as PDFs, or as content published on our website all undergo Plain English testing. Officers use a tool called 'Hemingway' that assesses the readability of the text and suggests improvements. Any unavoidable acronyms are clearly explained. Officers will continue to use this process. The review of website content is an ongoing process as part of service improvements.

Recommendation 2. Explanatory guidance for completing the (government mandated) online Planning forms will be amended to ensure that it explicitly refers to common carbon saving measure(s) that are the subject of the given planning application.

10. The standardised online planning application forms are maintained by the national Planning Portal service. Officers will consider ways to include or signpost advice on common energy saving and adaptation projects at the submission stage of the planning process. The planning division website is being updated to provide guidance.
11. We are also building new digital tools in partnership with 12 boroughs nationwide funded by DHLUC which will enable an easy to use planning application system which can be used instead of the planning portal. We are already using this for Local Development Certificates.
12. This can be viewed here: <https://www.southwark.gov.uk/planning-and-building-control/planning-applications/apply-for-a-lawful-development-certificate>

Recommendation 3. Clear guidance will be provided to applicants as to why and whether a Certificate of Lawful Development may be required or not, helping residents to make informed choices.

13. The innovative 'Find Out If You Need Planning Permission' digital tool provides free of charge guidance to residents on whether the proposed works would need

planning permission. Officers are also undertaking updates to the planning division website to ensure all permitted development advice is clear and helpful, and best practice is signposted. Alongside this, the planning service offers a [free of charge pre-application advice service](#) for homeowners who wish to install renewable energy or heating technology. Officers are in the process preparing a communication strategy to promote the service.

Recommendation 4. The planning advice services available within the council to help residents proceed with carbon saving adaptations to their homes will be promoted.

14. In addition to the service improvements already discussed above, officers are seeking to use a multi-channel and cross-Council approach to promote the pre-application planning advice service offered to residents. The advice of the Climate Change Team and Communications Team will also be sought on how to use the appropriate communication channels to promote our services. Officers will continue to promote the service improvements to residents at public facing events.
15. Officers are also working closely with the Climate Change Team to deliver the [Climate Change Strategy action](#) point B.1.v to 'establish a free green homes advice service for homeowners to help make homes greener and lower carbon emissions'. Planning guidance will form an important part of this service and is scheduled to launch later his year.

Recommendation 5. The council will work with other planning authorities within the borough, to improve and expand uptake of carbon saving adaptations in domestic (and, where appropriate, other) contexts.

16. Officers will continue to engage with the Dulwich Estate at the strategic level and through our development management and planning policy processes to promote our ambitious objectives for the borough.

Recommendation 6. Relevant and appropriate demographic and geographic data will be requested from residents using the pre-application service in order for the council to assess, after a relevant period, the accessibility of this service to all Southwark residents.

17. Officers will now request and monitor relevant demographic information of applicants who use the renewables pre-application service. Officers will then be able to provide updated guidance on the demographics of service users. Officers can currently identify the geographic location of application properties.

Recommendation 7. Residents in different types of tenure (leaseholder, council and social housing, private rented) will be provided with advice and assistance by the council on ways to take forward the installation of carbon saving measures on their homes, and demographic data captured, as above.

18. As outlined above in the response to Recommendation 4, the planning guidance and advice provided by officers is and will be promoted in several ways. Officers are also working closely with the Climate Change Team to establish the Green Homes Advice Service for homeowners that is scheduled to launch later his year.

Recommendation 8. Feedback from applicants will be collected and collated in order to facilitate further improvements in service delivery

19. An informative will be added to 'Green Deal' decision notices to request that applicants inform the planning team once they have completed their green projects. Following receipt of the notification, a brief feedback questionnaire will be emailed to applicants following completion of their scheme.
20. Through Q3 and Q4 2022/23, 19 planning applications have been identified for the accelerated Green Deal timeframe. These include:
 - 2 householder applications
 - 15 minor applications
 - 2 variations to schemes that support the provision of renewables.
21. 19 of the green deal applications were decided within 35-42 days of receipt within the accelerated target timeframe.
22. A feedback request survey was emailed to all 19 applicants. Questions included:
 - How easy was it to understand the planning/permitted development requirements of your scheme?
 - How easy was it to access this service?
 - Was your decision made in the timeframe within which you needed to make a decision on your renewable scheme? (if not please explain what the issues where)
 - Did you find information on the Council's website helpful regarding your planning application? (if not please explain why)
 - Do you intend to implement your planning permission? (if not please explain why)
 - Do you have any suggestions on how the Council can improve the service regarding renewable energy and retrofitting projects?
 - Do you have any other comments/suggestions?
23. In addition, a feedback request survey will be emailed to every recipient of the new free pre-application advice. Questions include:
 - Was the service easy to access or find on the council website?
 - How easy was it to understand the planning/ permitted development requirements of your scheme? (if not please explain why)
 - Was the pre-application advice clear and helpful? (if not please explain why)
 - Was the pre-application advice provided in the timeframe within which you needed to make a decision on your renewable scheme? (if not please explain why)
 - Do you intend to implement with your proposal?
 - Did you share the pre-app response or any guidance with your contractor?

Policy framework implications

24. The above key issues for consideration are in line with the Council's Climate Change Strategy.

Community, equalities (including socio-economic) and health impacts

Community impact statement

25. The above key issues for consideration outline how planning guidance and services are being streamlined and improved to help residents deliver renewable energy technology and retrofitting projects that achieve carbon savings.

Equalities (including socio-economic) impact statement

26. The '[Find Out If You Need Planning Permission](#)' free online tool, the free pre-application service and accessible information on our website is designed to be accessible to all.

Health impact statement

27. Non applicable.

Climate change implications

28. The above key issues for consideration outline how planning guidance and services are being streamlined and improved to help residents deliver renewable energy technology and retrofitting projects that achieve carbon savings. The review aligned with the council's declaration of a Climate Emergency 2019 and its ambitious borough target to do all it can to reach net zero by 2030. The recommendations align with the Council's Climate Change Strategy.

Resource implications

29. None

Legal implications

30. None

Financial implications

31. None

Consultation

32. Non applicable.

SUPPLEMENTARY ADVICE FROM OTHER OFFICERS

Head of Procurement

33. Non applicable.

Assistant Chief Executive, Governance and Assurance

34. Non applicable.

Strategic Director of Finance and Governance

35. Non applicable.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
Environment and Community Engagement Scrutiny Commission's Scrutiny Review Report: Streamlining planning applications for retrofit and renewable energy (November 2022) heard at Cabinet meeting held on 6 December 2022 (Item 26).	Online	Planning Policy planningpolicy@southwark.gov.uk
Streamlining planning applications for retrofit and renewable energy		
Environment & Community Engagement Scrutiny Commission	Online	Planning Policy planningpolicy@southwark.gov.uk
Domestic renewable energy and heating systems and Planning - (18 July 2022 Meeting)		
Domestic renewable energy and heating systems and Planning		
Environment & Community Engagement Scrutiny Commission Domestic Renewables – Follow up briefing - (11 October 2022 Meeting)	Online	Planning Policy planningpolicy@southwark.gov.uk
Domestic Renewables – Follow up briefing		
Website information	Online	Planning planningenquiries@southwark.gov.uk
Find Out If You Need Planning Permission		
Free of charge pre-application advice service		
https://www.southwark.gov.uk/planning-and-building-control/planning-applications/apply-for-a-lawful-development-certificate		

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
Climate Change Strategy	Online	Climate Change Team
Climate Change Strategy Action Plan		

APPENDICES

No.	Title
None	

AUDIT TRAIL

Cabinet Member	Councillor James McAsh, Climate Emergency and Sustainable Development	
Lead Officer	Juliet Seymour, Head of Policy, Building Control and the Historic Environment	
Report Author	Tom Buttrick, Planning Policy Team Leader	
Version	Final	
Dated	23 February 2023	
Key Decision?	No	
CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / CABINET MEMBER		
Officer Title	Comments Sought	Comments Included
Assistant Chief Executive, Governance and Assurance	No	No
Strategic Director of Finance and Governance	No	No
Cabinet Member	Yes	No
Date final report sent to Constitutional Team	23 February 2023	