

The pandemic has had a number of unexpected consequences and one of these is that the construction and DIY industry is booming. Consequently, there has been a large increase in the number of applications that our planning teams have received. We want to take this opportunity to update you on the work that is happening, the volumes of work being carried out and the processes we have streamlined to create greater efficiencies.

Regards,

Cllr David Walsh, Portfolio Holder for Planning
Matthew Piles Corporate Director for Economic Growth & Infrastructure

Planning Convergence and Transformation

Our Planning Convergence and Transformation Project aims to deliver a more effective, efficient, and customer-focussed planning service. We are halfway through the introduction of a new single planning software system for Dorset Council, which is a key part of our wider planning transformation project. All our planning systems are working on Mastergov. Although we still have to transfer the former East and Purbeck district councils, and county council information onto the new system, we are already seeing processes becoming more efficient. We are embedding change into our processes as we go.

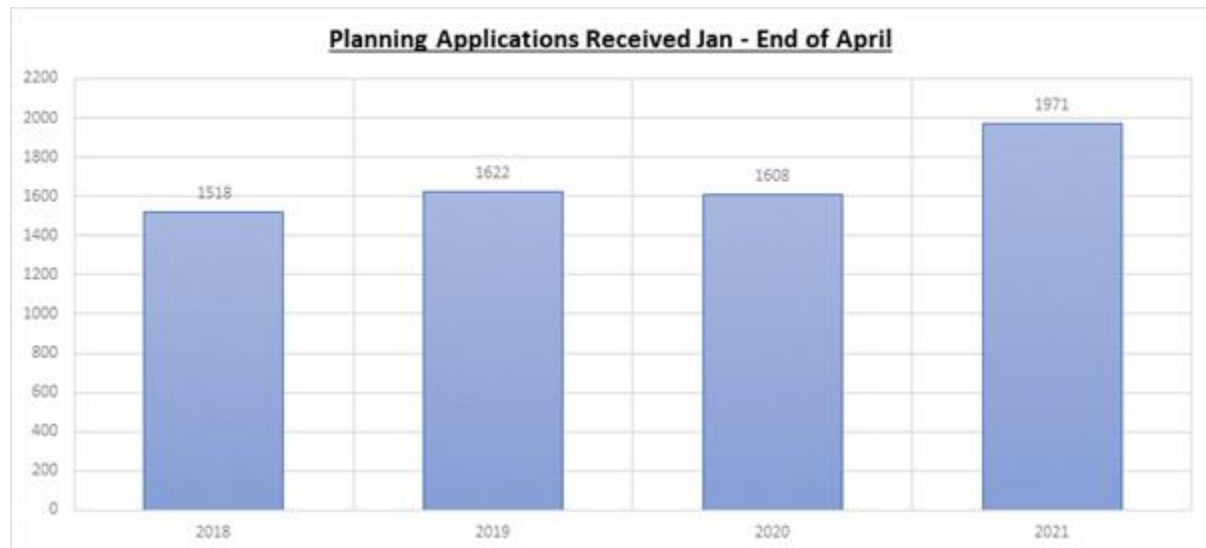
Next phase

We are currently preparing to transfer the Purbeck data, closely followed by East. The exact dates are still to be agreed, but we will inform you when they are confirmed.

Business as usual

We received 9,022 planning applications between January 2019 and December 2020. This is an average of 376 applications per month

We issued 482 decisions in March – higher than any month in the last 2 years



Planning validation backlog

There is currently an eight-week back log to validate new planning applications. The service was heavily impacted by the school closures during the second lockdown, coinciding with a significant increase in applications being received.

We are addressing the situation by continuing to use the support of Terra Quest as well as recruiting to additional posts to help bolster the teams.

In line with the Council's agreed Statement of Community Involvement, from 1 July onwards we will no longer be sending neighbour notification letters for planning applications, unless

these are specifically required by legislation. All applications will continue to be publicised via site notices, and press notices will also be used where required by law. Details of all applications will still be published online, and we will continue to consult statutory organisations and town and parish councils. Alongside this we are moving to use our preferred option for digital responses to planning applications via our online register, and we are encouraging everyone to use this system. This will significantly reduce the number of emails we are receiving so that we can concentrate on validating applications. We appreciate that our validation delays can cause frustration, and we are doing all we can to clear the backlog as quickly as we can

Planning site notices

To make sure that site notices are displayed in good time we are asking agents and applicants to help by putting them up. When your planning application is registered, we will contact you with a copy of the site notice, and a request for you to print this, and erect it as soon as possible. We will also ask you to date the site notice on the day it was erected, and to send us a photograph of the site notice in situ, which we will keep for our records.

Planning Site visits

We have changed our approach to site visits for planning applications. If an officer needs to visit a site in order to assess the planning issues, then they will do so. However, if the assessment can be made using a desk-based approach, then this is preferred as it is a speedier process. We will therefore continue to ask applicants and agents to send us photographs of proposed development sites, to help officers assess the impacts of proposal without needing a site visit.

Ecological surveys

Over the past year, we have sometimes validated planning applications without all the relevant ecological surveys (particularly bat surveys), in recognition of the fact that Covid-19 restrictions may have led to difficulties for applicants and agents in supplying the appropriate surveys. All relevant information was still required before a decision could be issued. We are currently planning to stop this approach for all applications submitted from 1 August 2021, meaning that full information will again be required at the validation stage. This will help to reduce delays later in the process.

Amended plans and pre-application advice.

We are streamlining our processes so that only one set of amended plans will generally be allowed, particularly for minor and householder applications. In time these changes will lead to more efficiency.

We encourage all applicants to use our [pre-application advice service](#), so that when an application comes in, it is more likely to be supported:

If an applicant has not engaged in pre-application advice, or has not taken the advice provided, then revisions will not normally be acceptable during the course of the planning application.

Building Control

The Building control team are seeing no delays in their service and dealing with all fee quotes, Plan checks and site inspections. They have recruited more staff to manage their increase in caseload. The team are continuing with all required site inspections and visits following Government guidance on social distancing to keep the construction sector moving. They are currently carrying out an average of 50 site inspections per day across Dorset.

We're open for business – Whatever the size of your building project, we can provide you with all the help to complete it safely and on time. [Contact details for all the area surveyors are on our website.](#)