

Submitted to Reform of planning committees: technical consultation
Submitted on 2025-07-23 19:04:10

Respondent Details

1 What is your name?

Name:
Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council

2 What is your email address?

Email:
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3 What is the name of your organisation?

Free text:
Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council

4 Please indicate in what capacity you are responding to this consultation (please only select one)

Neighbourhood planning body, parish or town council

National scheme of delegation

5 Question 1: Do you agree with the principle of having a two tier structure for the national scheme of delegation?

Disagree

Please explain your answer:

Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council does not agree that a 'one size fits all' mandatory two tier scheme of delegation is the best structure.

In our area the current scheme of delegation has, for Abingdon, worked well with the Vale of White Horse Planning Committee only reviewing a select number of cases where there are valid planning reasons for them to require scrutiny.

The majority of applications are officer led for decisions and as a statutory consultee, our local knowledge can be invaluable in adding to their decision making.

The town's Planning Committee actively reviews all applications on that basis. Where we do make comments or objections it is from that local knowledge, something that Officers with busy work loads simply do not have and don't have the time to make site visits to gain

It has worked very well to promote democracy and transparency in both the planning and local government systems.

A two tier approach which prevents any Tier A applications being reviewed at Committee will not encourage any local faith in process, democratic process and accountability and local governance.

6 Question 2: Do you agree the following application types should fall within Tier A? a) applications for planning permission for Householder development, minor commercial development and minor residential development b) applications for reserved matter approvals c) applications for non-material amendments to planning permissions d) applications for the approval of conditions including Schedule 5 mineral planning condition e) applications for approval of the BNG Plan f) applications for approval of prior approval (for permitted development rights) g) applications for lawful development certificates h) applications for a Certificate of Appropriate Alternative Development

Disagree

Please explain your answer:

Abingdon is growing in size but is still a market town of approximately only 34,000. Consequently what might be considered minor if it were a much larger town, major urban area or metropolitan borough has a much higher significance.

Adding to that it's historic and national heritage defined buildings and conservation areas and one size certainly doesn't fit all as we review a lot of applications under Heritage Officer comments and Listed Building status

Householder development where a property is being redeveloped into 5 or 6 flats, change of use to HMOs and 'minor' commercial or residential development on typical plots the town would have to offer have the ability to significantly impact the area it's in because of our size.

The same applies to Reserved matters approvals with the impacts on street scene, transport and highways schemes and congestion.

BNG is a significant concern to the town which under Climate Emergency is actively trying to reduce our footprint. There are extremely well known local wildlife sites and areas that would not be significant to an officer making a decision remotely and devoid of that knowledge.

7 Question 3: Do you think, further to the working paper on revising development thresholds, we should consider including some applications for medium residential development (10- 50 dwellings) within Tier A? If so, what types of application?

No

Please explain your answer:

Abingdon-on-Thames doesn't support this.

In our area 10 to 50 properties would be a significant development with the corresponding infrastructure impacts and should be considered under the current model, with the potential for a Planning Committee review if appropriate.

For example, the town is currently regularly gridlocked with public transport providers apps advising adding 30 minutes to travel times. Adding up to 50 homes with associated traffic, nature and environmental impacts could be the final nail for a very stressed system.

These applications are the ones where District and County Councillors and Officers with their larger areas find extremely helpful to have our local knowledge and context to assist them.

With no local input a pure paper decision exercise for an officer could result in increasing housing but actually be highly negative and detrimental to an area and its services. This would alienate both existing and new residents unnecessarily.

Abingdon Town Council strongly believe that has to be strong local contact across all relevant authorities and elected members to ensure all implications are fully understood, allowed for and suitably factored in.

8 Question 4: Are there further types of application which should fall within Tier A?

No

If yes, which application types?:

Abingdon Town Council doesn't support the structure as currently suggested. As mentioned we would like to see a system where Tier A can become a guidance list, not a mandated decision.

9 Question 5: Do you think there should be a mechanism to bring a Tier A application to committee in exceptional circumstances? If so, what would those circumstances be and how would the mechanism operate?

Yes

Free text:

There must be a way to escalate to the Planning Committee and as now District Councillors or the Town P should be able to trigger an application going to Planning Committee.

'Exceptional' is a very relative and subjective term and will vary from one application to another. Consequently there would need to be some clear definition by category of application to allow it to work effectively with good reason.

Again, that will not be a one size fits all when viewed according to rural, metropolitan , market town etc, are there adopted Local and Neighbourhood plans.

At present call in tends to happen where there is a very marked public concern, possible policy contraventions or conflicts or a high percentage of public objections. This could be triggered as now as noted above, for a Planning Committee review and decision.

10 Question 6: Do you think the gateway test which requires agreement between the chief planner and the chair of the planning committee is suitable? If not, what other mechanism would you suggest?

No

Free text:

Vale of White Horse District Council in our experience decides most applications under delegated authority by Head of Service and Officers who seek specialist Officers input for environment, drainage, health and utilities.

Planning Committee referral is therefore rare.

Abingdon on Thames Town Council feels that this is already working well and maintaining the input and escalation arrangement we have linked to our answer to Q5 above is appropriate.

11 Question 7: Do you agree that the following types of application should fall within Tier B? a) Applications for planning permission aside from householder applications, minor commercial applications, minor residential development applications b) notwithstanding a), any application for planning permission where the applicant is the local authority, a councillor or officer c) applications for s73 applications to vary conditions

Disagree

Free text:

Abingdon Town feel that S73 applications, which we don't see that often, can have a significant effect on the original planning permission as they are material changes, impacting the local area.

As they are lower volume they should follow the decision oversight process of Planning Committee with Towns and Parishes as consultees.

As previously mentioned Abingdon's size together with it's heritage and conservation areas and status means that householder redevelopment to add properties to a plot or minor residential or commercial developments can have significant impacts so merit a non delegated approach.

Should several of these applications be made in quick succession infrastructure impacts could arise and currently there are no CIL or S106 contributions required so the Town Council would welcome a review of this aspect as part of the consultation.

12 Question 8: Are there further types of application which should fall within Tier B?

No

Free text:

This would overcomplicate the system and add bureaucracy.

13 Question 9: – Do you consider that special control applications should be included in: a) Tier A or b) Tier B?

Tier A

Free text:

Abingdon Town Council feels that specialist technical officers reports and advice are very helpful in our town. For individual property applications Tier A

However, a significant scheme totally overhauling an individual property or affecting an area involving Conservation, Listed or flood areas for instance should be open to Consultee and Committee review due to subjective nature and impact.

14 Question 10: Do you think that all section 106 decisions should follow the treatment of the associated planning applications? For section 106 decisions not linked to a planning application should they be in Tier A or Tier B, or treated in some other way?

Free text:

They should follow the associated planning application to avoid misunderstanding and to ensure what planning gains are being achieved at local level.

If not linked they and their treatment still need to be understood at local level and this should apply whether they are Tier A or B.

15 Question 11: – Do you think that enforcement decisions should be in Tier A or Tier B, or treated in some other way?

Another way

Please explain your answer:

Enforcement seems to have become a 'Cinderella' service which is woefully short of resources but needs the public to have faith and trust in it's abilities.

It needs to be properly resourced and given the profile and importance to ensure assessments can be speedily made and relevant actions taken

Size and composition of committees

16 Question 12: Do you agree that the regulations should set a maximum for planning committees of 11 members?

Disagree

Free text:

Different authorities have different size of areas, density of population and numbers of Councillors so need to be treated according to those criteria.

This will allow fair workload allocations, treatment of applications and public trust that they are able to fairly and impartially deal with applications referred

17 Question 13: If you do not agree, what if any alternative size restrictions should be placed on committees?

Free text:

Vale of White Horse District has 9 regular members out of 38 total, but does have plenty of substitutes available to cover sickness and holidays. Membership should proportionately represent parties making up the Council.

One third of councillors maximum plus substitutes would be a sensible level to ensure service but again one size doesn't fit all.

Some high number levels or strategic sites area may need to have more separate or specialist Committees or the ability to draft in members from other related committees.

18 Question 14: Do you think the regulations should additionally set a minimum size requirement?

Free text:

Yes but again proportionate to the area and party representations.

Yes

Mandatory training for planning committee members

19 Question 15: Do you agree that certification of planning committee members, and of other relevant decisions makers, should be administered at a national level?

Agree

Free text:

This is fully supported but it should also apply that Planning Officers should have to maintain their CPD to ensure that both Councillors and Officers are making judgements from a high level and consistent basis.

Ideally Town and Parish Councillors should also be included at non prohibitive fee levels to avoid exclusion. This would help to streamline planning by ensuring only valid call ins are made.

All should be held on national publicly available registers

Delegated decision making

20 Question 16: Do you think we should consider reviewing the thresholds for quality of decision making in the performance regime to ensure the highest standards of decision making are maintained?

Yes

Free text:

However, only if this doesn't introduce performance criteria that merely adds bureaucracy and detracts from the quality of planning services to appear a super target beating authority.

21 Question 17: For quality of decision making the current threshold is 10% for major and non-major applications. We are proposing that in the future the threshold could be lowered to 5% for both. Do you agree?

Disagree

Free text:

There is a potential if that happens to encourage cautious decision making as opposed to the quality of the current system.

Public Sector Equality Duty and Environmental Principles

22 Question 18:- Do you have any views on the implications of the proposals in this consultation for you, or the group or business you represent, and on anyone with a relevant protected characteristic? If so, please explain who, which groups, including those with protected characteristics, or which businesses may be impacted and how.

Free text:

Abingdon Town Council believe impact assessments for the effect of these reforms should be conducted for all protected groups.

Abingdon Town Council believes in equality and environmental responsibilities, has declared a Climate Emergency and works with many local groups to tackle climate change and actively work towards Net Zero within the town.

23 Question 19: Is there anything that could be done to mitigate any impact identified?

Free text:

Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council believe that current legislation cover all mitigations necessary to ensure the reforms are implemented with the correct rights, freedoms and inclusivity from inception.

24 Question 20: Do you have any views on the implications of these proposals for the considerations of the 5 environmental principles identified in the Environment Act 2021?

Free text:

The five environmental principles as detailed in the Environment Act 2021 are inherently embedded in Local and Neighbourhood Plans. Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council firmly believe that all planning reforms should align strengthen and reinforce these principle, not diminish them in any way.