



Sent via email

Julie Beilby
Chief Executive
Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council

Julie.Beilby@tmbc.gov.uk

**Growth, Environment
& Transport**

Room 1.62
Sessions House
Maidstone
Kent
ME14 1XQ

Phone: 03000 415981
Ask for: Barbara Cooper
Email: Barbara.cooper@kent.gov.uk

Out of hours helpline: 03000 419191

Your ref:
Our ref: GT/BC/JAC

Date: 04 February 2021

Dear Julie

**KCC HIGHWAYS/ TMBC PLANNING COMMITTEE
ATTENDANCE AND SUPPORT**

With continuing pressures on staff workload and a need to focus resources on our statutory responsibilities I have been keeping a close eye on how officers have been supporting district councils with the planning process and in dealing with planning applications. Whilst there is a good working relationship with the planning process in most boroughs, I am very concerned about the time and effectiveness of my officers' support for TMBC as well as the behaviours shown towards them.

I have discussed this with my highways team and there is a better way we can support you. This is in line with good practice employed at other Kent local planning authorities where a much more efficient and effective relationship is achieved without affecting our professional input into the priority applications.

We have fostered a very good working relationship with your team at TMBC to support the Local Plan process. Good quality and timely advice on planning applications is provided in line with Government planning guidance and local policies. And this will continue.

However, I am concerned about the pressures caused by the planning committee meeting processes where officers have been asked to attend to face local opposition, even on relatively small applications, and have been subjected to aggressive, disrespectful questioning over points of detail which would have been better addressed by the applicant. To underline the seriousness of this situation, this behaviour led to an officer resigning last year and other promising internal candidates not applying for the vacant post.

Your unique set up with 3 area planning committees and the large number of applications considered by committee and, I am told, a constitution which does not allow the applicant's transport consultant to answer Member questions raised in the debates results in officers spending a significant amount of time re-reading associated material and preparing to be cross examined.

This time would be much better spent focusing on technical responses and negotiating with applicants for strategic sites where we can get the best outcomes for the borough.

In line with what we provide to other districts and boroughs, and subject to availability, an officer from KCC Highways will attend district planning committee meetings to speak on applications where:

- these meetings are held virtually, and you have the technology to enable this to continue in the future,
- proposals are of a strategic nature and where it is agreed there are significant or complex highways issues which cannot be adequately presented by the district planning officer,
- the highway advice is for refusal and this is contrary to that of the planning authority,
- the district planning officer will field questions of clarification in the first instance and questions of clarification of detail contained within the Transport Assessment will be referred to the applicant's transport consultant, and
- officers will only attend Chairs Briefing meetings for those applications on the agenda that meet the criteria above.

To assist we will provide:

- training in highways development planning matters where this is requested,
- assistance in preparation of planning officer presentations and
- written responses to Member questions where these are not already covered in previous consultation responses.

Most importantly though I would expect officers to be treated with respect at all times and that the KCC and District Council's Code of Conduct on Member/Officer relations to be followed.

As ever happy to discuss further.

Yours sincerely



Barbara Cooper
Corporate Director
Growth, Environment & Transport

Cc: Simon Jones, KCC
Tim Read, KCC
Eleanor Hoyle, TMBC