

**SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**REPORT TO:** Planning Committee      **DATE:** 26<sup>th</sup> July 2012

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**WARD(S):** All

**PART I**  
**FOR DECISION**

**SLOUGH ACCREDITED PLANNING AGENTS SCHEME**

1. **Purpose of Report**

Members are requested to authorise the introduction of an accredited agent scheme, which would be linked to the existing '*Buy With Confidence*' scheme, operated by Trading Standards. The purpose of the scheme is to allow the planning applications of accredited agents to be 'fast-tracked' through the validation process. This scheme will only be applicable to householder consent applications and Members are therefore also requested to approve a 'Validation Checklist for Householder Consents'.

2. **Proposed Action**

- a) That the Head of Planning Policy and Projects proceed with the introduction of an Accredited Planning Agents Scheme, subject to not receiving substantive objections in response to the consultation with local agents.
- b) That a Validation Checklist for Householder Consents be adopted to validate householder consent applications only, subject to not receiving substantive objections in response to the consultation with local agents.

3. **Other Implications**

(a) **Financial**

Overall there will be some efficiency savings on the costs of delivering the Planning Service, assisting the Council to cope with the withdrawal of the Housing and Planning Delivery Grant.

(b) **Risk Management**

No risks.

(c) **Human Rights Act and Other Legal Implications**

The proposed scheme could result in more work for accredited agents and a reduction for others. However, the scheme does not prevent any agent from applying for accreditation and does therefore not discriminate against any agent. The purpose of the scheme is to provide all the residents of Slough with the option to select an agent to assist them with the planning process, which has undergone

the required accreditation tests. It should however be made clear that the accreditation only relates to the quality of the submitted application and does not relate to compliance with Adopted Policy or Guidelines.

## 5. **Supporting Information**

- 5.1. The main purpose of the accredited agent scheme is consumer satisfaction. There is presently no statutory regulation of planning agents and anyone can therefore submit a planning application. Unfortunately, some agents submit applications that do not include all the information and therefore results in an invalid application. Depending on the nature of the problem, the agents are either required to submit the additional information or the whole application is returned to the agent. The applications are processed in accordance with their submission date, which means that valid applications are held up, whilst officers are dealing with invalid applications that have already been submitted. It does therefore result in a 'bottle neck' and the aim of the agent accreditation would be to ensure that those agents who submit fully compliant applications are dealt with more efficiently and without delay. The applications received from the accredited agents would bypass the initial validation process and the LPA would then endeavour to determine the applications within 6 weeks, in stead of the statutory 8 weeks.
- 5.2. The accredited agents may use their accredited agent status and '*Buy With Confidence*' logo for the purpose of marketing. Agent Accreditation only certifies that the agent has been accredited and vetted by the Local Planning Authority (LPA) and Trading Standards as submitting good quality planning applications and that the agent understands and submits all of the information required for Slough Borough Council to make an accurate planning decision. Any marketing of the agent's accredited agent status should in no way imply that the Council has accredited the agent as giving good planning advice regarding applications or that the applications of an accredited agent would automatically be approved. The applications would still have to comply with the Council's adopted Policies and Guidelines in order to receive a positive decision.
- 5.3 In terms of the existing '*Buy With Confidence*' scheme, the Council's Trading Standards Service will evaluate the applications for membership. The following points give a general guide on requirements for '*Buy With Confidence*' membership. The company / individual must:
- Be committed to good customer service;
  - Have been operating for a minimum of 6 months;
  - Not cold call customers;
  - Comply with consumer protection legislation;
  - Have appropriate insurance;
  - Abide by the terms of membership of the scheme.
- 5.4. Householder consent applications make up the majority of applications submitted to the LPA and for this reason it is recommended that the scheme is only linked to these applications. Following publication of the Local Communities and Government Guidance on Information Requirements and Validation in March 2010, LPA's were encouraged to review their local validation lists. Slough Borough Council does not currently have any adopted checklists and the proposed list will be the first. The Government has 28 standard application forms and it is therefore possible to create a checklist to correspond with each application. However, as stated before, the proposed Accredited Agent Scheme is only aimed at householder consents, because that is where the scheme can make its biggest

impact. At this stage it is therefore not proposed to provide a checklist for every application type due to the work involved in preparing the lists and the fact that the Department for Communities and Local Government has recently published a consultation document on streamlining the validation process. The attached Validation Checklist is in line with the Government's National List, but has been scaled down for Householder Consent applications. The list will be used to validate all householder consent applications and during the accreditation process of the agents.

6. **Comments of Other Committees**

None

7. **Conclusion**

The proposed accreditation scheme has the following benefits:

- Increased customer satisfaction, due to quicker decisions for householder extensions;
- Time saved for validation officers (current staff can cope better with workload);
- Officers and Members would be able to point the public towards the list of accredited agents on our website;

In light of the above benefits, Members are requested to favourably consider the recommendation of this report.

8. **Appendices Attached**

'A' Validation Checklist for Householder Consents

'B' Entry Requirements

9. **Background Papers**

'1' Guidance of information requirements and validation (Communities and Local Government, March 2010)