

East Lothian Council frustrated by HES response to planning applications

Historic Environment Scotland (HES) has come under fire from East Lothian planners for providing 'unhelpful' responses to cases involving protected buildings.

Frustration at the agency spilled out during a meeting of the council's planning committee as it overturned officers recommendation to refuse to allow white window frames in a 19th century listed building to be replaced with 'tarpaulin grey' frames.

Councillors were told the public body, which was established to care for the nation's historic environment, had made no comment on the proposal after being consulted.

But while the agency added that its lack of response should not be taken as support for the application, one councillor accused them of leaving it to others to 'take the flack'.

An HES spokesperson told the Local Democracy Reporting Service it deals with thousands of applications every year and only responded to ones where "we can add value".

The council's head of planning Keith Dingwall asked elected members to give him the go ahead to write to the body expressing concern over their input in applications in the county.

Councillors were discussing proposals to replace windows in Engine House which is Category B listed.

A report by officers said HES were consulted and advised they had "considered the information received and do not have any comments to make on the proposals"

It added: "Their letter also states that the decision not to provide comments should not be taken as support for the proposals and that the application should be determined in accordance with national and local policy on listed building/conservation area consent."

Councillor Colin McGinn told the meeting: "I always feel it would be better if any body is consulted that they make a response one way or the other.

"It does feel like 'we are not going to make a response but pass it back to somebody else to take the flack', and I don't think it is helpful and I don't think it particularly helps officers."

Mr Dingwall said: "Picking up the point on the lack of a response from HES not being particularly helpful, I have to say that is the view of officers as well.

"We have this quite a lot where it will then be used against our position. If members are happy I am quite content to write to HES to express both officers and members concerns on the lack of any response to these cases."

The committee unanimously backed is call to write to the public body.

The HES spokesperson said in terms of the Engine Cottage application it did not provide comments as it appeared the council had already had pre-application discussions with the applicant and had consulted its guidance on changes to

windows.

Tehy added: "On average, HES is consulted on around 2,600 listed building consent applications annually. We concentrate on cases where we can add value, rather than responding to more straightforward applications.

"We offer detailed comments to around a quarter of consultations and only object where issues of national interest are raised."

By Marie Sharp Local Democracy Reporter